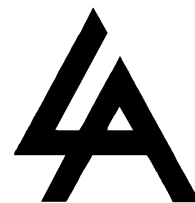


ANGLO-GERMAN RELATIONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: AN ISOLATIONIST VIEW



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SEAN GABB

1. INTRODUCTION

“German unity, like it or not, is unmistakably on the agenda of world politics.”¹ Just a few months ago, these are words that would have been laughed at. Now, said by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, they almost raise a yawn. Elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the collapse of Soviet power has left a mass of contingencies. In Germany, it has simply made reunification a certainty. How and when it will occur are details that remain unclear. One effect of it, however, is quite easily seen. Even by itself, the Federal Republic is the most populous country in Europe apart from Russia, and is by far the wealthiest. Its population stands at 62 million to our 56 million and the French 53 million. Its domestic product is 47 per cent greater than ours and 21 per cent greater than that of France.² Once - by whatever means - it has absorbed the Democratic Republic, its population will grow by another 17 million. If the new Reich should come also to include Austria, its population will rise to 85 million. At the same time, geography - together with cultural affinities that 50 years of Socialist and National Socialist tyranny could never efface but only submerge - will ensure that its eastern trade, already large, will become gigantic, perhaps matching the benefits derived from membership of the Common Market. Germany will become - in many cases actually and, in all others, potentially - the greatest power in Europe.

This alarms the French. They have suffered three German invasions since 1870, and each has been more destructive or humiliating than the last. Perhaps the Federal Republic since 1945 has been an exemplary neighbour. But the Federal Republic has been only a fragment of Germany; and its freedom of action has throughout been limited by the military threat of the Warsaw Pact and the presence on its soil of nearly half a million foreign troops, the successors of the old Allied armies of occupation. The threat ended, the armies withdrawn, the capital moved from Bonn to Berlin, its rulers might conceive a more ambitious view of the national interest than keeping on good terms with the French. At the very least, France will decline from the first to the second rank of European powers.

It also alarms the Poles. Since 1945, their borders have contained the whole of Silesia and much of central Prussia - territories given them as compensation for their own losses to Russia. The West German government has never unambiguously accepted the new borders in Eastern Europe; and the continued presence of large German minorities in Poland will undoubtedly strain relations between the two countries once they are neighbours and the Russians are no longer able or willing to uphold the existing settlement.

There are the beginnings of alarm in this country. The time has come, we are told, when our wisest course is to forget our differences with France and throw our common weight into the balance against Germany. This is, in part, just another means of rushing us into a United States of Europe governed from Brussels. But even among the “narrow little nationalists”, the idea has not been immediately rejected. In her latest speech, Mrs Thatcher has spoken very plainly of her wish for German unity to come about only after full consultation with and among the old Allied powers, and with a formal guarantee of all existing borders.³ The French are - perhaps rightly - despised and distrusted; but fear of Germany remains a far stronger and more widespread sentiment among the British public. If we fought two massive wars to keep the Germans down, the reasoning goes, ought we to stand aside now and let Herr Kohl achieve what we denied to the Kaiser and to Hitler?

The short answer is yes. If Germany is to dominate Europe, our business really is to stand complacently aside. French and other vapourings are not our problem. But, rather than move straight to a conclusion, let us first examine the arguments on which it must rest. Let us begin by recalling the costs incurred already this century in keeping the European balance of power tipped against Germany.

2. THE COSTS OF WAR

Direct

During the Great War, 702,410 British Servicemen lost their lives. Of these, 512,564 were killed on the Western Front;⁴ and, of these, 57,000, or more than 11 per cent, were killed on the first day of the Battle of the

Somme. The direct financial cost of the War was £3,810 million.⁵ Allowing for inflation and economic growth, this would amount in today's terms to something like half a trillion pounds. Certainly, it amounted to 168 per cent of the net national income for 1913.⁶ The War's total financial cost has been estimated at £12,000 million.⁷ This tremendous sum was raised partly by increased visible taxation, partly by borrowing, and partly by the hidden tax of inflation. In 1914, the standard rate of income tax was 1/2d in the Pound, and a single man retained out of the first £10,000 of his income £9,242. In 1919, these figures were respectively 6/- and £5,813.⁸ During the same period, the national debt, which had been steadily falling through-out most of the previous century, rose from £649.8 million to £7,434.9 million.⁹ In terms of its 1914 value, the Pound in 1919 was worth just over 9/3d.¹⁰

The Second World War was far less bloody so far as we were concerned. This time, we lost only 265,000 servicemen,¹¹ plus around 40,000 civilians in air raids. On the other hand, it cost much more money - £34,000 million,¹² or 728 per cent of the net national income for 1938, or, allowing for inflation and economic growth, around £1.7 trillion in today's terms. In 1938, the standard rate of income tax was 5/- in the Pound, and a single man kept £6,103 of his first £10,000. By 1945, these figures had altered to 10/- and £3,138 respectively. The national debt rose from £6,993.7 million to £21,365.9 million. The Pound of 1938 had depreciated, by 1945, to just under 12/3d.

Indirect

Nor, however great, were these the full costs of war. We also lost many of the traditional rights and that once set the English apart from almost all other nations. A century ago, freedom under the rule of law was an established fact. Government was small and confined largely to the protection of life and property. Today, nearly half the national income goes to pay the salaries of an immense bureaucracy and to support an underclass of unemployable brutes. Our lives are comprehensively pried into and regulated. We are ruled by an executive that can - and, increasingly, does - do whatever it pleases. For all these changes, war was the necessary condition. With each outbreak, the state expanded. On the coming of peace, it either remained large, or expanded further.

Extenuating Arguments

There are views to be put in opposition to this. First, too much attention is said to have been paid to the number of those who were killed in the Great War. To Corelli Barnett, the figures are nothing. Anyone inclined to dwell on them he treats with scathing contempt. We did better than most of the other belligerents, he declares; and a nation that cannot shrug off a few Sommes and Passchendaeles must be pretty un-

healthy in the first place.¹³ Per head of population, we did, it is true, compare well with the Germans. Our deaths amounted to 152.5 per 100,000, theirs to 274 per 100,000.¹⁴ But, so far as it is better to stay alive than be shot or gassed or blown up, the Great War was a thoroughly bad time for 702,410 British servicemen, not to mention for quite a few of their friends and relatives, who comprised very nearly the rest of the British population.

