Introduction

In 1968 the Public Records Office made available to historians British Cabinet papers relating to the years 1938 and 1939. This decision had renewed the debate on the extent of British responsibility for allowing Hitler to pursue his revisionist and aggressive policies in Europe. It has been asserted that the degree of British complicity, the logical consequences of appeasement, could be ascertained through the study of contemporary documents. The historical analysis of British involvement in the break up of Czechoslovakia has notably benefited from this development. It is therefore surprising to note that this has not been matched by an equally detailed analysis of the few months preceding the outbreak of the war, in particular the period from March till September 1939.

The assumption of an undertaking to aid Poland against German aggression on the 31 March has traditionally been seen as signalling a break in the foreign policy hitherto pursued by the British government. It is presumed, therefore, that the period from the end of March to the outbreak of the war is one of few new initiatives, in any case none which would contradict the assertion that in the closing days of March Britain had made a definite commitment to fight Germany.¹ Thus the British guarantee to Poland is frequently viewed in apocalyptic terms. In some interpretations it is portrayed as a supreme folly, a gesture that constituted a gauntlet thrown down to Hitler and one which he picked up at a time when Britain was unprepared for war.² By others, it is seen as a point at which Britain decided to oppose Germany and forge a new policy of challenging Hitler by offering a guarantee to a country which, it was known, would be the next object of German revisionism.³
In both these interpretations of Britain’s reactions to German aggression in Central and Eastern Europe in 1938 and 1939, the British guarantee to Poland is seen through the prism of German actions in Europe, overlooking the traditional and long-term policy of successive British governments of disengagement from the affairs of Central and Eastern Europe. The latter perspective reveals the more complex origins of British appeasement as well as casting a more revealing light on Britain’s inability to build up successfully an eastern front against Germany during the period from March to September 1939.

Throughout the First World War British politicians and the Foreign Office were deeply apprehensive of the consequences of the break up of the old empires, primarily the Austro-Hungarian, but also the Russian and the Ottoman Empires. The replacement of existing, however unstable, entities was going to pose new and unknown problems. Thus little support was given initially to Polish and Czechoslovak claims for support for their aspirations from the Entente powers. The collapse of the Russian partner precipitated new attitudes. Moreover, the Central Power’s attempt to obtain Polish support, by recognising the right of the Poles to an independent state, forced the British and French to formulate new policies.4 Britain’s main concern was the future fate of Germany, and subsequently also that of Russia. In the first case Britain opposed French schemes for weakening Germany by imposing a punitive peace. In the case of Russia, Britain’s involvement in the Civil War was badly planned and half-hearted, resulting in troops being committed to the Russian war but, simultaneously, a reluctance to support Polish schemes for a war against the Bolsheviks.3 To Poland the consequence of that attitude was that Britain remained opposed to the incorporation of Danzig and Upper Silesia into Poland.6 But the subsequent Polish–Russian war of 1919–20 and the Polish–Czechoslovak crisis over Teschen appeared to substantiate fully Lloyd George’s apprehensions that the new states would be the source of instability in that region.

It was France which, ostensibly, benefited from the creation of the new states in Central Eastern Europe. However, the importance of the Franco–Polish Alliance of 1921 and the Czechoslovak–French Alliance of 1924 should not be overestimated. Polish–Czechoslovak hostility retained its full potency during the whole of the inter-war period and prevented France from making any diplomatic use of her
agreements with both countries, whether to form an anti-German
c bloc or to consolidate potential Danubian conflicts.  

The British initiative in negotiating the Locarno Pact confirmed all
that was apparent in British foreign policy towards Germany and
Central and Eastern Europe as well as leading to the weakening of
France’s influence east of Germany. The substance of the Locarno
treaties was such that Britain and France implicitly let Germany
know that they accepted the possibility of the revision of Germany’s
eastern frontier while at the same time underlining the inviolability
of her borders in the west.

Whereas it is difficult to perceive any long-term British political
plans towards Central Eastern Europe, an analysis of economic con-
tacts is more revealing. In the first half of 1919 Britain lent her sup-
port to schemes for the creation of independent Baltic States. The
Polish claim to the Baltic coast and region as areas of her exclusive
interest were seen as going counter to British plans for increasing
trade with those countries and subsequently also with the Soviet
Union. On a general level, Britain opposed any power trying to
monopolise trade with the Successor States. But during the 1930s
these countries’ attempts to restrict their trade with Germany and
expand it with Britain evoked little response from the latter.

The onset of the world depression necessitated a revision of
economic priorities. At the Ottawa conference in July 1932 Britain
committed herself to trade with the imperial territories. The
agricultural countries of Central Eastern Europe, most notably the
Baltic States and Poland, were affected adversely by this decision.

