

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

In 1933 Europe was governed by innumerable politicians presiding over the many pockets of insecure power which constituted the régime in each particular state. On all these régimes the impact of Hitler was profound. In all the geography of politics was transformed as the danger of war raised problems so acute that all other problems were affected. By 1939 few régimes had escaped a transformation. By 1945 many had been swept away.

In Britain the problem was defined psephologically. Though a general election in 1940 might have returned a Labour government with greater power than Labour had in the Churchill Coalition, the possibility was important not just because it might have occurred but because the thought that it might be prevented affected policy when Hitler had been made central, not just by himself but by publicists and the party leaders.

In these years foreign policy became central not only because it was but because politicians could fit it into the political battle which had begun in the twenties. To the Labour party it gave a respectability it might not otherwise have regained so quickly after 1931. By others the domestic appeasement of the twenties was assumed in order to attack the international appeasement of the thirties. The result was an alliance between a class-conflict programme in the Labour party and an international-conflict programme in parts of the Liberal and Conservative parties.

In 1939 the effect was devastating. In the first nine months of the war, Chamberlain tried to circumvent it. In May 1940 he was discredited and his coalition replaced.

The displacement of Chamberlain was a victory for Conservatives who, in disputing his leadership, had developed links over the whole range of opinion. In reducing him from being leader of a party into being leader of a group, Churchill had abandoned the anti-socialist rôle he had played since 1919. In the process he had assisted at the event at which Labour was in office not as minor partner, not as pathetic

remnant and not on Liberal sufferance, but as a major element in a centre government.

As a centre coalition, the government of May 1940 realised the hopes which many politicians had had since the 1931 régime had first cracked electorally six years before. It survived the fall of France, the threat to Egypt and the loss of Singapore, developing in office the consensual relationship established in opposition and leaving it uncertain whether it was a Lib-Lab trap for Conservatives or a Conservative trap in which Attlee was the victim. Its continuation into the period of Russo-American victory established the post-war illusion that a régime which had been on the 'right side' in relation to Hitler must have embodied an indefeasible centrality for the future. Through Churchill, Sinclair, Attlee and Eden (who were its founders) and through Butskellism (which was invented by Hoare in 1934) it lasted until Macmillan's retirement, establishing inflation, disestablishing the Empire and permitting a receptivity in which the central features of Labour thinking became entrenched as normal.

For historical writing the régime's success had two consequences. It made it possible to see the foreign-policy conflict of the thirties as anticipating the egalitarian patriotism of the forties rather than as continuing the class conflict of the twenties. And it produced a built-in negativity about the régime which had been defeated. Though neither normally deliberate nor always self-conscious, identification with the régime that 'won the war' made writing about its enthronement an act of self-congratulation.

This obstacle to understanding was supplemented by another. The most accessible material, being designed for publication (to the public or other governments), enabled policy to be equated with diplomatic statement and the half-truths of democratic reassurance with the intentions behind acts of state. Since the intentions of critics were similarly lost in their public appearances, policy conflict was presented in the single-dimensional terms in which it had been discussed publicly in the first place.

The result was neglect of the fact that the public statements of politicians were functional, not 'true', and were about other politicians as much as about policy. This was strengthened by the reticence of Feiling's *Chamberlain*

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

(which was completed in 1944)¹ and by the sale and scale of the first volume of Churchill's *Second World War*.

Churchill's report of his encounter with destiny embodied more genuine recollection and more impressive documentation than Lloyd George's report of his. But both were coloured by the needs of their post-war situations and by their desire to stand above the post-war conflict of the parties. How far the 'saviour of the nation' was the suppliant leader of a defeated party is not clear. What is clear is that Churchill established a view by catching a mood which so deepened the contrast between himself and what went before him that even defenders of Chamberlain thereafter assumed that the differences were as he had described them.

A similar conviction that the policies differed, and that Munich reflected the difference, was enshrined in Wheeler-Bennett's *Munich* and in the crude memorials to his fellow Jews erected by a great historian of British aristocracy.² It was confirmed by denigration of Chamberlain's civic origins and by shrill nonsense from a great thinker. It was deepened by the assumption that Chamberlain had emasculated parliament and deceived the people, and had caused Britain to stand alone after commitments had been given that he never really wanted. It was condoned historically when Rowse discerned a 'deep ... propriety' in the 'coming together' in May 1940 of the 'old ruling class ... and the solid representatives of the working class'. It achieved immortality when the self-inflicted wounds of June were seen as permitting a 'happy breed' to make a 'contribution to the world...even greater than that of our ancestors'.³

This assumed that 'liberty' was being defended, not an empire being lost, and that Churchill was Pericles, Marlborough, Elizabeth and Drake. It did not ask whether he was implicated in the situation he inherited and how far his relations with Baldwin affected the positions he adopted.