Second, while the scale of the deaths and financial outlay are undisputed, it can be argued, following George Dangerfield, that "[t]he War hastened everything - in politics, in economics, in behaviour - it started nothing."¹⁵ The power of the state had been growing since at least around 1870. Hours and conditions of work had been regulated, as had the conditions under which most goods and services could be offered for sale. Just before the Great War, the Liberal government had begun paying old age pensions and had set up the first compulsory scheme of insurance for the working classes. If the 1914 income tax rate of 1/2d was little more than a quarter of the lowest rate imposed ever since, it was already seven times the 2d to which it had been reduced in 1873. No matter how cautiously, or with how much regard for political continuity - or even how fiercely resisted by many - Great Britain in 1914 was turning unmistakably from liberalism to social democracy.

But as important as the direction of change was its speed. Looking back, we can see now what few then could imagine - that the few classical liberals still around may actually have had time on their side. Had the country remained at peace, they might have so slowed the speed of change that, when the fruits of collectivism became known from other western countries, its reversal might have come at no very great cost. In the event, we fought our two great wars against Germany; and the apparent success of war socialism opened the way first to the Tory paternalists, and then to the Labour Party. The collectivising of England, which might otherwise have remained an unsightly but local blemish, has become an immense and probably inoperable cancer.

Third, it will be said that, whatever happened in the past, a renewed *Entente Cordiale* will require no more to succeed this time than a little diplomacy. The prospects of a war between the states of Western Europe do seem very remote. But it was in 1909 that Norman Angell asked "[h]ow can modern life, with its overpowering proportion of industrial activities and its infinitesimal proportion of military, keep alive the instincts associated with war as against those developed by peace?"¹⁶ He soon had his answer. And, when the present turmoil in Eastern Europe has come to an end, and a new balance has emerged, the age of neighbourly goodwill through which most of us have passed our entire lives might have been shown as less securely founded than we currently like to believe.

Fourth, there is the simple truth, that costs are only assessable in terms of the benefits derived or expected from their being incurred. It may be undeniable that we came badly out of the Wars; but, if the alternative to fighting them were to have become a province of Wilhelmine or National Socialist Germany, they were still worthwhile undertakings. If the phrase national independence strikes many as fine but meaningless, that is because its meaning to such people only becomes plain after its loss. But, here, we come to the second argument against our helping keep Germany down: that it was neither essential to our survival as a nation, nor justified on the grounds of any other significant British interest.

3. BRITISH STRATEGY AND EMPIRE

Success

The safety of the British Isles rests ultimately on control of the seas round them. Indeed, with several thousand miles of coastline to guard and no natural barriers to check an invading army's advance, they are probably indefensible except by sea. The Romans never fully realised this, which is why they lost Britain. Nor, oddly enough, did the Angles and Saxons once they had settled, which is why they failed to keep either the Vikings or the Normans out. It may have been King John who first observed that "it was easier to drown invaders than to kill them on land";¹⁷ but, unless the Jacobites are to be believed - and they are not - it was his father, Henry II, who led the last successful foreign invasion of England. To every European power, seapower has been at best useful. To England it has always been an absolute essential.

Its main use at first was defensive, being maintained only in the Channel and its approaches. By the end of the 17th century, however, war with France required, and increasing wealth made possible, a transformation of local power into naval supremacy in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. During the 18th century, this supremacy was gradually extended across the whole world; until, after the Vienna peace settlement of 1815, the other great powers could scarcely float a plank in their river estuaries but on British sufferance. This, together with a commanding lead in wealth and technology, ensured that the British Empire should become the largest that has ever existed. When, in 1897, Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, she ruled a quarter of the Earth's surface and a quarter of its inhabitants. One of her subjects, had he been so minded, could travel by the long route between Southampton and Liverpool, and never once touch on foreign soil.

The Problem

Yet, for all its apparent magnificence, the Empire was overextended. Already, its retention was at a cost jus-

tifiable in terms neither of economics nor of defence; and its more perceptive observers were beginning to ask not whether but when the cost would become insupportable. Possession of India, to take the largest example, contributed absolutely nothing to the safety or the wealth of Great Britain. At any moment, a third of the Army was stationed there. Commitments were taken on in the Middle East, in the Far East, in Africa, and in half a dozen oceans, that would have been quite senseless had the Queen of England not also been Empress of India. British trade there was worth slightly more in 1913 than the trade with France and Germany; and British investment there was only just greater than in Argentina, and barely half as much as in the United States.¹⁸ To those who lived under it, British imperial rule brought a degree of freedom under the rule of law that their ancestors had never known, and that their descendants know only as a fading memory. But, to the British taxpayers, the Empire was a burden. It was less a cause than an effect of national greatness. Before the middle of the century, it had been on the whole an inexpensive effect. Since then, the temporary advantages on which British supremacy rested had been rapidly eroding.

Although not quite the moribund thing that the tariff reformers were claiming, and that it did eventually become, the British economy was in relative decline. Between 1900 and 1913, the American economy grew by 138 per cent, the German by 57 per cent, and the British by only 29 per cent.¹⁹ Even taking a narrower standard of comparison for the period, output per man rose by 25 per cent in America, by 16 per cent in Germany, and by only 1.9 per cent in Great Britain.²⁰ In part, this falling behind was inevitable. The British had been the first to industrialise, but had neither the population nor resources to stay permanently ahead. In part, however, there was a perceptible slowing of the old dynamism. Most inventions came now from America. German manufacturers were setting standards of excellence that few in Birmingham could begin to match. Why the decline should have begun many years before the weight of taxes and collectivist legislation became crushing, and in an age of almost unhampered freedom of international trade, is a mystery. But it was happening. And, though declining empires can often survive remarkably well on the good will or by the common agreement of their neighbours, survival is not to be confused with greatness. That depends ultimately on armed might; and that depends on economic capacity. In possession of this, even in what seemed their noon day glory, the British were no longer what they had been; and they would grow progressively less throughout the next century.

The Empire was not yet helpless. A challenge in any one part of it could still be met. The resistance put up by the Boers was an embarrassment in London, but was futile. The Royal Navy cut off all aid to them, while bringing in as many armies as beating them re-

quired. But the forces available were enough to meet only one substantial challenge at a time; and to concentrate forces in one place was to leave others undefended. It was becoming evident that, if the Empire was to be retained, and the costs of its retention were not to cripple the British economy, it could no longer stand in isolation. By the Queen's death in 1901, the search had begun for friends. The only unsettled question was which friends were the most worth having.

