

Chapter 2

In the previous chapter I attempted to describe and analyze, in the context of the development of the Cold War, the events from the consolidation of Bolshevik power in Russia (1921) to roughly the end of Stanley Baldwin's term as Prime Minister of England (1937). Considerably more attention was directed toward Soviet foreign policy for the simple reason that, in terms of East-West contacts, it was the Soviet Union that made virtually all the initiatives; it was Russia, not the capitalist nations of the West, particularly England and France, whose strategic and diplomatic position was so weak and uncertain. The West really desired no serious political cooperation with Russia at this time, with the possible exception of France who, sharing her Western border with Germany, had an interest in preserving her treaty with Moscow; there is certainly no evidence that a military alliance with Russia was seriously considered in the West, and France, whose alliance with Moscow included nominal military commitments, refused to enter into staff talks which might have given any meaning to the military agreement. Unlike Stalin, the Western leaders prior to 1937 really had no well-defined or systematic policy toward Germany or Italy. The actions of the British and French governments are those of leaders paralyzed by weakness, fear, and misunderstanding: weakness as a result of their failure to respond to Germany's rearming; fear of war, and a misunderstanding of both Hitler and Stalin. This fundamental misunderstanding of the dictators was perhaps excusable in the case of Hitler up to his seizure of the Rhineland in 1936, but much harder to justify or comprehend in the case of Stalin except from the perspective that a deep aversion to Bolshevism and a virtual paranoia that tended to associate most social reform with communism so blinded

the ruling elites (if I may loosely use that term) in the West that they could not rationally analyze the policy of the Soviet Union.

Stanley Baldwin failed to lead British foreign policy, with the result that there was no consistent policy based on systematic assumptions and goals. E. H. Carr has described the conflicting trends in British foreign policy up to the first half of 1935:

During the first two years after the Nazi revolution, British opinion as a whole was too deeply moved by Nazi excesses to feel much sympathy for German grievance and aspirations; and the British government, though unwilling itself to undertake any commitments, had encouraged the French, the Italian and the Soviet governments to build up a system of defensive alliances for the maintenance of the status quo, particularly in Central Europe where it seemed most directly menaced. But by January 1935, when this system of alliances had been virtually completed by the Franco-Italian reconciliation [brought about by the alienation of Italy from Germany in the winter of 1933-34] indignation in Great Britain against the Nazi regime began to subside. A growing body of opinion came around to the view that the only effect of the French understanding with Italy and the Soviet Union was to isolate and encircle Germany and to perpetuate the inequalities of the Versailles Treaty--in short, to maintain those very conditions which had been largely responsible for the Nazi revolution. Those who held this opinion, while not denying that Germany might be a danger to peace, believed that French, Italian and Soviet policy merely aggravated that danger, and that the British government's first aim should be to break the ring round Germany, to engage in friendly discussions of her grievances, and to bring her back to the League of Nations. (Foreign Secretary) Simon's visit to Berlin (in March 1935) was a concession to this trend of thought.¹

It was this latter trend, commonly known as appeasement, that gained the upper-hand by the end of 1935. Although Britain had supported sanctions against Italy in the fall of 1935, her paramount desire was to avoid war and by December, fearful of Italian reaction in the face of the lack of success of the aggression in Ethiopia, Britain was willing to hand over most of the African colony to Italy. When this failed because of the public outrage in England, Italy proceeded with her military campaign, which triumphed in May 1936. In July of that year Britain sponsored a move in the League to remove

sanctions from Italy. The Anglo-German Naval agreement, as well as Britain's acquiescence in the militarization of the Rhineland and the German-Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War clearly indicated the policy preferred by the British Cabinet.

A year before he succeeded Baldwin as Prime Minister, Chamberlain, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, complained in his diary that "we have no policy." On April 27, 1936 he wrote that the failure of the League to protect Ethiopia "demonstrated the failure of collective security." He explained his conception of the proper foreign policy for maintaining peace:

...for peace we should depend on a system of regional pacts, to be registered and approved by the League....I thought the proposal would make it easier for Germany to come into the League, and I was anxious that Halifax should visit Berlin and get into touch with Hitler as soon as possible.²

On June 10, in a speech before the 1900 Club, Chamberlain argued for a policy based on the assumption that "nations cannot be relied upon" to go to war "unless their vital interests are threatened." "That being so," he continued, "does it not suggest that it might be wise to explore the possibilities of localizing the danger spots of the world...by means of regional arrangements ...which should be guaranteed only by those nations whose interests were vitally connected with those danger zones?"³

The thrust of the policy Chamberlain wished to pursue as of the spring of 1936 was made apparent by the above-quoted passages. He saw the best guarantee for peace in "regional pacts" to "localize" areas of potential danger not vitally connected with Great Britain. By such a policy he would hope to draw Germany back into cooperation with England. As of early 1936 Chamberlain advocated a rearmament program based on the theory that in the "next war" air power would be of decisive importance with sea power secondary

and regular territorial armies of the least value in defense.⁴ He embraced this theory not for its value as a realistic contingency in the event of a continental war but rather as a deterrent to the outbreak of war, enabling British diplomacy to follow the line he advocated. On February 9, 1936 he wrote in his diary: "I am pretty satisfied now that, if we can keep out of war for a few years, we shall have an air force of such striking power that no one will care to run risks with it."⁵ In another diary entry, upon his assuming the post of Prime Minister, he wrote: "I believe the double policy of rearmament and better relations with Germany and Italy will carry us safely through the danger period, if only the Foreign Office will play up."⁶

Chamberlain's "double policy" was doomed from lack of realism in each of its elements. I have already mentioned the lack of realism with regard to Hitler, but I am willing to admit that even as of March 1938 it was conceivable that England, through massive concessions, might have come to terms with Hitler and avoided war. But Chamberlain doomed this remote chance, on which his entire policy was based, by striving for a defense program that let Germany (and all other countries) know that Britain was not prepared for and thus did not intend to fight in a war on the European continent. It is inconceivable that Hitler could have studied British rearmament, in which the size of the army was severely limited, and not have known that England had no intention of fighting on the continent. This alone put virtually all the diplomatic cards in Hitler's hand; it made Hitler a negotiating partner who knew that the other side had almost no means of resisting his demands. Chamberlain's frank statement that his projected policy "will carry us safely through the danger period," taken in the context of his intention to strengthen only the air force to the extent "that no one will

care to run risks with it" makes it clear that he did not seriously anticipate a war.⁷ He was aware of the dangers of war, but he was confident that by appeasement he could at least postpone war until his rearmament plans were fulfilled at which time the very presence of Britain's awesome air force would deter war in Europe.