Churchill need not be blamed for climbing Olympus. Nor need his Lib-Lab laureates like Rowse, who had spent the thirties as laureate to Keynes and Morrison.⁴ Nor even should Bryant, who had been Chamberlain's editor and a Baldwinian defender of the Chiefs of Staff, and who might have been expected to know better.⁵ But assumptions generated in malice and gratitude between Dunkirk and Abadan established a

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

living interest which will survive the most zealous attempts at reinterpretation.

Reinterpretation began in the mid-fifties with the memoirs of Hoare. They were followed by works from Medlicott, Watt, Taylor, Thompson, Gilbert, Robbins, Lammers, Wendt and Gannon, and by the slow unearthing of a City and Whitehall-based suspicion of the economic power of the United States.

Hoare gave a retrospective coherence and did considerable injustice to his own positions. Lammers established that neither Chamberlain nor the Foreign Office thought 'ideologically': he also questioned the belief that Chamberlain wanted to set Hitler on to Stalin.⁶ Gilbert's *Roots of Appeasement* (1966) recanted much of *The Appeasers* of 1963. Without either Chamberlain's papers or the Public Records, Watt had intuitions which in policy respect were right.⁷

Taylor's book was an isolationist landmark which implied the need to explain why Chamberlain felt obliged to intervene in Eastern Europe. Robbins saw that the explanation would be complicated. Wendt emphasized economic policy, Howard the Empire. Thompson and Gannon gave differing twists to Medlicott's view that the difference between Chamberlain and his critics was insignificant. Before and after the government archives were opened in 1970, all of these differed from Taylor in assuming – what Middlemass, Aster, Parkinson and Barnett assumed also – that 'the notables outside the government, most backbench MP's, the Parliamentary Opposition and the Press... made little impact on decisions during the Chamberlain government.'⁸

Whether foreign policy can be understood from governmental archives depends, however, on its place in party conflict. In the past hundred and fifty years, though often important, it has seldom been central. From the beginning of 1936, it was as central as Protection in 1846 or Ireland in 1886, and as the Turkish question had been in the 1870s.

In these circumstances, policy-making was a complicated matter. Ministers were informed by Foreign Office, Treasury and Defence staff advice. And they reacted to an indictment. But advisers were listened to or not as the indictment connected 'manifest truths' about the international order with the controversial 'truths' of party conflict, and decisions were taken in face of other politicians who, like ministers them-

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

selves, were artificial persons made up of the assessments they made about the advice that they were given.

For party leaders, some ex-ministers and a few backbenchers, advice came from a parallel bureaucracy. For most backbenchers on most questions, it came from newspapers, White papers and discussion with one another. For everyone it involved an implicit understanding that policy-making was inseparable from the spectrum of conflict which had been established when Baldwin and MacDonald stabilised the class struggle ten years before.

Whatever the legacy of the past, the future was unknown. Churchill, Eden and Sinclair helped the Labour leaders to become central. But they did not know that they would do so, and the 'truths' they established about the régime they replaced must be seen, initially, as merely instruments for replacing it.

When foreign policy is marginal, it is possible to neglect the total situation and still show how policy was conducted. In the late thirties, foreign policy was the form that party conflict took. Politicians conducted it in the light of party considerations; it can only be understood if these considerations are reconstructed. It is for this reason that the Prologue sketches the party situation of the early thirties. Part I then presents foreign policy as an extension of its function from the Hoare-Laval pact to the occupation of Prague in March 1939. Part II describes the attacks made on Chamberlain, Part III their effect between Prague and the Russo-German pact in August. Chamberlain then resumes control (Part IV), fighting a politician's war and expecting a political victory until brought down (the sketchiest part of the book documentarily) by defeat in Scandinavia.

The theme is the relationship between the objectives of politicians and their decisions about policy. The claim is that this is the way in which foreign policy must be understood.

To make this claim, and write in this way, is misleading since the obvious context was the international system. This, however, whatever else it was, was a register of opinion in national capitals. If it is to be understood, the politics of the Powers must be seen through the filtering effected by the politics of the parties. Until they are seen – and seen in detail, in most of the states concerned – it will be impossible

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to give a real account of the development of events.