4. THE SEARCH FOR FRIENDS

Dramatis Personae: France and Russia

The choice should have been simple. The traditional enemies were France and Russia. The French had never given up their claim to a position of influence in Egypt, through which the Suez Canal - the principal sea route to India - ran. They had ambitions in Morocco, from where they could threaten the British hold on the western Mediterranean, and also in South East Asia, on the flank of India. Though repeatedly driven from the seas in wartime, their navy could threaten England simply by reason of geography; and since 1880, it had been growing again. The Russians were a threat across half the world. They had raised a fanciful claim to Constantinople, possession of which would give them access into the Mediterranean. They had their eyes openly on the Persian Gulf. They had reached the borders of Afghanistan, and had agents stirring up discontent in northern India. Lately, they had become a power in the Far East, with a fleet at Port Arthur and a forward policy in northern China. To contain them, three crumbling empires had to be supported, and a bafflingly complex pattern of local alliances maintained. Although the Franco-Russian alliance of 1892 was directed chiefly against Germany, it was always possible that its signatories might combine against the British Empire. For a while in the 1890s, their combined fleets had been almost as large as the Royal Navy.

Dramatis Personae: Japan and Germany

Against this combination, there were two obvious allies. The Japanese had become an imperial power only after nearly every territory worth having had already been taken. If they were to have an empire, it could only be acquired at the expense of another power. They could push into southern China, which was economically, if not formally, part of the British Empire. They could push into the East Indies, which were not formally part of the Empire, were mostly within its undoubted sphere of influence. They could push into northern China, and face Russian disapproval. Since, for the moment, British India was the dominant power in the East, they preferred to concentrate their energies against Russia. So far as London and Calcutta were concerned, this was an excellent

choice. If Japan could be directed against Russia, one actual and one potential threat would be neutralised. All that restrained Japan was fear of intervention on the Russian side. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 removed this difficulty. Neither signatory would attack the other. If either went to war with a third party, the other would hold the Pacific against any intervenor. Both sides profited from the agreement, Japan gained a spectacular victory over Russia in 1905. The British Empire gained a partial loss of Russian interest in southward expansion.

Bismark had provoked the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 purely to remove French influence from the south German states, and thereby to clear the way for the first unification. Creating a permanent grudge was never his intention. But the generals, with their talk of military security, had ensured the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. Their recovery became the supreme goal of French policy during the next half century. Unable to undo what had been done, Bismark could still put off its worst consequences by keeping France isolated. Though Austria-Hungary and Russia were rivals, each seeking to acquire as much as possible of the Turkish empire in the Balkans, he managed to retain the friendship of both. But, after the accession of Wilhelm II, in 1888, his services were dispensed with, and the new Kaiser took over the conduct himself of German foreign policy. Almost at once, he alienated Russia. The French saw their chance and pressed it. Neither they nor the Russians could stand up to Germany separately. Even together, they might not be strong enough. But the odds would be more equal. After 1892, Germany, though still supreme in Europe, could now preserve that supremacy, in the event of its being challenged, only by a war on two fronts.

There remained, however, one means of escape. An alliance with Great Britain would, at a stroke, have left both France and Russia outmatched on every possible front. German security would have been restored in Europe, British throughout the rest of the world. Unlike with Japan, moreover, this would have been an alliance not merely of strategic interests, but also of kindred peoples. As Queen Victoria's grandson, the Kaiser was half English. As Prince Albert's son, Edward VII was half German. In each country, the other's language and literature were eagerly studied. In both countries, if to a different extent, it was growing fashionable to explain national success in terms of Teutonic racial superiority. An alliance should have been there for the asking. But none was ever made. Instead the British allied themselves first with France and then with Russia, and, between 1914 and 1918, fought a war with Germany that plunged Europe into a chaos and barbarism that in some places are only now coming to an end.

War becomes possible when two nations, or groups of nations, fall out. It becomes likely when they also disagree as to which is the stronger. By 1900, the great

Continental powers had settled firmly into two mutually hostile coalitions, one led by Germany, the other by France. But, so long as the Germans retained their ascendancy, though each side wanted what could be had only by the humiliation of the other, neither was inclined to fight. The weaker feared losing. The stronger preferred the occasional check or compromise to the inconvenience of fighting. Continued British isolation would have left the existing European balance of power unchanged. Had there been an understanding with Germany, it would have tilted so heavily against France and Russia as to ensure peace for a generation. The effect of the Anglo-French Entente of 1904 was to bring it into what both coalitions chose to regard as an equilibrium. Neither was at all sure that Great Britain would ever go to the defence of France: what had been made, after all, was a settlement of outstanding differences, not a defensive treaty. But German fears and French hopes were allowed to rise to the point where the old military certainties were abolished, with only shifting probabilities set in their place. A series of recurrent crises followed. In Tangiers, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, at Agadir, each coalition lined up against the other to snatch or preserve some small advantage. At last, at Sarajevo, there came a crisis from which neither could retreat without facing diplomatic ruin.

5. THE APPROACH TO THE GREAT WAR

Benefits of the New Diplomacy

From involvement on the side of France and Russia, Great Britain gained absolutely nothing that was worth its cost of purchase. They may have been the traditional enemies: this made no addition to the value of their friendship. The settlement with Russia, reached in 1907, by which the old disputes in Central Asia were finally resolved, did bring a certain relief. But the Russian menace had already been checked by the Japanese alliance. Had the Russians begun making demands in Persia or Afghanistan, it would have been easy enough to engineer a diversion on their Pacific coast. It might even have been possible to encourage a shift of Japanese ambitions north from overpopulated China and into Siberia. The resulting tension between the two powers, and concentration of forces, might have guaranteed British rule in the Far East so long as there was will to keep it. As it was, the Japanese were dissuaded from making any further attacks on Russia; and their future expansion was to be largely at British expense.

Similarly, if the French were an annoyance, they were no real threat. Without the most extreme and foolish provocation - and, perhaps, not even then - they would never dare go to war with Great Britain so long as Alsace and Lorraine were still in German hands. Nor, would they ever spend serious money on their fleet

while the Germans outnumbered and outclassed them on land. It was nice if, by the *Entente*, the Egyptian and Moroccan disputes were finally settled. But it was hardly more than that.

Its Justification

The reason usually given for the British choice of allies is that it was dictated by the German Government. In 1898, Joseph Chamberlain - who, though Colonial Secretary, played a large part in the making of foreign policy - had proposed a formal treaty to the Germans. The offer was repeated in 1901 by Lord Lansdowne, the Foreign Secretary. On both occasions, it was rejected, or sent back with amendments so unacceptable as to amount to rejection. The Kaiser was not to blame for his people's rising hatred of England. But his encouragement of it, his inability to see the immense value of what was being held out to him at the price of no more than a momentary unpopularity, was an act of plain folly. Had he done no more than turn down the offer of friendship, Germany might have remained no worse off in Europe. There might, indeed, still have been something gained from the distraction of Russian attentions into the Far East after 1902. But he went further. By an act of the most colossal folly, he put his influence behind a policy of naval expansion that would transform Germany from a virtual nonentity at sea into the second power on earth. In 1898, the Reichstag voted funds for the building of 19 battleships, 8 coastal battleships, 42 cruisers, and various destroyers, torpedo boats and support craft. Two years later, funds were voted for a further 19 battleships and 10 cruisers.²¹ The expected final size of this fleet was then steadily increased, until, by 1918, it would have possessed 61 battleships together with smaller ships in proportion.