Chamberlain understood that in the fateful period during which Britain rearmament was carried out he would have to make particularly attractive offers and perhaps otherwise unconscionable concessions to Germany and Italy to assure their cooperation with England. Despite mutual French-British commitments, Chamberlain had no confidence in France as a strong ally: "France's weakness is a public danger," he wrote in the first month of 1938.⁸ Hiding behind the broad mantle of "the English people" he described Britain's position as "one of great anxiety" pending rearmament. Thus, "in the absence of any powerful ally, and until our armaments are completed, we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances, and even bear with patience and good humor actions which we should like to treat in a very different fashion."⁹

It was true, as Chamberlain stated, that Britain lacked a powerful ally who might have made a different policy toward Germany feasible; it was not true, however, that Britain could not have had such an ally if she so desired. The Soviet Union had repeatedly offered an alliance to Britain and France, and Britain would not hear of it. The most significant Soviet offers commenced in March 1938 when Hitler invaded Austria. Chamberlain, for the next year, gave no serious thought to such an alliance and only in April 1939 did he even make the pretense of considering it. What were the reasons for Chamberlain's negative policy toward Russia? This is perhaps the most crucial

historical question of the pre-World War II period. In this and the next chapter I will present my answer to this question.

Briefly stated, if not perhaps oversimplified, Chamberlain rebuffed Stalin's overtures for alliance for two reasons: (1) His policy was to settle Britain's differences with Hitler and an alliance with Russia would have been the antithesis of this policy; and (2) He was absolutely unwilling to permit what an alliance with Russia would have entailed, namely, a foothold for the Soviet Union in Europe and diplomatic relations on an equal basis as a "great power." It is this thesis that I will substantiate in this and the following chapter.

The most effective way to present my analysis of the complicated and often misunderstood period from 1937-39 is chronologically. One factor vital to understanding British policy in context must be addressed, however, before the chronological analysis is attempted. One of the common contemporary as well as historical justifications for disregarding Russia as a potential ally is that Stalin's 1937-38 army purges had so undermined the strength and effectiveness of the Russian Army that it could not be counted on in the offensive capacity which an alliance would have demanded. A. J. P. Taylor's analysis of this justification is probably the best:

The British and French governments acknowledged Soviet Russia (in 1938) only to emphasize her military weakness; and this view, though it rested no doubt on their information, represented also their desire. They wanted Soviet Russia to be excluded from Europe; and therefore readily assumed that she was so by circumstances.¹⁰

That Britain and France believed in the ineffectiveness of the Soviet Army because that belief best served their policy toward Germany and Eastern Europe is undoubtedly true; that this belief rested on the intelligence they were receiving is not completely true.

The British military attache in Moscow, Colonel Firebrace, wrote an evaluation of the Soviet Army on April 18, 1938. He emphasized the drastic effects of the purges on the Army's leadership and concluded that militarily "there must be considerable doubt as to whether the Soviet Union is capable of" a war of offense; "In defense of its territory, I still consider that the Red Army would be a formidable opponent."¹¹ In a conversation with French Premier Daladier on April 29, British Foreign Minister Halifax included the effects of the purges as one of the factors that "made it extremely doubtful whether Russia could be counted upon to make any great contribution, if, indeed, she could make any contribution at all" to the defense of Czechoslovakia. Daladier agreed that the purge had weakened the Red Army. He pointed out, however, that numerically the Soviet Air Force was the "strongest" in Europe and that Russia's "potential war resources were extremely great."¹² On July 26 French Foreign Minister Bonnet told U.S. Ambassador William Bullitt and U.S. Treasury Secretary Morgenthau that he "believed that the recent 'purges'...had so weakened the...Red Army and the government that it would be impossible for the Soviet Union to contemplate war beyond its frontiers."¹³ Yet, in a conversation with Halifax in September, Daladier again drew attention to Russia's air supremacy.¹⁴

The above estimates relate to the possibility of Soviet military assistance, in compliance with her treaty obligations, in the event of aggression against Czechoslovakia. According to the 1935 treaty with Prague, Russia could act only if France chose to act first. Of course, in 1938 France was not about to go to war over Czechoslovakia. During this period the Soviet government repeatedly gave its assurances that it was willing to fulfill its treaty obligations if (1) France acted first and (2) France arranged

for the passage of Soviet troops across Poland or Rumania; these stipulations were entirely justified and, in fact, necessary. Without them, there was no possibility that Soviet military aid could be rendered. France, of course, had an interest in keeping alive the alternative of securing Russia's help in the event of war, if only because of her own treaty with Prague. But Britain was firmly committed not to precipitate war over Czechoslovakia; hence it was actually in the interest of her policy that Russia not intervene. It is important to remember that by this time, France could not pursue an independent foreign policy; she had to bow to Britain's wishes. It was for these reasons, I believe, that the British evidenced such skepticism about the prospects of any Soviet military aid, whereas Daladier apparently regarded the Soviet Air Force as a probable asset in the event of war over Czechoslovakia.

In this context it is extremely interesting to note a conversation of May 15, 1938 in Moscow between British chargé Vereker and French Ambassador Coulondre. Coulondre had requested the meeting because he anticipated a request from his government for information regarding possible Russian reactions to a German attack on Czechoslovakia. He had gotten the impression from Litvinov that Russia was becoming "more serious in regard to" the possibility of taking action in Czechoslovakia. In sounding out Vereker, Coulondre summarized his most recent intelligence:

We knew...that the army on the whole was more contented than it had ever been and was certainly better fed than the whole of the remaining population, that they had enormous supplies of ammunition, some thousands of tanks, and quite a formidable, if obsolescent, air force, and that he had moreover been reliably informed that M. Voroshilov had reported to M. Stalin that the Soviet army was fit for war and that he had also heard from his Bulgarian colleague that, in order to forestall any possible revolt on the part of the peasants in the event of mobilization, a large number of able-bodied conscripts had in fact already been attached to units to increase their peacetime strength.