Parties performed different functions in different places and registered differing relationships between politicians and public. Though all reacted to Hitler (who was also reacting), their reactions reflected pre-existing functions, as well as considered conclusions about the international situation. These functions must be established in depth. Establishing them may take a long time. In some cases it may be impossible. For the moment British policy may be seen emerging from the situation in which Hitler became a problem.

This situation was dominated by the class struggle, which had been defined in the early twenties, won (by the forces of resistance) in 1931 and renewed with the electoral dilapidation of 1934. In the following six years, it was dominated (and the class struggle transformed) by Hitler's challenge to the double-talk which surrounded nearly all discussion of Imperial defence.

The realisation that the world would not be as it had been was the essence of the situation to which politicians had responded in the decade before 1914. Whether 'peace' was 'threatened' by 'violence' or 'the Empire' by 'rivals', this was the need to which relevant thinking responded. On the one hand, it produced the internationalism which became the norm when the war was over. On the other, it produced demands for autarky, Imperial unity and renovation of the national and Imperial defences.

Though pre-1914 Imperialism had an expanding and jingoistic rhetoric, its essence was the realisation that the Empire was in danger. To some extent it assumed that defensive impregnability was possible so long as Isolation was ended. To some extent, it assumed that sentiment could make up for financial deficiency. The system of sentiment lasted the war which, however, eroded the financial base on which military power depended. In the indebtedness of post-war Britain, the League of Nations on the one hand, the Statute of Westminster on the other, and Locarno – the type of non-alliance guarantee of peace – provided new sentiments and altruistic clothing to deal with the fact that air power had placed Imperial frontiers on the Rhine.

Both the sentiments and the clothing were impermanent. The peace settlement was denounced in England as soon as it

INTRODUCTION

7

was made and had lost moral force long before Hitler began to dismantle it. Though victory brought entanglements which had not been there before, the governments of the twenties undermined them by leaving it uncertain at what point British intervention in Europe could become effective. With the rejection of the Geneva Protocol and the refusal to make Locarno an alliance, financial, imperial and isolationist considerations became important.

In spite of this, the nakedness of the Empire created a vested interest in the *status quo* and contradictory desires both to restore the pre-war economic system and to anticipate its erosion. Moreover, the importance of liberal opinion in a class-polarised politics made a power-political justification unsuitable, so foreign policy was presented in terms which the League of Nations Union would approve. *Laissez-faire*, however, was dead, and was buried in 1933. 'Collective Security' was a bluff which had only to be called. When Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese called it, politicians created new alignments among themselves in the course of wrestling with the discovery that this had happened.

The effect was as striking as the discovery of the Labour party in the twenties. It produced the same reactions and provided similar opportunities for reputations to be made. Where MacDonald had played according to the rules, however, Hitler did not, and did much damage in the course of establishing that he would not do so. All but one of the foreign secretaries and prime ministers who dealt with foreign policy were destroyed, as well as a number of soldiers and officials. But it was neither depravity which determined policy up to September 1939 nor a reign of virtue that began in May 1940, and Chamberlain merely fumbled when faced with a contradiction between the desire to maintain peace by being detached from central and eastern Europe and the desire to be involved strenuously in it.

Central and eastern Europe had never been areas of British interest; except at the Peace Conferences, they had not been primary subjects for British action. Though the Turkish collapse had produced conflict with Russia and Greece and the beginning of a Middle Eastern empire, both conflict and empire had been confined. In the post-war decades, British interests followed the thin line of oil and trade through the

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Mediterranean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf to India, Malaya, Hong Kong and Australasia.

This was the 'Empire' as the Services saw it – and the hard core of the strategic problem. It required acquiescence from Italy, Turkey, Greece and Egypt and a want of interest in central and eastern Europe. Politically, however, central and eastern Europe became the crux. Not because of direct interests and commitments but because French governments regarded a second front as crucial if the Rhine was to be defended. It was for this reason that the British desire to keep out was thwarted by the French need to keep in, and why policy had to be conducted on the assumption that detachment was impracticable.

Whether, in these circumstances, Britain should help or halt German influence in central and eastern Europe depended on whether this was seen as a guarantee of peace or a prelude to world domination, and on whether an anti-German alliance would give undue assistance to the Russians.