This was an ambitious programme, and there was little doubt that it would be completed. The normal - indeed, the wise - practice of any assembly that can grant or refuse supplies is to grant them for a year at a time. But, in the Wilhelmine Reichstag, armament programmes and the obligation to fund them were voted for as many years ahead as the executive could obtain, and no later amendment was possible without the consent of an upper house dominated by the ruling élite. The first Navy Laws were passed in a very generous mood. Their effect was to place a standing order on the German exchequer for the building of a set number of ships each year, followed, after 20 years, by their automatic replacement in perpetuity.

The plan was not to outbuild Great Britain. That, for the moment, the Germans thought beyond their ability. What they wanted was to put such a strain on the Royal Navy that the British could never go to war with Germany without risking a fatal weakening of their power elsewhere in the world. Either the Imperial Navy would offer battle and, being destroyed, take much of the Royal Navy with it; or it would stay

in port, and require an insupportably large blockading force to keep it there. The Germans were twice offered British friendship. To having what was willingly offered they preferred to try frightening Great Britain into neutrality: and they took offence when British opinion turned violently anti-German: and the Kaiser and his ministers thought themselves men of genius and vision.

Considerations on the Naval Race

The British alarm was justified. So long as the Germans kept to bullying other foreigners on land, that was their business. Building a huge fleet just across the North Sea was entirely different. The threat was unmistakable, the danger not at all remote. If, in 1897, the Home Fleet alone had contained 50 battleships, and the Royal Navy as a whole was larger than its two nearest rivals combined, armaments were no longer what they had been. A hundred years earlier, it had been common for ships to last for generations. Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar had served in the previous three wars. Napoleon could never have outbuilt the Royal Navy unless he had found the money to catch up in a few years with with a lead that derived from half a century of steady building. Now, scientific and technical progress was leaving ships obsolete almost before they were launched. With every new class of battleship, the British lead was cut effectively to zero. This was particularly the case after 1906, with the launching of H.M.S. *Dreadnought*, the fastest, biggest, deadliest ship afloat. The Germans copied it, and the naval race was on.

Yet, while the German challenge gave cause for worry, it gave none for turning British foreign policy on its head. The Navy Laws provided for a large fleet; but the only waters to which it could have open access were the Baltic, an enclosed sea, and the North Sea, which, with the transfer of the Home Fleet from the Channel to Scapa Flow, was made a British lake, to be opened or closed at will. Should war come, the main use of the Imperial Navy was to weaken British naval power to the point of collapse; but, though undeniably clever, this strategy was based on a miscalculation of what each country was willing or able to afford. When it came to a naval race, it was beyond German power not only to gain superiority, but even to gain the more limited immediate ends.

In 1913, taking the closest available comparanda, the German net national product stood at £2,527 million,²² the British net national income at £2,265 million.²³ Allowing for the 20 million difference in population, the British income per head was nearly 50 per cent higher than the German. Although, *ceteris paribus*, the faster rate of economic growth in Germany would eventually remove this differential, Great Britain would, for the foreseeable future, hold the advantage where taxable capacity was concerned; and this natural

advantage was magnified, and might well have been prolonged, by differences of political system.

Although the Reichstag was the main granter of supply in Germany, its powers were confined by law to the granting of indirect taxes only. For direct taxes, the Imperial Government had to go to the state assemblies, which, obliged in theory to comply, often managed to avoid paying what was asked of them. Much of the cost, therefore, of increased spending on armaments had to be met by increased taxes on food and clothing and other items of mass consumption. But the higher these taxes, the greater the discontent of the lower classes, and the greater the appeal in elections to the Reichstag of the generally pacific Social Democrats. A transfer of fiscal powers was thought undesirable. To attempt it would risk defections from the already unstable coalition of parties on which the Government relied for passage of its bills. To succeed in it would weaken those assemblies that had safely restricted franchises at the expense of one elected by manhood suffrage, and in which there was a real threat of a socialist majority. Without bringing on a political crisis, no more than part of the naval programme could be funded from an increase of taxes. The rest would have to be found from cuts in spending elsewhere or from borrowing.

But, since the only other large item in the Imperial budget was the Army, there was no room for cuts. For all their wealth, the Germans faced the same strategic constraints as the French. After a certain point, every battleship built and manned was a diversion of resources from the army. For the decade or so after 1893, the General Staff was largely content with what it had. It was already hard to find officers of the right background, and further growth would compel dilution. But, as the French and Russians enlarged their armies and coordinated their plans, exclusiveness gave way to fears of encirclement, and the cry went up for greater military spending. For a while, pressure on the budget was eased by running a deficit. But this was only to push the necessary hard choices from the present into the future.

By 1912, they could be deferred no longer. The deficit had grown as large as was thought tolerable; and, the Social Democrats now being the largest party in the Reichstag, to try for a great increase of indirect taxes would be politically unwise. Either the centre parties would vote against the finance bill, and defeat it, or they could be persuaded to give their support, and destroy their own chances at the next election, so leaving the way open to an overall Social Democratic majority. At the same time, the General Staff had become absolutely insistent: if Germany was not to be defeated on land, its message went, the Army needed more men and equipment. Even after an emergency capital levy had been reluctantly asked for and granted, there was still too little money available to afford the continued growth of both services. The

only solution left was to cut spending on the Navy. Between 1908 and 1911, four battleships per year had been built. Thereafter, without a supplemental appropriation, the rate of building was set to fall to just two per year, until 1918, when, with the replacement of those built after 1898, it was set to rise again to three per year. The naval lobby did manage to secure an increase in the rate of building during these years - but only by one battleship in every other year. German policy had returned from the high seas to Europe.