To the North Eastern European countries, Britain remained the
most important market for their agricultural produce, a position
which was altered by Germany’s aggressive economic policy after
1934. Their preference for trading with Britain was nevertheless not
considered to be of sufficient economic importance by the British
Treasury and the Board of Trade. That attitude was maintained
steadfastly in spite of the Foreign Office’s disquiet at the expansion
of Germany’s political influence, which came in the wake of the
spread of her economic dominance.

In 1936 the Foreign Office’s urgings that clearance payments
schemes should be established with Central East European states
was rejected on the grounds that it conflicted with the government’s
determination not to make special arrangements with that region.
This decision was aimed at protecting British agriculture.
Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939

Foreign Office did recognise that Britain was thus casting aside an opportunity to realise the political capital of those countries' apprehensions at their growing economic dependence on trade with Germany. But, both in political and economic terms, trade with Poland and the Baltic States was of little consequence to Britain. German expansion eastwards, be it economic or even political, was not viewed as undesirable, although British politicians had earlier strongly objected to the states east of Germany becoming an area of exclusive French influence.

Militarily too, Britain considered Central Eastern Europe to be of no direct significance. When the military activities of the First World War had ceased in Europe, British troops remained in various trouble spots of the empire and, in addition, Britain acquired new areas which brought with them the need for policing. This was particularly the case in Palestine. Britain's military resources remained severely stretched during the inter-war period and the defence of Europe was the first casualty of any plans for reducing or rescheduling expenditure on military matters.32 Notwithstanding the Treasury's determination to control and limit spending on troops for the Continent, there also existed amongst British military chiefs a general dislike of the French and a consequent reluctance to plan joint action in Europe.33 This sentiment prevailed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

During discussions in December 1937 the Cabinet reaffirmed its acceptance of the primary role of the army as being the defence of the empire. Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, based his assumptions on Hore-Belisha's earlier statement that 'France no longer looked to Britain, in the event of war, to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed'.34 Thus, even on the eve of German action in Austria, and in the full knowledge of Germany's well publicised claim to the defence of Sudeten Germans, the British government was proceeding with the decrease of military commitments to the Continent. In any event, the only role envisaged for the British army on the Continent was the defence of Belgium, Holland and the northern coast of France. British unwillingness to send any troops to Central Eastern Europe or naval units to the Baltic or Black Seas was a foregone conclusion. In the absence of political commitments east of Germany, no plans were made for a reappraisal of this position throughout the inter-war period.
Introduction

Historians studying the British government’s reaction to the Austrian crisis of 1938 agree that developments there were considered to have been outside the scope of the mainstream of British foreign policy considerations. In his book The Chamberlain Cabinet, Ian Colvin notes that the annexation of Austria was an event with which the British Cabinet came to terms with admirable ease. German actions were considered to have been unnecessarily provocative and likely to threaten peace in Europe, but in essence, it was still hoped to continue with the long-term aim of reaching a colonial settlement with Germany, a plan which had earlier been put to the German government by the British. 13

The Austrian crisis immediately brought to the fore the question of Czechoslovakia, a subject the British Cabinet proceeded to debate on the day following the Anschluss. Two issues preoccupied the minds of the British ministers. The most important was the fear lest France make a hasty decision to honour her obligation to Czechoslovakia and then draw Britain into a European war. The second concern was that of how to persuade the Czechs to yield to the German demand for the incorporation of the Sudeten Germans into Germany. On 14 March 1938 Chamberlain, addressing the Committee for Foreign Policy, asserted that he did not believe ‘the assumption that when Germany had secured the hegemony of Central Europe, she would then pick a quarrel with ourselves’. 14 Having persuaded the French government of Chautemps to distance itself from Czechoslovakia Britain took the reins into her own hands. Pressure was to be put on Czechoslovakia to show herself reasonable in the face of German demands. Keith Middlemas states in his book Diplomacy of Illusion that by the summer of 1938, the question was not that of whether to defend Czechoslovakia or not, but that of whether ‘to warn Hitler off or to go to the extreme lengths of concession’. 15

Both these crises and the British government’s response illustrate the point stated earlier, that the British government was indifferent to the fate of Central Eastern Europe. A notable feature of both these crises is the fact that the merits of Germany’s claims were on the whole not considered, nor was the legitimacy of Germany’s actions.

But it was not a feeling of fatalism which caused British politicians to display indifference to the fate of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The main motive for British indifference to the consequences of German revisionism was the recognition of the fact that German
actions did not threaten British interests. Chamberlain's pre-
occupation remained a general European and global settlement
with Germany, in which case he was prepared to overlook the fate of
minor European states as well as long-term French interests.