Another factor which he considered should not be omitted from our calculations in estimating the Russian situation was the military situation in the Far East....(recent developments) had undoubtedly led the Kremlin into thinking that any possible Japanese menace to their interests in the Far East had for the present been deflected down into Central China, thus relieving the Soviet government of much anxiety on that score and enabling them thereby to make if necessary a correspondingly greater effort in the West. M. Coulondre therefore felt that one could in fact place some reliance on the Soviet government both in a political and in a military sense at the present juncture, and that on the whole he felt inclined to tell the Quai d'Orsay that he was more optimistic of possible Russian intervention on the side of Czechoslovakia at the present moment than he had been heretofore.¹⁵

Vereker disagreed with Coulondre, and Colonel Fireside was present to discuss in detail the effect of the purges on the Red Army's high command. The discussion was informal, but Vereker tried to discourage any "vain hopes" on the part of the French Ambassador of the value or reliability of Russian aid "as a counterpoise to the Germans."¹⁶

Coulondre's intelligence, if accurate, would seem to detract from the validity of the British interpretation of Soviet military effectiveness. His emphasis on the Soviet position in the Far East was well founded. In 1937, the threat of a Japanese attack was far more imminent than that of a German attack.¹⁷ Faced with threatening border clashes, the primary Soviet interest in the first half of 1937 was to have China absorb Japan's fury; following Japan's invasion of China on July 7, 1937, "the Kremlin could breathe more freely." Adam Ulam has confirmed Coulondre's contemporaneous analysis: "By 1938 the situation in the Far East still required the utmost watchfulness, but the danger of war...had passed. Europe once more occupied the main stage."¹⁸

(This situation was soon to change, however. In July 1938 serious fighting erupted between Russian and Japanese forces at the border area of Changkufeng, involving "tens of thousands of troops, planes, and artillery."¹⁹

By August, the Russians had repulsed the Japanese. Ulam writes that "the Russian's spirited action must have given the Japanese general staff some second thoughts about the allegedly debilitating effect of the purges on the Soviet military establishment."²⁰ Evidently the British were unimpressed by this demonstration. On March 26, 1939, Chamberlain wrote in his diary, "I have no confidence whatever in (Russia's) ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to."²¹ Halifax expressed similar sentiments on March 24.²² From May until August 1939 Soviet forces were involved in massive battles with the Japanese along the Mongolian frontier. They again repulsed the Japanese and gave an "impressive performance."²³)

It was in April 1939 that Britain began guaranteeing states in Eastern Europe, where she was clearly powerless to act "except," Churchill notes, "within the framework of a general agreement with Russia."²⁴ Now Britain was willing to negotiate with Russia, but only on the basis that Russia commit herself to give unilateral aid subject to Poland's and Rumania's approval. The notion was preposterous and, as I will discuss in detail later, Britain participated in the negotiations less because she desired Soviet military aid than because she hoped the prospect of a pact with Russia would give her a diplomatic advantage in coming to terms with Hitler. As I will later document, Chamberlain based this policy, in part, on the assumption that Poland and Rumania together could defend themselves with minimal British and French aid in the event of a German invasion. Yet, on April 5, 1939, the British Ambassador in Warsaw had provided a wealth of intelligence information proving that the state of Polish defense was not adequate to resist invasion. "The importance for Poland of a friendly Russia is thus of paramount importance," he wrote. Among the military

intelligence he included in his report to the Foreign Office were these two essential factors: (1) "The attitude of the U.S.S.R. is vital to Poland from the point of view of supplies for her armed forces"; (2) "The Polish air force equipment is...inadequate (to resist German invasion) but it is probably no less inadequate than the equipment of much in the rest of Poland's armed forces."²⁵

The sincerity of the whole British attitude toward Soviet military effectiveness is brought into question by all of these facts. To say the least, the British were selective in accepting or even seeking intelligence on which to base an estimate of Russian capabilities as of the middle of 1938. Regardless of their skepticism at the time of the crisis over Czechoslovakia, the British, it must be noted, never took the Russians up on their repeated calls for joint action or their pledges to fulfill their treaty obligations. If the British genuinely doubted the ability of the Red Army but nevertheless contemplated the possibility of standing up to Hitler, they would still have had to make an effort to consult directly with the Russians on matters about which they were currently only able to speculate on the basis of information they freely admitted was uncertain and unreliable; this they never did. Furthermore, whatever their feelings about the Red Army, the British had no way to make good on their pledges of 1939 to Poland or Rumania without Russia's aid, and this they did not really want until it was too late to secure it. In short, the most that can be said about Britain's analysis and conclusions of Soviet military effectiveness in the 1938-39 period is that the British leaders operated in a political, not objective or factual context. Furthermore, the military advice and evaluations offered by the British Chiefs of Staff were significantly in-

fluenced by diplomatic considerations. In February 1938, the Chiefs resisted pressure for staff talks with French and Belgian military delegations. Such talks were a necessary prerequisite to any cooperative defense plans which the three nations might make in fulfillment of their mutual treaty obligations.

Yet, as Anthony Eden relates:

In our present effort to reach a detente with Germany, the Chiefs of Staff argued that it was most important, from the military standpoint, that we should not appear to have both feet in the French camp. They therefore considered that the military plans for closer collaboration with the French upon concerted measures against Germany, however logical they might appear, would be outweighed by the grave risk of precipitating the very situation we wished to avoid, namely, the irreconcilable suspicion and hostility of Germany.²⁶

Eden's secretary, Oliver Harvey, was more blunt in his personal diary. Of the Chiefs of Staff he wrote "They are terrified of any cooperation with the French."²⁷ If the Chiefs feared alienating Germany by consulting with England's ally, one can imagine their attitude toward the very thought of an alliance with the country which Hitler openly called his foremost enemy, the Soviet Union. It is therefore not unreasonable to question the integrity and impartiality of the evaluations of Russia's military capacity which the Chiefs of Staff provided for the Chamberlain Cabinet. The Chiefs themselves in the spring of 1939 were to reverse their position on the value of Russia as a military ally, a reversal in which they freely admitted that "strategical and political aspects are closely related."²⁸ Ironically, when Colonel Firebrace wrote his evaluation of the Red Army, he had to account for the difference in other countries' estimates of Russia's capability to wage war in the near future. Why should other nations be more optimistic than his? He wrote, "in general their opinions are to some extent swayed by their desires."²⁹

Admittedly, this discussion has taken place out of context. One may criticize the British for their apparent unwillingness to seriously evaluate

all military factors relating to Russia's possible participation in an alliance guaranteeing East Europe; but this is, in fact, incidental. Whether or not the British really believed what they said about Soviet military effectiveness, and however questionable the validity or realism of their analysis, that belief was not the reason that Britain rejected an alliance with Russia.