The East European commitments of 1939 were, of course, primarily about Hitler. But to say this is to beg the question. For, if Hitler's 'object' was to 'hurl his armies against Russia' (rather than to secure relations with the army and the German public), then the decision to obstruct him would have done Stalin's work for him if the French collapse in 1940 had not prevented it being done, and this would have been so unless Stalin wanted to co-operate with France and Britain more than he wanted to involve them in war against Germany.

Hitler may have wanted to destroy the British Empire. But this was not obvious then and is far from obvious now. It is at least as likely that he aimed primarily to fulfil promises about Germany's economic and world rôle and was compelled to attack Britain only by British action in May and September 1938.⁹ Even if it is assumed that his aims from the start were to 'purify' Germany, destroy Russia and colonise the Ukraine, that suggests nothing about his attitude to Britain.

It may be that Hitler was the 'beast from the abyss' whom Britain had a duty to destroy.¹⁰ It may be that victory over Russia would have been followed by an attack in the West. It is possible to deny the duty, to question the sequence or to

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

believe that success, or failure to succeed against Russia, would have affected the character of the régime in Germany.

Why Hitler wanted to destroy Russia and what he would have done afterwards are questions to which many answers can be given. This book gives none. All it does is to display the problem and the curious thinking that lay behind the British decision to resolve it.

The final solution was a succession of commitments between the Runciman mission in August 1938 and the guarantee to Poland eight months later. At each point in the approach to involvement, however, detachment was the objective. That it turned into an attempt at alliance with Russia was the work of Halifax who was the chief cause of the events which made Chamberlain a ghost in the machine between the occupation of Prague and the Russo-German pact in August.

To history, until yesterday, Halifax was the arch-appeaser. This, it is now recognised, was a mistake. His rôle, however, was complicated. In these pages he is not the man who stopped the rot, but the embodiment of Conservative wisdom who decided that Hitler must be obstructed because Labour could not otherwise be resisted.

Why Britain should have chosen to obstruct Hitler except in France or the Low Countries was not obvious. Until September 1938 it had been out of the question. The change was made possible by the decision then to underwrite an international guarantee of a dismembered Czechoslovakia.

However ambiguous, the guarantee was crucial. If Chamberlain erred (as, given his intentions, he did), one element in the error consisted in the decision to give it when he had previously assumed that Britain's only commitment beyond Locarno should be in the defunct mechanics of the League. Up to September 1938 his policy was exactly that; he abandoned it then the better to pursue it, and his failure thereafter was a result of political pressures imprisoning him in a policy he had no intention of adopting.

Chamberlain knew that war would be damaging to Britain, to the Empire, and in terms of human suffering. He had, therefore, been performing a balancing act in which the threat to intervene was designed to make intervention unnecessary and where commitments to France had been stepped up, beyond the formal need, in order to prevent the

Cambridge University Press

052101929X - The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933-1940

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

[More information](#)

French intervening. After Berchtesgaden this failed; he lost balance, gave a guarantee he did not expect to honour and, after Prague, gave himself a retrospective firmness when he needed to establish that he had meant it.

The negative calculations of 1938 thus initiated the commitments of 1939. But these, too, were made so that the threat of war would prevent war being declared, just as the declaration of war would make it unnecessary to fight it, and because, after Prague, the policy of avoiding war could only be pursued in terms which the political climate would permit.

This was determined by the reactions of politicians which themselves were a function of the conceptions they had of the rôles they should play in the system they were working. For some (not only in the Labour party) the leading rôle was a class-war one. For others, it involved adopting positions designed to conceal the class war. For many Conservatives, it involved sensitive responses to what was conceived of as the opinion of the Centre.

As an object of pursuit, the Centre was a moving fixture. With the crumbling of the Centre established in 1931, it had meant primarily economic flexibility (and criticism of Chamberlain for being inflexible) until it came to mean criticism of Chamberlain for being inflexible about foreign policy.

No more than in office were changes in opposition dictated solely by the merits of questions. For Chamberlain's critics, as much as for him, the conclusions reached resulted from the situations in which they reached them and the effect they had from the situations to which they applied them. Whether as genuine belief or as 'an instrumentality' necessary for removing a prime minister, the 'Centre' was central both in developing criticism after 1936 and in affecting policy in 1939.

The 'central' position in foreign policy in the early thirties was a League and disarmament one, but, until 1935, foreign policy was not central. The Peace Ballot and Abyssinia then became the chief focus of discussion and the issue through which Baldwin re-established his 'centrality' at the election. It was the lead Chamberlain gave against the League after the defeat of the Abyssinians which initiated a division about himself and the foreign policy his party position had led him into representing.