At the same time, the conclusion of an Anglo-Italian Agreement
was high on the list of British foreign policy priorities. Italian
acquiescence to the Anschluss did surprise British politicians. But in
the absence of any major difference of opinion between the British
and Italians over Austria, the Spanish Civil War remained the only
live obstacle to, what British politicians hoped would become, good
relations between the two Mediterranean powers, Britain and
Italy.

Still one has to recognise that Britain's sudden involvement in
German–Czechoslovak negotiations over the fate of the Sudeten
Germans was a move that clearly went counter to traditional British
policy not merely in Europe but particularly in Central Eastern
Europe. Amongst a number of theories put forward by historians,
two suggest opposing explanations. One by Simon Newman con-
centrates predominantly on the Munich conference and concludes
on the granting of the guarantee to Poland. Simon Newman sees the
British initiative in setting up the Munich conference as an attempt
to stem German expansion eastwards. Concentrating on a study of
economic developments, he concludes that the British initiative in
German-Czechoslovak relations was the beginning of the turn in the
British attitude towards German revisionism. According to
Newman, Chamberlain tried to halt German aggression and since
September 1938 sought means of cautioning Germany against con-
tinuing aggressive moves. This was to be achieved partly through the
use of economic contracts and, when these failed, by a direct warn-
ing to Germany over the case of Poland in March 1939. The British
commitment to Poland is thus seen in the new light as a final notice,
where economic gestures had failed to deter Germany. Newman
suggests, therefore, that during the period October 1938–March 1939
Britain sought means of defending Central East European
states against German aggression.

The other theory on British–German relations in the 1930s is sug-
gested by Andrew Crozier. In his article on the subject Crozier con-
centrates his attention on the period preceding the Munich
conference. The core of his theory is that in 1936 the British Cabinet
authorised a new, more systematic approach to Germany. Aban-
doning the previously piecemeal treatment of German actions which challenged the Versailles Treaty, it was decided to take the lead in initiating a review of German grievances in respect of the postwar settlement. Thus a comprehensive list of aims was presented by Eden according to which the Locarno Treaty was to be abandoned in favour of a more general arms limitation agreement. Furthermore, Germany's economic and political interest in Central and Eastern Europe would be recognised. According to Crozier, Britain was thus taking the initiative and hoping to control German revisionism.

The colonial question promised to be a good starting point for this British programme. Unfortunately, Germany did not respond to these approaches and proceeded with the Anschluss, thus presenting Britain, as the rest of Europe, with a fait accompli. Crozier thus sees the Munich agreement as Britain's last attempt at setting the pace and thus controlling German expansion, and as, in effect, a miscarriage of that policy. He views the Munich conference not as an isolated incident but, 'an aspect of a much wider whole, namely, the policy of trying to achieve a European and general settlement'.

A variation of this theory of British actions preceding the Munich conference is also suggested by Michael Newman. Newman asserts that Britain had, throughout the inter-war period, refused to take an active interest in the minutiae of Central and Eastern European politics. In the British view, the region's affairs only were of indirect importance to Great Britain. Michael Newman sees Britain as aiming exclusively for a four power detente including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, as the sole purpose of her European policy. If small power rivalries in the Danubian Basin were likely to impede this detente they should be resolved forthwith in order to facilitate the major aim of harmony between the four big European powers. Newman states that the advent of the Nazi government and its obvious aggressive intentions did not alter this basic principle of British foreign policy towards Central Europe. He asserts that:

Since the goal of four power agreements, completed with passive pragmatism in Central Europe, had been adopted because it apparently served Britain's world interests, there would inevitably be extremely powerful forces in favour of retaining this policy unless it could be proved that Nazi aggressiveness in Central Europe necessarily threatened Britain's major interests elsewhere. In fact these forces maintained their dominance throughout the period.
Finally, Michael Newman concludes by showing that German aggression towards Czechoslovakia, though considered undesirable, was never seen as requiring a major reappraisal of British goals towards Germany.

Both Andrew Crozier and Michael Newman lay great stress on the continuity of British foreign policy primarily towards Germany and also, as a result of that, towards the victims of German aggression. Michael Newman succinctly summarises this attitude by suggesting that Britain was not prepared to modify the traditional supposition that Central Europe was an area of minor importance unless and until it was absolutely convinced that Nazi expansion there would preface general expansion.14

In any event, the period from October 1938 until March 1939 was one of relative stability. Germany’s immediate demands towards Czechoslovakia appeared to have been dealt with and no new areas of potential conflict appeared imminent. But in the same way that the Anschluss did not satiate Hitler’s appetite, so the Munich agreement did not resolve the issue of German revisionism. Indeed, the whole Czechoslovak crisis gave proof of Hitler’s determination to seek redress of all remaining outstanding German territorial grievances. Furthermore, it exhibited his ruthlessness in the pursuit of his aim. Not surprisingly, most European statesmen and politicians sought to anticipate Hitler’s next move.