Chamberlain, Halifax, Wilson, Hoare, and Henderson (and many others involved in making British policy) all had a fundamental hatred of Bolshevism and a profound distrust of Russia. Under Secretary of State Alexander Cadogan wrote in his diary in 1938 that Chamberlain had "what amounted to a hatred of the Russians," adding that "we have all come to loathe (them)."³⁰ To the men who made British foreign policy an alliance with the Soviet Union recognizing Russian interests in Eastern Europe and paving the way for the penetration of Bolshevism into that area, was unthinkable. "A thoroughness of commitment to Russia," writes one historian of the period, "...would have been anathema to those in power" in Britain.³¹ Describing the flip attitude of the British Cabinet toward the 1939 negotiations with Moscow, another prominent analyst writes: "Behind it all was a deep, insuperable aversion to Bolshevist (sic) Russia."³² In June 1939 William Bullitt spoke with French Foreign Minister Bonnet about the lack of progress in the negotiations with Moscow; Bonnet reflected the attitude of the Chamberlain Government when he said that "France and England could certainly not consent to giving the Soviet Union support for an extension of Bolshevism in Eastern Europe."³³ Yet up to that time the whole policy of France and England had been based on supporting and facilitating the extension of Nazi Germany into Central Europe, Chamberlain's distrust of Russia exceeded the bounds of reason. On

March 20, 1938, after the Russians had called for joint action to guarantee Czechoslovakia, he wrote that "the Russians (are) stealthily and cunningly pulling all the strings behind the scenes to get us involved in a war with Germany."³⁴ Indeed, to a man who believed this, what difference did Russia's offensive military capacity make? A year later, when he was coming around to the realization that some accord with Russia would be necessary if a stand against Nazi aggression was to be taken, Chamberlain still could write: "I must confess the most profound distrust of Russia.... And I distrust her motives, which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty, and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears."³⁵

Nazi Germany certainly had "little connection" with British "ideas of liberty," and Chamberlain could privately admit to a profound distrust of Hitler. Why, then, did Chamberlain try to accommodate Hitler? First, the price of opposing Hitler was considered too high to pay. Chamberlain wanted to avoid war, especially war over Central or Eastern Europe, an area not vital to British interests and in which the British would need the help of Soviet Russia to wage war. He believed that he could pacify Hitler, or at least protect Western Europe, by granting Hitler hegemony in Central Europe. Also, there can be little doubt, as Halifax, Henderson and Wilson freely admitted to Hitler, that a strong and anti-Bolshevik Germany was regarded as a benefit and protection for Europe, provided she would cooperate peacefully with the capitalist nations. Economically, Chamberlain was always conscious of the fact that Germany was "a rising market."³⁶

It is fundamental to any understanding of appeasement to point out that this policy was not forced on the Chamberlain Cabinet because Britain was militarily unprepared to pursue any other policy; rather, as of the end

of Chamberlain's first year as Prime Minister, the vulnerable state of British defenses was the result of a series of deliberate policy decisions based on a strong faith in the rightness and practicality of appeasement. Chamberlain was confident that he could circumvent the need for massive rearmament by altering the European status quo in a manner acceptable to Hitler.

When Chamberlain assumed office in 1937 Britain was hardly capable of defending herself militarily, was unable to fulfill her continental commitments, and did not possess the capacity to produce the armaments necessary to expand her military machine. This situation was directly the result of the irresponsible maneuverings of Stanley Baldwin, who had manipulated the issue of rearmament, as he had so many other issues, as a tool for his own political advancement, not as a matter of vital interest for his country.

In Parliament on February 7, 1934 Winston Churchill made a plea for the expansion of British air power in the face of an expansionist-minded and rearming Germany; should "the means of threatening the heart of the British Empire pass into the hands of the present rulers of Germany" England would lose her "freedom of action and independence." Prime Minister Baldwin responded with the pledge that

If all our efforts for (a disarmament) agreement fail...then any Government of this country--a National Government more than any, and this Government--will see to it that in air strength and air power this country shall no longer be in a position inferior to any country within striking distance of its shores.³⁷

When Churchill and some of his colleagues declared in Commons on November 28, 1934 that British military preparations were insufficient and that by 1937 the Germans would possess superior air power, Baldwin responded that the projections of the Air Ministry belied Churchill's arguments, and that

Churchill's "figures are considerably exaggerated."³⁸ Baldwin's lack of foresight was striking. By May 22 of the following year he was forced to admit that his estimates for the future were "completely wrong. We were completely misled on that subject."³⁹ In the general election of October 1935, Baldwin played both sides of the fence on the rearmament issue, pleasing those who favored sanctions against Italy by speaking "in strong terms of the need for rearmament," and then, "very anxious to comfort the professional peace-loving elements in the nation," declaring to the Peace Society "I give you my word there will be no great armaments."⁴⁰ By the end of 1936 Britain was seriously behind Germany in air power, and Churchill "severely reproached" Baldwin for failing to keep his pledge that Britain would never become inferior in air power to any nation within striking distance. This prompted Baldwin's famous speech of November 12, 1936 in which he "carried naked truth about his motives into indecency" by hiding behind a pacifist sentiment which he probably more than any other politician had helped create by misinforming his people about German rearmament:

Supposing I had gone to the country and said that Germany was rearming, and that we must rearm, does anybody think that this pacific democracy would have rallied to that cry at that moment? I cannot think of anything that would have made the loss of the election from my point of view more certain.⁴¹