Not one of these problems had to be faced in Great Britain. The German government, though unelected, had to rely for money on an assembly over which it held, already weak, was progressively slipping. It was unwilling to push what taxes could be levied too high, and unwilling to introduce new ones. The British government was drawn from whatever party controlled the House of Commons. Aside from the crisis over the 1909 budget, the right to tax and the right to govern were acknowledged to begin and end together. There were no tariffs, and, in 1914, more than 40 per cent of the revenue was drawn from direct taxes paid by the middle and upper classes.²⁴ In the long term, this ease with which taxes could be increased was to prove disastrous. Even viewed from strictly social democratic grounds, it was to allow a cutting down of the tree to get at the fruit. But, for the moment, it was to allow for an elasticity in government finances that the Germans were incapable of matching. The German armaments budget for 1914 was set, before the outbreak of war, at £110.8 million. Of this, £22.4 million was intended for the Navy and £88.4 million for the Army.²⁵ Every penny added to one of the services was a penny taken from the other. Part of the budget had been raised by means of what was then considered, short of inflation, to be the last resort of a bankrupt treasury. The British armaments budget for that year was set at £76.8 million, of which £47.4 million was intended for the Navy and £29.4 million for the Army.²⁶ Since 1910, spending on the Army had risen by just over £2 million, but on the Navy by more than £12 million.²⁷ This increase in naval spending put no impossible strain on the rest of the budget. During the same four years, there was no increase of taxation, and the national debt fell by just under 9 per cent.²⁸ During the next four years, the German building programme was constrained by law and other circumstances, and the British was not. Had the Great War not begun in 1914, there is reason to believe that the Germans would not have resumed the naval race in 1918. It is quite clear, however, that, bearing in mind what did happen, they had lost it by 1914. British superiority was less overwhelming on the outbreak of war than the Admiralty would have preferred. But it was too great for the Germans ever to risk a fully committed naval battle, and great enough to maintain a tight blockade of their commerce and to deter any third power from threatening the Empire. True, the submarine offensive came close in 1917 to starving

Great Britain; but the submarine was a weapon that, before 1914, had been largely disregarded by both sides.²⁹

If no one can be blamed for not having seen the precise course of events from 1904 to 1914, their general course had been foreseeable. The Germans, by their naval policy, had raised a challenge. But it should have been realised on what slender foundations that challenge - like all those before it - was raised, and that the best answer to it was to build as many ships as were needed to stay safely ahead. Beyond this, it was a matter of waiting until such time as the French and Russians, together with the Social Democrats and General Staff, could, for their own reasons, and by their own means, bring about a change of German policy. "It is impossible to judge" Lord Salisbury had written in 1901, the year before he retired as Prime Minister, "whether the 'isolation' under which we are supposed to suffer, does or does not contain in it any element of peril. It would hardly be wise to incur new and onerous obligations, in order to guard against a *danger in whose existence we have no historical reason for believing.*"³⁰ Had his successors taken this same view, all danger might gradually have receded. The Germans would turn to securing their Continental position. The British building programme would move rapidly ahead. As it was, during the two years after 1912, the original cause of dispute removed, Anglo-German relations did markedly improve. The good sense and moderation shown by both countries in keeping the other powers from intervening in the two Balkan Wars even raised hopes that the old Concert of Europe might be restored. Great Britain went to war not over the balance of power at sea, but because, having gone about Europe, turning harmless enemies into worthless friends, in the mistaken belief that British security could be ensured in no other way, its governments had acquired obligations that, it was felt, had to be honoured.

The July Crisis

When, on the 23rd of July, 1914, the Austrians delivered their ultimatum to Serbia, they did so in the full knowledge of what they were risking, but sure that to what they did there was no alternative. The murders at Sarajevo had been planned in Serbia, and not to avenge them might be taken as a surrender to Slav separatism throughout the Empire. The Serbs, unable to fight Austria-Hungary alone, called on Russia for help. The Russians had ignored the same call during the Bosnian crisis of 1909, and felt that to ignore it again would be to lose all their influence in the Balkans. The Austrians, unable to fight the Serbs and Russians, invoked their treaty with Germany. The Germans had no allies left in Europe but Austria. Not to commit themselves now to whatever was required would be to risk both encirclement and isolation. Russia called on France. The French were thrown into

confusion. Unless they stood by their treaty obligations, they would lose all hope of ever regaining their lost provinces. But, if they did stand by them, they might easily lose another war with Germany. Word was sent to their ambassador in London: what would Great Britain do?

The *Entente* had been neither made nor announced to the British people as an alliance. There was no document that committed them to go to war in defence of France. But, since 1906, the British and French generals had been in regular, if secret, communication with each other. For eight years, they had been discussing the best means of putting 150,000 British soldiers into France and what to do with them once they were there. In 1912, the admirals had been brought together - again in secret - and asked to consider what joint action might be taken in the event of war with Germany. The British had suggested a concentration of their own forces in the North Sea and Channel approaches, while the French held the Mediterranean against Austria-Hungary and, perhaps, Italy. On the British side, the conversations were taken as hypothetical, and the strengthening in home waters, though welcome, was not vital. But the French took them literally, and had promptly moved their Atlantic fleet from Brest to Toulon. Their entire northern and western coasts lay exposed to any enemy that cared to land there. On the basis of this, they had accepted the *Entente* as an alliance, and what firmness they were about to show Germany depended almost entirely on whether it could be invoked. No British government had ever been trapped into defining it to mean anything at all. Until now, this had seemed to work rather well. On the one hand, it secured an ally on the Continent. On the other, it gave the non-interventionists in the Liberal and Labour parties nothing firm enough to organise themselves against. Now its real cost was made apparent. Had the French been assured when the Austrian ultimatum was served that, whatever they might expect, they would receive no British help in the event of war with Germany, they would almost certainly have done their best to moderate the Russians - to have the Czar, perhaps, denounce the Serbs as regicides beyond the pale of civilisation, and not fit therefore to be helped. But no such assurance was given; and, by the end of July, the British Government found itself compelled to take one of two choices: it could repudiate France and present the world with the most flagrant breach of public honour in modern times; or it could take the country into a war the fighting of which was not in British interests.

The Germans are said to have solved the problem. Their plan was to smash France in a matter of weeks, and then, no longer made to fight on two fronts, to throw their entire armed weight against the slower Russians. But all depended on speed. If this could be achieved only by pushing into northern France through Belgium, so much the worse. On the 2nd of August,

they told the Belgians to expect an invasion. Two days later, they invaded. Invoking the 1839 Treaty of London, by which their independence had been guaranteed by all the surrounding powers, the Belgians appealed for British and French help. The British ultimatum expired at midnight on the 4th of August, and Great Britain declared war on Germany. Yet Belgium was purely an excuse. In itself, the invasion gave neither reason for fighting nor excuse to fight. It may, for centuries, have been one of the chief ends of British diplomacy to keep the Low Countries either friendly or neutral; but, while the German presence there was deeply inconvenient, it was scarcely disastrous. Whatever the numbers and locations of troops in Europe, the waters round the British Isles remained as wide and deep and impassable as ever.