Outstanding claims to Polish territory, namely to the Free City of Danzig, came once more to the forefront of attention in the autumn of 1938. Indeed, the whole of Polish–German relations were closely observed, as most European politicians envisaged a number of possible conflicts between the two. Polish complicity in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, while removing the Polish–Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region from the list of dangerous issues, immediately gave rise to a new potential Polish–German conflict over the Czech region of Bohumin, Frydek and Freistat. In addition, it was generally suspected that Germany was supporting Ukrainian irredentism, which was, amongst others, also directed against Poland.

But at that time Poland was not viewed with sympathy. Her policy of following an independent and what appeared at times to be a policy of extreme opportunism, endeared her to none of the other European powers. Both the French and the British realised that
**Introduction**

Poland would not allow herself to be directed to the extent that Czechoslovakia had. The haughty and abrasive personality of Poland’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Colonel Joseph Beck, made him an unpopular figure in the League of Nations, in France and in Britain. In the autumn of 1938, although anticipating the possible development of a conflict between Germany and Poland, no British politician was prepared to champion the case of Poland, even if Britain were determined to oppose Germany.

Political developments in Central Eastern Europe throughout the inter-war period vindicated previous British feelings of disquiet and distaste at having to deal with the consequences of instability in that part of Europe. Poland, her internal and foreign policies, all provided an adequate rationale and excuse for disinterest in the squabbles of the Successor States. J. Maynard Keynes’ comment on Poland as ‘an economic impossibility with no industry but Jew-baiting’ is exquisitely sarcastic as it is, did, to all intents and purposes, reflect the attitude of Liberal, Labour and particularly Conservative party circles.

Within one year of having obtained independence, Poland had embarked on a policy of aggression against the newly-established Bolshevik state. While Britain had made known her disapproval of Polish claims to the extension of the Polish border in the east beyond the Curzon line, the outbreak of the Polish–Russian war in 1920, drew Britain back into arbitration in that region. But what left a lasting impression in the minds of the French and British politicians was the manner in which the Polish government behaved when it first appealed for arbitration as a Polish defeat appeared to be imminent and then flouted the advice given when their strategic position improved. During the Spa conference in July 1920 Polish–Russian hostilities were discussed and, on British insistence, an attempt was made to commit Poland to a major border settlement. But when in August 1920 Poland restarted a successful counter-offensive against the Bolsheviks, earlier British advice was scorned. By October, the Piłsudski government was once more letting it be known that Poland considered not merely Lithuania but also Estonia and Finland as areas of legitimate Polish interest. In October 1920 General Żeligowski occupied Vilnius in direct contravention of the British–French decision that it should belong to Lithuania. Though ostensibly this action had not been authorised by the Polish government,
in November the Polish Sejm approved the incorporation of the town and district into Poland, thus demonstrating that British advice and wishes would be ignored.

Soon after winning the war against the Bolsheviks, the Poles displayed a remarkable ability to ignore the national aspirations of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian population and proceeded to get involved in an acrimonious quarrel with their southern neighbour, Czechoslovakia. The Polish–Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region originated in the Czechoslovak occupation of the area in January 1919. An additional factor was the French support of Czechoslovakia which aimed at making the latter a pivotal point of French influence in Central Europe. Czechoslovakia was the only industrialised state in that region and it was considered advantageous by the French to support the development of Czechoslovak coal mining, in particular that of the rich coking coal, as well as steel production. The result was that Polish–Czechoslovak relations remained strained throughout the inter-war period. Polish support for Slovak independence movements was reciprocated by Czechoslovak aid to Ukrainian nationalist organisations.

During the 1920s and 1930s Polish military leaders presumed that the next major war in which Poland would be involved, would be one with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was viewed as Poland’s major enemy and, until late 1938, the only aggressor against whom military plans had been prepared. The historical enmity existing between the two states was further encouraged by internal policy considerations. Political restrictions and a nationalist policy pursued by successive Polish governments against internal political opponents and national minorities tended to be justified by a need for vigilance. Anti-communism and anti-Semitism became the most obvious examples of these tendencies. Aspirations to the status of a major European power served to draw public attention away from economic problems and the suppression of democratic rights and focussed it on imperial claims and calls for an anti-Bolshevik crusade, which would extend Polish borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea. As in the case of Czechoslovakia, Poland’s relations with the Soviet Union remained bad throughout the inter-war period and only on a few occasions appeared to rise above the indifferent. In July 1932 Poland signed with the Soviet Union a Pact of Non-Aggression, a move motivated by the disquiet at the policies of the other major European powers, notably Britain and France, rather