Churchill was right when he wrote that "the passionate desire for peace which animated the uninformed, misinformed majority of the British people...is no excuse for political leaders who fall short of their duty."⁴²

Chamberlain too opposed any full scale rearmament, for a wide variety of reasons. At the heart of his opposition seems to have been an unwillingness or inability to recognize the militant ambitions of Hitler and the untenable diplomatic position into which Britain would be forced vis a vis

Germany if she did not keep pace with the latter's rearmament. Chamberlain and his supporters feared the economic consequences of putting the country on a war production basis, and they reasoned, in the face of significant if small opposition, that the international situation simply did not warrant such a commitment on Britain's part. At the end of 1936 Halifax expressed this general sentiment in response to a call by Churchill for the establishment of a Ministry of Supply. Halifax, then in the House of Lords, maintained that the European situation was not sufficiently grave to warrant transforming Britain into an "armed camp":

What is quite certain is that in the process you would gravely dislocate trade, Budgets, general finance, and the general credit of the country. Are we in fact to judge the question so serious that everything has to give way to the military reconditioning of our Defense Forces? Such a conclusion, in fact, appears to me to rest on premises, not only of the inevitability, but of a degree of certainty as to the early imminence of war, which I am not prepared to accept.⁴³

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Chamberlain was concerned with the economic aspects of Britain's armaments program, and he was exasperated at the lack of a consistent policy defining the role and eventual size of each of the military services. At one of the last meetings of the Baldwin Cabinet, on April 28, 1937, Chamberlain called attention to the constantly rising estimates of military spending and the Cabinet's failure to agree upon a definite policy. According to the Cabinet's minutes, "he warned the Cabinet that we were approaching the time when he would have to propose a fixed limit to which the Services would have to conform."⁴⁴ The idea that Britain must adopt an armaments policy which fell within a financial ceiling reflected Chamberlain's concern that full rearmament was economically unacceptable. In reviewing the year 1937 in his diary entry for February 19, 1938, Chamberlain expressed this concern:

Again, our own armament programme continued to grow, and to pile up our financial commitments to a truly alarming extent... the annual cost of maintenance, after we had finished rearmament, seemed likely to be more than we could find without heavily increased taxation for an indefinite period.⁴⁵

As Anthony Eden has written in his Memoirs:

A difficulty which confronted the British Government at this period was that a high priority... was placed on the maintenance of our economic stability. This argument found particular favour with the Prime Minister and was constantly used by the Treasury, but it certainly made difficulties for the Service departments, whose political chiefs and staffs had to spend many hours trying to curb their demands within Treasury figures which had no particular significance in terms of defense.⁴⁶

In a memorandum of December 1937, Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Coordination of Defense, defended the philosophy that economic strength was in itself a deterrent to war, of more value in fact than bankrupting rearmament:

The maintenance of credit facilities and our general balance of trade are of vital importance, not merely from the point of view of our strength in peace time, but equally for purposes of war. This country cannot hope to win a war against a major power by a sudden knockout blow: on the contrary, for success we must contemplate a long war... We must therefore confront our enemies with the risks of a long war, which they cannot face. If we are to emerge victoriously from such a war, it is essential that we should enter it with sufficient economic strength to enable us to make the fullest uses of the resources overseas, and to withstand the strain.⁴⁷

The implications of this philosophy were that limitations would have to be placed upon the extent and nature of rearmament and, consequently, the preservation of peace would have to be undertaken almost solely through diplomacy. As Chamberlain wrote in early 1938, "From the first I have been trying to improve relations with the 2 storm centers, Berlin and Rome."⁴⁸ Indeed, if Britain were to pursue a policy in which she deliberately deprived herself of the means to resist the demands of Hitler and Mussolini, she would have to bargain (from a position of weakness) to achieve a new status

quo in Europe and her colonial empire, acceptable to the two dictators. When the British Ambassador to Rome warned Sir Robert Vansittart of "the truculent and aggressive attitude of Italy in the Mediterranean", the Cabinet met on July 7, 1937 to consider the issue. Thomas Inskip inquired as to how far this warning should affect Britain defensive arrangements. Chamberlain, according to the Cabinet minutes, "thought there was very little that could be done to improve matters. The real counter to Italy's disquieting attitude was to get on better terms with Germany." The Cabinet concurred with the Prime Minister's views.⁴⁹ By the end of 1937, the view that diplomacy would have to defend British interests in place of full military preparations had crystalized into a policy acknowledged and approved by each Cabinet member except Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden.

Eden did not particularly object to efforts at improving relations with the Axis powers, but he viewed such diplomatic attempts as futile and humiliating unless backed up by sufficient military power. In a private meeting with Chamberlain on November 8, 1937, Eden expressed his conviction that "rearmament must go faster....Unless it were known that we were rearming effectively, our efforts in international sphere today were useless." As Eden recorded in his diary, "N.C. did not, I think, share my view and clearly had the financial situation much in mind."⁵⁰ A week later, a friend of Oliver Harvey spoke with Chamberlain's confidant, Horace Wilson, about the Prime Minister's deteriorating relationship with his Foreign Secretary. According to Wilsin, Chamberlain denied any personal hostility, but "at the same time P.M. DID think his own policy of using every opportunity of getting together with the dictators was right and that he was determined to go on with it. P.M. genuinely thought A.M. (den) was wrong..."⁵¹

During November 1937 the British Chiefs of Staff completed a secret memorandum entitled, "A Comparison of the Strength of Great Britain With That of Certain Other Nations As At January 1938." The outlook expressed in this report was bleak, especially in its judgement that France and Russia, the only two major nations with whom Britain could ally in the event of war with Germany, Italy or Japan, were not sufficiently militarily prepared to be depended on should war erupt. The report's conclusion was highly political, and provided a strong reinforcement for the sentiments already expressed by Chamberlain and his supporters:

From the above report it will be seen that our Naval, Military and Air Forces, in their present stage of development, are still far from sufficient to meet our defensive commitments, which now extend from Western Europe through the Mediterranean to the Far East....So far as Germany is concerned, as our preparations develop, our defense forces will provide a considerable deterrent to aggression. But the outstanding feature of the present situation is the increasing probability that a war started on any one of these three areas may extend to one or both of the other two. Without overlooking the assistance which we should hope to obtain from France, and possibly other allies, we cannot foresee the time when our defense forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. We cannot therefore, exaggerate the importance, from the point of view of Imperial defense, of any political or international action that can be taken to reduce the numbers of our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies.⁵²