There was, moreover, the question of imperial security. If Belgian neutrality was to be upheld by war, it would require the defeat or the severe weakening of Germany; and this, as John Morley, biographer of Gladstone and Lord President of the Council, pointed out in the Cabinet discussions, might not be entirely desirable. "Have you ever thought" he asked his colleagues, "what will happen if Russia wins? If Germany is beaten and Austria is beaten, it is not England and France who will emerge pre-eminent in Europe. It will be Russia. Will that be good for Western civilisation? I at least don't think so. If she says she will go to Constantinople, or boldly annex both northern and eastern Persia, or insist on railways up to the Indian and Afghan frontier, who will prevent her?"³¹ The 1839 Treaty enjoined no specific action, he reminded them. There was an obvious precedent to follow. In 1856, the Russians had secured the withdrawal of the British and French armies from the Crimea by undertaking, among other things, not to remilitarise their Black Sea coast. In 1870, they broke this undertaking, and the British Government reacted with a loud protest. So it might again react, and hope to get its way by subsequent negotiation. But Morely was outvoted. The commitment to France, it was decided, should be honoured.

Courts have inferred binding obligations from smaller proofs than the French could have adduced; and, had it come to a Chancery action between the countries, the doctrine of part performance might have worked damningly against Great Britain. Sovereign states, however, are subject to few of the sanctions that keep people honest with each other. Even had there been a formal commitment - and there was none - there was no national interest that compelled intervention. The French had not the same means of bringing Great Britain into the crisis as the Russians had of bringing in France. The British declaration of war on Germany was justifiable on no grounds but of honour. Among individuals, this is a wholly splendid sentiment. A man says what is reasonably, though falsely, construed as readiness to stand surety for a loan. The loan goes

bad, and he is called on to pay. Whether or not legal action can be taken against him, his only proper response is to pay. But public honour is a rather less inflexible concept. When a government blunders, those responsible usually face nothing worse than embarrassment. It is others who go abroad to be shot at, and all the taxpayers who must find the extra money.

Still, for good or bad, war was declared, and it was now a matter of deciding how to fight it. The generals had been laying their plans for eight years, and they and their French opposites had settled every difficulty that the railway timetables could suggest. They had even overcome the difference of capacity between the British and French railway carriages, and knew exactly how many men to transfer from one to the other. But, for all this achievement, there was room for doubt as to whether sending an army to Belgium, though by far the most direct and gratifying to France, was not the only, or the best, means of bringing pressure on Germany.

The main advantage of seapower is that distance becomes no object. During the Peninsular War, Wellington led an army of 23,000 against French forces numbering 250,000 men, and led it gloriously from Torres Vedras on the borders of Portugal to victory at Toulouse inside Southern France. He was a great commander, and Marshal Soult, though far from incompetent, was no match for him. But as great a factor in the war's outcome as the relative skill of the opposing generals was the relative ease of communication. Paris was closer to Madrid than London, and France had a land border with Spain, and Great Britain had not. But Wellington was able at all times to rely on the arrival of supplies and reinforcements sent by sea from Southampton to the nearest safe port. To Soult, everything had to be transported first across the Pyrenees, and then slowly and under heavily armed guard along the Spanish roads.

Bearing past lessons in mind, the Admirals believed that the best hope of victory lay in striking as far away from the main concentrations of force as possible. From 1905 until removed from office in 1911, Sir John Fisher, the First Sea Lord, had argued this case. He doubted the ability of the French army to resist a German attack, and saw no reason why British troops should be sent over to join in the being slaughtered. It would be "suicidal idiocy".³² It would be far better to ignore the generals, who knew nothing of war, and treat the Army as an "annex to the Navy". An expeditionary force should be landed on the Baltic coast of East Prussia, about 90 miles from Berlin. Supplied by the Navy, it could hold down a million Germans on a completely unexpected front. It would relieve the pressure on France and encourage the Russians to advance. At the same time, Antwerp could be fortified and Heligoland taken away. Beyond this, the main British war effort should be devoted to naval operations out in the blue water.

But Fisher had been allowed no part in the drawing up of the British war plan in 1911. That had been left to the generals, and they had imposed their own view of strategy on the Imperial Defence Committee. For obvious reasons, their entire view of strategy was based firmly on the protection of France. The Navy was to carry an expeditionary force across the Channel by the shortest route, and could then go and do as it pleased. When, on the outbreak of war, changes were suggested to the plan for the avoidance of casualties, they were rejected. Everything had been prearranged to the last detail, it was said. The railway timetables were just so. To change anything now would produce chaos.³³ And so the Army was sent off to France; and the noise of the guns that were to pound it into mincemeat and rags could soon be heard on Wimbledon Common.

6. THE APPROACH TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Appeasement

Between his coming to power in 1933 and his declaration of war on the United States in the December of 1941, Adolf Hitler directed the most successful foreign policy of any German statesman since Bismark. The popular view is that much of his success was owed to the dithering incompetence of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments. Certainly, British foreign policy during the 1930s was very poorly conceived and conducted. But rather than assisting Hitler, it was this failure that ultimately destroyed him - though only after having produced the greatest war in history.

When he looked back over the whole course of events that led to humiliation at Versailles, Hitler saw one obvious mistake that had been made by the Kaiser and his ministers. Their idea of German expansion had been to annex hot places that were a long way distant, and were already full of black people. But the national destiny had lain in following the path laid down centuries before by the old Teutonic Knights. In Russia was all the land that German farmers could ever desire, all the raw materials and markets that German industrialists could ever desire. Perhaps a short war against France might have been in order before starting on the main conquest. This would have secured Germany from having to fight a war on two fronts. But so far as the British Empire was concerned, there had been only one sensible policy: "no sacrifice should have been too great for winning England's willingness. We should have renounced colonies and sea power and spared English industry our competition."³⁴ He was incredulous that the British offers of an alliance should have been rejected. "Just suppose that an astute German foreign policy had taken over the rôle of Japan in 1904, and we can scarcely measure the consequences this would have had for Germany ... There would have been no World War."³⁵

Germany had lost the Great War only because of British intervention. The French alone might not have parried the great opening stab at Paris. Without help, they could never have sustained four years of stalemate on the Western Front. There would have been no strangling blockade, no American involvement. The immediate cause of British entry into the War had been the invasion of Belgium. Yet that, in itself, should have been open to compromise. The true cause had been the commitment to France, and the cause of this had been the building of the German Navy and the poisoning of relations that had accompanied it. That navy no longer existed; and, once the treaty of peace was signed, the British had pulled out of Europe. In 1925, at Locarno, they had guaranteed France against German aggression. But, at the same time, they had also guaranteed Germany against French aggression. Much was said on paper: its only real - and perhaps intended - effect was to ensure that the evenhanded commitment to Germany kept the British and French generals from growing too friendly with each other again. This arrangement suited Hitler perfectly. Once in power, he had every interest in its continuation.