This secret report was discussed on December 2, 1937 at a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defense, a Cabinet sub-committee. Anthony Eden took issue with the Chiefs of Staff's report. Pointing to the union of Germany, Italy and Japan in the anti-Comintern pact, Eden suggested that it would "be a mistake to try to detach any one member" of the pact "by offers of support or acquiescence in the fulfillment of their aims." His conclusion: "it might be more in keeping with our honour and dignity to pursue a policy of armed strength."⁵³ This position met with severe

opposition, especially from Chancellor of the Exchequer Simon, who pointed out that "we are in process of spending of 1500 millions on our defense.... It is clear that we cannot go on spending at this rate forever, and a political adjustment with one or more of our political enemies is absolutely vital."⁵⁴ Chamberlain firmly expressed his agreement with the Chiefs of Staff. "To contemplate basing our defensive preparations on the possibility of a war with Italy, Germany and Japan simultaneously was to set ourselves an impossible problem," he said.⁵⁵ He repeated the view which he had often expressed, namely that "Germany was the real key to the question"; relations with Germany would have to be improved. Furthermore he stated his intention not to repeat Baldwin's pledge to maintain air parity with Germany, for he "did not consider it necessary to have precise equality in every class of aircraft."⁵⁶

The broad issue was put before the full Cabinet on December 22.

Halifax made a strong appeal in favor of the Prime Minister's position:

...we are faced with the possibility of three enemies at once. The conclusion which I draw...is that this throws an immensely heavy burden on diplomacy and that we ought to make every possible effort to get on good terms with Germany.⁵⁷

The Cabinet voted in support of Chamberlain. They recognized "factors of economic resources and stability as being essential to the strength and fulfillment of the Defense programmes," and approved a set of defense priorities which deprived Britain of an army for a continental role and postponed final decision on a policy for the expansion of the Air Force.⁵⁸

In pursuit of a far-reaching agreement with Hitler, Chamberlain sent Halifax to Germany, in response to a German initiative, in November 1937. Although Eden was still Foreign Secretary, Chamberlain did not trust him with the delicate task of building the framework of an agreement with Hitler.

Eden, whose influence in the making of British Foreign policy had seriously waned, attempted to instruct Halifax in an effort to assure that British interests were not compromised in these unofficial discussions with Hitler. At the end of October, Eden told Halifax to "confine himself to warning comment on Austria and Czechoslovakia" so as "to discourage German intervention in these two states."⁵⁹ Later he instructed that "it is essential to avoid giving the impression of our being in pursuit of" Hitler.⁶⁰ Halifax ignored both these instructions.

On November 19, 1937, Halifax met with Hitler and explained the policy of cooperation that his government wished to pursue. The object was "to achieve a better understanding between England and Germany by means of personal talks with the Fuhrer" for "a comprehensive and frank discussion of all questions affecting the two countries" with a view toward "completely" removing the "existing misunderstandings."⁶¹ Halifax told Hitler that "he and other members of the British Government were fully aware that the Fuhrer had not only achieved a great deal inside Germany herself, but that, by destroying Communism in his country, he had barred its road to Western Europe, and that Germany therefore could rightly be regarded as a bulwark of the West against Bolshevism." He assured Hitler that Britain would exercise her influence to see that "the errors of the Versailles dictate...be rectified." He solicited Hitler's views on the League and disarmament and added:

All other questions could be characterized as relating to changes in the European order, changes that sooner or later would probably take place. To these questions belonged Danzig, Austria and Czechoslovakia. England was only interested that any alterations should be effected by peaceful evolution, so as to avoid methods which might cause far-reaching disturbances, which were not desired by either the Fuhrer or by other countries.

This was hardly a "warning" to Hitler. As Eden later implied, it was more a signal that Britain would acquiesce in any changes in the status quo in Eastern Europe which Germany could effect without resorting to war.

Eden recalled:

I wished that Halifax had warned Hitler more strongly against intervention in Central Europe. "Alterations through the course of peaceful evolution" meant one thing to Halifax and probably something quite different to the Fuhrer. Hitler was capable of taking this as giving him freedom to increase subversive Nazi activity in Austria, or to stir up the grievances of the Sudeten Germans.⁶²

Eden clearly exaggerated Halifax's naivete, for Halifax was quite aware of the implications of what he told Hitler, as his own memorandum of the conversation reveals:

As regards Austria and Czechoslovakia, I formed the impression that Germany believes time to be on her side, in the sense that the strong magnet will sooner or later attract the steel filings lying about within reach of its attraction, and intends to assist this process as far as possible.⁶³

In the course of his conversation with Halifax, Hitler raised the colonial question, demanding the return of Germany's former colonies, and hinting at deals by which he might gain portions of other colonial empires. He justified his rearmament in terms of the danger of Soviet Russia, clearly implying that Russia's presence prevented a change in Germany's armament policy. Halifax concluded by expressing Chamberlain's wish that this discussion be followed "by further talks on individual questions." "All that was needed," he said, "was that both sides should have one aim in view, namely, the establishment and consolidation of peace in Europe."

Chamberlain was elated at the "great success" of Halifax's visit "because it achieved its object, that of creating an atmosphere in which it is possible to discuss with Germany the practical questions involved in a European settlement." In his diary entry of November 26, 1937, Chamberlain

expressed his confidence in Hitler's and Coering's wish not to make war at present. He wrote:

Of course, they want to dominate Eastern Europe; they want as close a union with Austria as they can get without incorporating her in the Reich, and they want much the same things for the Sudetendeutsche as we did for the Uitlanders in the Transvaal.... I don't see why we shouldn't say to Germany, "give us satisfactory assurances that you won't use force to deal with Austrians and Czechoslovakians, and we will give you similar assurances that we won't use force to prevent the changes you want, if you can get them by peaceful means."⁶⁴

Thus, Chamberlain clearly approved of German hegemony in Eastern Europe, secured by "peaceful means," which really included any means short of open warfare.