In the May of 1935, having denounced the Treaty of Versailles - and particularly those clauses that dealt with German disarmament - he offered, without any prior approach, to keep the new German fleet no larger than 35 per cent of the British. When this was received favourably in London, Ribbentrop, his adviser on foreign affairs, was immediately sent over to incorporate the offer into a treaty. The Government tried to negotiate on the matter of the ratio, and it was only after German insistence that the treaty was signed. Corelli Barnett describes Ribbentrop's behaviour as "preposterously arrogant".³⁶ "Cato"³⁷ accuses the Government of a stupidity barely this side of treason. But, if it was poor manners to arrive in a foreign capital with a treaty already drafted and ready for signing without further discussion, what of that? Hitler's intention was plain. He wanted to make absolutely sure that German expansion this time would not be seen as posing a threat to Great Britain. Many of his promises were made only for the purpose of making what he promised not to do the more easily done. But the Naval Treaty was strictly observed: indeed, it was observed more than strictly. On the outbreak of war in 1939, the Royal Navy had 15 battleships building or in commission. The German Navy had only two. The Treaty was an act of pure appeasement.

It was Hitler's wish, up to and for some time after the September of 1939, to settle all possible differences with Great Britain on the basis of a German free hand in Eastern Europe and Russia. Revealing this in 1937, Anthony Eden, then Foreign Secretary, explained why he could never accept it. In the first place, there was no certainty that a Germany victorious in the east would not turn back eventually and attack the west. In the second, such a settlement would be "immoral".³⁸

After the Suez fiasco, everyone at last agreed on how utterly unfitted Eden was for high public office. The argument should have been settled twenty years earlier. If there are certain acts that no politician should normally consider, this was not one of them. By now, the Empire was, at best, like one of those toads that ward off predators by puffing up with air. It had no other means of defence. It was no longer the case that a challenge on two fronts would strain British resources. The growing relative strength the other powers had brought it about that a single challenge would strain those resources near to breaking point. Within four years, it was to be discovered for sure - and it was already suspected - that not even a total mobilisation could enable the fighting of a war on more than one front. The Empire was gradually drifting into independence, but the commitment to its defence would remain for some while yet. During this time, the only moral foreign policy was to do whatever might keep the country at peace.

Japan

The Japanese had observed the 1902 Treaty with absolute fidelity. Relying on their honour, most of the Pacific Fleet had been recalled to home waters, where it could help maintain the German blockade. When the treaty expired in 1921, its renewal should have been automatic. But the Americans, now themselves a power in the region, had threatened their disapproval should it be renewed. Unless the Treaty were allowed to lapse, they would continue what they had begun in 1916, and build the largest and most powerful navy in the world. The Royal Navy would be entirely eclipsed; and its supremacy, once lost to America, would never be recovered. For, unlike Germany, the United States was a country not even remotely equal to Great Britain in wealth and population. In 1900, its population had been 76 million people and its national income £3 billion. By 1920, they had risen to 106 million people and £20 billion.³⁹ The British net national income for that year was just £5.6 billion and the population 46.5 million people.⁴⁰ It was as comforting to reflect that the new dominant power was to be another English-speaking nation, where the ideal of freedom under the law was regarded at least as highly as in England. Looking back, it can be seen how that nation has twice gone altogether out of its way to save Great Britain, first from a prolongation of war, and second from inevitable defeat. But the choice demanded by the Americans at the time was an exceedingly hard one. Offering no active cooperation whatever in the Pacific, they would agree to a general naval limitation treaty, under which the United States and Royal Navies would remain equal - in return for which the treaty with Japan was not to be renewed. The choice was made; and the Japanese were turned from loyal allies into rivals. Ten years later, they invaded China and marched south, regardless of the foreign lives or property in their way. By 1937, the

East Indies lay wide open to attack, and the New Zealanders and Australians were growing nervous about their own exposure. Unless the bold, and perhaps dangerous, step were taken, of ignoring the United States, and buying the best renewed alliance available from Japan, it would be fatal to reduce any further what little British strength there remained in the Far East.

Italy

But relations were almost equally strained with Italy, which was now regarded as the greatest power in the eastern Mediterranean. Friendship with Mussolini should have been a British priority. Instead, he had been alienated by the Anglo-French sanctions imposed in 1935 as ineffectual punishment of his attack on Abyssinia. Unless a show of strength were made in the bases at Malta and Alexandria, it was possible that, if war came on either side of the world, the route through Suez might be cut.

The Benefits of Lebensraum

The destruction of Czechoslovakia was very sad. The German claims against Poland were very peremptory. But the states of Eastern Europe had been living on borrowed time ever since their creation after 1919. Few of them had any recent tradition of independence, still fewer of autonomous political stability. Several contained large and discontented German minorities. Their governments were generally too frightened of Communism to seek Russian help, without which they would be absolutely at the mercy of a revived Germany that wished to rearrange their borders. Many had alliances with France. But the French had neither intention nor ability to honour these without a guarantee of British support; and successive British governments had been careful to avoid giving the slightest hint of renewed support. To have allowed Hitler his free hand in Eastern Europe would have been to accept the inevitable. It would also have been highly advantageous in so far as a Russo-German war would soon have followed.

The 1941 invasion failed for two reasons. First, having to drive the British from the Balkans and to guard against British intervention in conquered France, weakened and delayed an offensive that, despite these, nearly succeeded. Second, British and American assistance to Russia helped compensate for the industrial and military failings of Communism. Otherwise, the Germans would almost certainly have won. Their empire would have stretched from the Rhine to the Urals, from the Baltic to the Crimea.

And, having gained this empire, the Germans would almost certainly have spent the next few generations trying to keep it. They would have had no efforts to spare on turning west. Matchless conquerors, they had no understanding of how to occupy. When, in 1814, Wellington pushed across the Pyrenees into France, he

kept his troops on their best behaviour. The French, accustomed to fearing their own army, were agreeably surprised when goods were bought with ready money, and rape and looting were punished by death. They soon grew used to the British presence. But, when a German army moved into a district, the first act was to have everyone know who their new masters were. There would be much goosestepping and parading. The leading citizens would be openly humiliated, the others oppressed. Property would be seized without compensation, and regulations imposed, supported by threats of death or imprisonment for their breach. When the inevitable acts of resistance began, the commonest reaction was to take and start shooting hostages. This was not a policy original to the National Socialists, but was the standard German practice. It had been tried in France in 1870; and the mass executions had been almost as great a cause of French hatred as the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. It had been tried in Belgium in 1914; and the destruction of Louvain and the shooting of Edith Cavell had helped to swing American opinion behind the Allies. The holding of an empire by these methods might have required almost as many troops as its conquest.