The first real challenge to Chamberlain's complacency came in mid-February, when Hitler met with Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg at Berchtesgaten and presented a series of ultimatums threatening Austria's independence. The immediate reaction of Undersecretary Cadogan was typical of the Cabinet in general: "I almost wish Germany would swallow Austria and get it over. She is probably going to do so anyhow--anyhow we can't stop her. What's all this fuss about?"⁶⁵ Schuschnigg appealed to Britain for help, but the Cabinet knew it was in a position to do nothing to stop Hitler. William Strang, head of the Central Department of the Foreign Office, analyzed the situation and concluded:

We do not possess the means to prevent Germany from treating Austria and Czechoslovakia as satellite states....neither we nor the French possess the offensive power to prevent Germany from working her will in Central Europe.⁶⁶

Of course, Chamberlain had no intention of opposing Hitler's designs on Austria. He merely wished to see Hitler get his way without war, and now Hitler's actions drove home the point that the British were simply not in a position to stop Hitler if he wanted war. By February 19, the Cabinet

had written off Austria. A Foreign Office memorandum of that date stated that "we must assume that Austria is doomed as an independent state."⁶⁷

On March 8, 1938, the British Ambassador in Berlin, Neville Henderson met with Hitler for further discussions on the "broad outline (of) an attempt at a solution suggested by the British Government."⁶⁸ He stressed Britain's willingness to abide by changes in Europe, provided they were effected without resort to war, and he said that "the purpose of the British proposal was to contribute to" a settlement which avoided war. Hitler, who was preparing to take over Austria in a week, spoke in more detail about his wishes in Eastern Europe. Again he raised the specter of an attack by Russia, saying that "German rearmament was made necessary by Russia." He insisted on complete freedom of action in Eastern Europe and, apparently playing on the well-voiced British dread of war, he made it clear that if Britain opposed his designs in the East, she would force him to make war: "if England continued to oppose the German effort to achieve a just and reasonable settlement here, then the moment would come when it would be necessary to fight." Hitler warned Henderson that "if explosions from within were to occur in Austria or Czechoslovakia, Germany would not remain neutral but would act with lightning speed." This was a thinly veiled threat, since Nazi subversion through "fifth columns" in Austria had created a situation where Hitler could, at his whim, trigger violence which would provoke suppression and would thus "justify" his taking action against Austria.⁶⁹ Hitler found a sympathetic listener in Henderson when he charged that agreements with "so barbaric a creation as the Soviet Union" were "as good as worthless." He criticized the admission of Russia into Europe through her treaties with France, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and reminded

Henderson that his (Hitler's) long-standing proposals on disarmament "had in mind a union of Europe without Russia."

On March 10, 1938, the new foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, wrote Hitler from London that a definite and unmistakable trend in British foreign policy had become apparent since the Halifax visit in November 1937: "It looks as if Chamberlain and Halifax want to try to reach a peaceful understanding among the four Great Powers of Europe without the Soviet Union."⁷⁰ The same day, Erich Kordt, Ribbentrop's private secretary, spoke with Sir Horace Wilson in London. Wilson was Chamberlain's "principal confidant and agent," in both foreign and economic matters.⁷¹ In discussing a four-power agreement with Kordt, Wilson said, according to Kordt, "Russia ought to be left out entirely at the present time. In his (Wilson's) opinion the system there was bound 'to melt away' some day."⁷²

The following day, March 11, Hitler delivered an ultimatum to Schuschnigg, who had, in desperation, announced a plebiscite to determine whether Austria should be incorporated into the Reich or remain independent. On March 12, Nazi troops marched into Austria. Chamberlain received the news of the German ultimatum while he and Halifax were dining with Ribbentrop on the 11th. Halifax could not conceal his indignation at this time. However, later that evening, Chamberlain called Ribbentrop to a private meeting at which he asked the Foreign Minister to convey a message to Hitler: "It had always been his desire to clean up German-British relations. He had now made up his mind to realize this aim....this was his sincere wish and firm determination." Chamberlain, whose apparent sincerity impressed the cold and skeptical Ribbentrop, concluded by saying that "once we had all got past this unpleasant affair and a reasonable solution had been found, it was to

be hoped that we could begin working in earnest toward a German-British understanding."⁷³

March 12 was a sad day for Chamberlain, not because the Austrians had lost their independence without even the facade of a plebiscite, but because Hitler had behaved in a way inconsistent with Chamberlain's wishes; he had excluded a "reasonable solution" by resorting to the use of military force.⁷⁴ As Chamberlain and Halifax agreed, "what it was necessary to condemn was the method," not the aim.⁷⁵ Chamberlain's diary entry for March 13 is quite frank:

It is perfectly evident, surely, now that force is the only argument Germany understands, and that collective security cannot offer any prospect of preventing such events, until it can show a visible force of overwhelming strength, backed by determination to use it. And if that is so, is it not obvious that such force and determination are most effectively mobilized by alliances, which don't require meetings at Geneva, and resolutions by dozens of small nations who have no responsibilities? Heaven knows, I don't want to get back to alliances, but if Germany continues to behave as she has done lately, she may drive us to it....For the moment we must abandon conversations with Germany, we must show our determination not to be bullied by announcing some increase or acceleration in rearmament, and we must quietly and steadily pursue our conversations with Italy. If we can avoid another violent coup in Czechoslovakia, which ought to be feasible, it may be possible for Europe to settle down again, and some day for us to start peace talks again with the Germans.⁷⁶

This statement deserves close scrutiny. Chamberlain readily admits that if Germany continues to behave as she did in Austria, she could be opposed only by alliances outside of the League. Of course, there was no tangible reason to believe that Hitler would change his ways; up to this point he had openly and unilaterally broken numerous treaty provisions. There was every reason to believe that he could not be trusted to keep his word, and even Chamberlain called him "utterly untrustworthy and dishonest."⁷⁷ Yet, Chamberlain here claims that he does not want to resort to alliance politics. This statement prompts the inference that he does not want to

resort to an alliance with the Soviet Union, the one country whose aid would be essential if "a visible force" were to be mustered to stop Hitler where he was currently expanding, in the east, where Britain and France could show little determination and even less force. Chamberlain's efforts to secure a far-reaching understanding with Germany seem to bely his professed reluctance to engage in alliances. The latter part of the quoted passage reveals how much Chamberlain still depended on appeasement, to the virtual exclusion of all other alternatives. The key is his wish to avoid a "violent" coup in Czechoslovakia; if the Germans could achieve their ends by any means short of open violence, Chamberlain would approve and could continue talks.

The events of the next week support this analysis. At a Cabinet meeting on March 12 Chamberlain expressed his anger at the German move, but cooled enough to state that "the next question was how we were to prevent an occurrence of similar events in Czechoslovakia."⁷⁸ On March 14, Chamberlain condemned Germany's action in a speech before Parliament; however, as Halifax made clear, England would do nothing to oppose the German move⁷⁹, which meant that France could not act and there was no chance for collective security to function. Chamberlain, with the approval of the Cabinet, had decided not to show any "determination not to be bullied"; instead of announcing "some increase or acceleration in rearmament", he announced that he would order a "fresh review" of the British defense program.⁸⁰ On March 12, still stinging from the impact of Hitler's move, many Cabinet members and British officials became sensitive to Britain's militarily weak position. Even before German troops marched into Austria, Halifax exclaimed to Harvey and Cadogan, "the only thing they understand is force. A warning will be useless unless accompanied by a threat to use force which we cannot do."⁸¹

With Austria out of the way, Cadogan reflected, "we may be helpless as regards Czechoslovakia, etc. That is what I want to get considered."⁸² General Edmund Ironside wrote in his diary on March 13, "The moral for us is that force is the only thing which tells with these two gangsters. If we are not ready to meet this force, then we shall go under. We have had ample warning."⁸³ One of the primary topics of discussion at the March 12 Cabinet meeting was the "possibility of some expansion and acceleration of our defense forces." The general view was that Air Force and anti-aircraft defenses should receive first priority. However, by the following day the mood of the Cabinet was against any change in armament plans. Simon argued against a change for economic reasons, and was supported by Thomas Inskip who asserted that any expansion of the Air Force "would wreck the armaments program recently adopted by the Cabinet." Halifax spoke for prudence in saying that "the events of the last few days had not changed his own opinion as to the German attitude towards Britain. He did not think it could be claimed that a new situation had arisen." Chamberlain simply put off the issue and decided to announce a mere "review of the defense programme."⁸⁴ If Chamberlain and Halifax really believed that force was the only thing Hitler understood, they knew Hitler would not be impressed by the impending "fresh review."

On March 17, Litvinov made a formal statement to the press, describing the new danger faced by the smaller states bordering Germany as well as the larger states. He announced:

I can therefore state on (behalf of the Soviet Government) that so far as it is concerned it is ready as before to participate in collective actions, which would be decided upon jointly with it and which would aim at checking the further development of aggression and at eliminating the increased danger of a new world war. It is prepared immediately to take up in the League of Nations or outside

of it the discussion with other Powers of the practical measures which the circumstances demand. It may be too late tomorrow, but today the time for it is not yet gone if all the States, and the Great Powers in particular, take a firm and unambiguous stand in regard to the problem of the collective salvation of peace.⁸⁵

On the same day, an official version of Litvinov's remarks, identified as representing the views of the Soviet Government, were presented to the British Foreign Office by Soviet Ambassador Maisky.⁸⁶

Adam Ulam's evaluation of this Soviet proposal is worthy of quotation:

The Soviet move of March 17 is supremely important...(in that it meant exactly what it said. This was no call for a crusade against Hitler, for overthrowing him, or for wresting Austria from his graspThe note reflected the Soviet belief, which was then shared by many in the West, that a firm enough guarantee of Czechoslovakia by the three Great Powers would make Hitler back down.⁸⁷

I would add one further observation to Ulam's analysis. Doubtlessly, Stalin hoped that a three-power guarantee of Czechoslovakia would deter Hitler; however, he was also anticipating the contingency that Hitler might still risk war over the Sudetens. The critical part of the Litvinov proposal is the declaration of readiness to discuss "practical measures which the circumstances demand." The circumstances had already been described in the proposal: Czechoslovakia was the country now directly threatened. Furthermore, Litvinov claimed to make the proposal, in part, because of his country's responsibilities under treaties with France and Czechoslovakia.⁸⁸ Thus, the discussion of "practical measures" for the possible defense of Czechoslovakia could mean only one thing: arranging for the passage of Soviet troops through Eastern Europe. For the countries involved, especially Poland and Rumania, this was seen as a fate worse than Nazi domination. There is no doubt that arms would have to be twisted before the governments of Eastern Europe would consent to allowing Soviet troops on their soil; there is also no doubt who would have to do the arm-twisting--Britain and France.

In the next six months, Britain and France would obligingly twist many arms to force a small nation to do something utterly against its will and destructive of its independence. They did it not to secure an alliance with Russia, but rather to satisfy every demand of Hitler.

The Soviet proposal for collective action, with the provision for working outside of the League, was really what Chamberlain, in his March 13 diary entry, admitted was "the only argument Germany understands." Yet, as early as March 14, in his speech before Parliament, Chamberlain revealed his determination not to stand up to Hitler. On March 20, he recorded his despair at the world situation. Of the Russians, whose proposal was then in British hands, he could say nothing more than that they were clandestinely trying to involve England in a war with Germany. He admitted that he had entertained the idea of a "Grand Alliance," but rejected it because it was not practicable. "You have only to look at the map," he wrote, "to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia, from being overrun by the Germans, if the wanted to do it....Russia is 100 miles away."⁸⁹ That England and France could do nothing for Czechoslovakia was obvious; what Chamberlain did not mention with regard to Russia is that she was the only country who could conceivably send troops to Czechoslovakia. The crucial observation was not that Russia was 100 miles away, but that permission would have to be secured before her troops could travel across those 100 miles. Even at that, her air force was stronger than Germany's and Chamberlain himself had been a strong advocate of the decisive influence of air power in the "next war." Yet there is no indication that Chamberlain evaluated any of these military considerations.⁹⁰ He concluded his self-serving analysis of March 20 with these lines: "I have therefore abandoned