Diverting the Germans east would have been to remove all likely pressure on France and Belgium. It would also have isolated Mussolini. Denied the prospect of effective German support, his own aggressions would have been more easily checked. Otherwise, they would have been more easily dealt with. The destruction of the Soviet Union, moreover, would have given back to the Japanese the opportunity of imperial expansion at other than British expense.

There was, of course, the persecution of the Jews in National Socialist Germany. Even the comparatively mild harassment that preceded the Holocaust disgraced a civilised nation. But had the very gassings begun in 1933 - and been done openly, so there could be no doubt of their happening - they would have provided no valid reason against British cooperation with Germany. Either Hitler was to be conciliated and used, or he was to be destroyed at all costs. If he was to be destroyed, an alliance would have to be made with Soviet Russia: and what moral gain could there be in this? For reasons an explanation of which falls outside the scope of this essay, huge investments of energy and money have gone into blackening the name of Adolf Hitler. Nearly 50 years after his death, he is still portrayed as the supreme embodiment of evil. Anyone who so much as shook a fist at him - no matter what else he did - receives the same plenary indulgence as the Popes once granted to the Crusaders. Yet, at the most, he was responsible for the murder of 10 million civilians. At least 20 million Russians were murdered during Stalin's reign.⁴¹ The defence usually raised at this reminder of the numbers involved - that mass-murder is somehow worse for racial than for political reasons - is not only frivolous, but also irrele-

vant. Granted, Hitler chose his victims on a bad principle. But Stalin chose his on none at all: there might have been more system in his massacres had he shut his eyes and stuck pins in the electoral register. On strategic grounds, there can be no doubt which of the two made the better ally; and there can be none on moral grounds.

The Immediate Cause of War

Neville Chamberlain is usually blamed for having done nothing to save Czechoslovakia. But, since there was no British alliance with the Czechs, and anything that moved the Germans closer to the Russian border was profoundly to be desired, he should be blamed much rather for having done as much as he did. The Munich Conference should be condemned not for its outcome, but for its ever having taken place. It ought to have been made absolutely plain that what the Germans did in Eastern Europe was their business alone. When, in the March of 1939, Hitler broke the Munich agreement by annexing Bohemia and Moravia, it might reasonably have been a matter of some embarrassment for the British Government, considering its unwise actions of the previous autumn, but was hardly any occasion for deciding on war. The Polish guarantee was an act of strategic insanity. There were no more means of sending a British army to Poland than there were of sending one to Mars. All the guarantee amounted to was a declaration of war on Germany, to become effective whenever Hitler chose to accept it.

7. CONCLUSION

For us, the War was a disaster. We had no valid purpose to serve by starting it, nor any reasonable chance of winning it. Had we, indeed, done what common sense dictated, and accepted Hitler's offer of peace after the French collapse, we should now remember it as a lost war. We did continue it - and contemplating our stand in 1940 can put a lump even into my throat - but only by opening the way to the final triumph of socialism in England. For the world at large also, it was a disaster. In no other war had so many lives been lost or crimes committed. At last, John Morley's prediction was allowed to come true, and Russia, for nearly half a century, occupied eastern Europe and became overwhelmingly great in Asia. The Americans were drawn into a strategic ascendancy which was no more sustainable than ours had been before it, and which has destroyed the balance of their Constitution and slowed their rate of economic growth.

Even so, the War did bring us certain external advantages. We had the supreme good fortune to come out of it, if not as victors, at least on the winning side. We were not defeated, but the true magnitude of British power was now made fully apparent. But for the War, the Empire might have been retained for decades

longer than it was, with a prolonged overextension and increasing bitterness. Instead, the will and ability to hold it had vanished together as early as 1947.

During the twenty years or so that followed, the Empire was abandoned. Its abandonment was, on the whole, presented rather well. Open humiliation was avoided by clothing every withdrawal in the language of decolonisation: we were not leaving because we had to, but because it was just and proper. When the new countries became despotisms more or less grim, hardly anyone blamed us for desertion: people were oppressed, but they were also "free". The rapid fall from the status of a first, to that of a second, class power was not entirely to be hidden either from the world or from ourselves - and awareness of it may have been one of the causes of our accelerated spiritual and economic decline since around 1960. But the Empire is gone. Once the Falkland Islands have become Argentine, and Hong Kong has ceased being British, that vast and terrible weight of contingent liabilities will have been fully cast off. For a while, our continued membership of NATO will keep British servicemen in places where they have no business. But, with the removal of the Soviet threat - such as it ever was - they will soon have been recalled. Our security and our resources will then fall into a more favourable balance than at any time since 1850. We shall be committed to the defence only of Great Britain, and have the means to deter even the most powerful of enemies. At the same time, we shall have no powerful enemies. Who would ever be stupid enough to go looking for one?

The Germans may have spent the first half of this century envying our position. They may have spent much of the second half despising us. But they have, throughout this time, been our natural allies. It has been a disaster for both countries that first they and then we should have failed to realise this. Until 50 years ago, they were the best means to hand of preserving our Empire, we of restraining France and Russia. Today, though we may be nothing much to them, their strength is still greatly to our benefit. If we liken the Eurasian land mass to a large bottle with fizzy contents, Western Europe is the mouth, pointing straight at us, Central Europe the neck, and Germany the stopper. The stronger that stopper, the safer we may go about our business and sleep in our beds. So far as they think otherwise, the French, with their long German border and their crumbling hegemony, may rightly grow nervous. The Poles - together with any other nation in Eastern Europe that has territory or populations that the Germans might eventually want inside their new Reich - may have hardly less reason for despair than they had in the late 1930s. But this is, and must remain, strictly a problem to be faced by foreigners.

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NOTES

1. *Sunday Telegraph*, 4th February, 1990.
2. 1986 gross domestic products in European Currency Units:

Great Britain	433,000,000,000
Federal German Republic	637,200,000,000
France	526,200,000,000

 Source: *Eurostat Review, Office des Publications Officielles des Communautés Européennes*, Brussels, 1988, p. 36.
3. *Daily Telegraph*, February 19th, 1990.
4. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War* (London, HMSO, 1922), Table i(a), p. 237 - cited, Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (1974), paperback edition, Alan Sutton, London, 1987, p. 425.
5. David and Gareth Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-1985* (6th edition), Macmillan Press, London, 1988, p. 473.
6. See *ibid*, p. 381.
7. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 124.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*, 390.
10. Calculated from *ibid*.
11. *Ibid*, p. 476.

12. See same tables as above.
13. Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 425, *et passim*.
14. Barnett (*ibid*), following C. R. M. F. Crutwell, gives German war deaths of 1,808,545 from a total population of 66,000,000. According to Butler (*op. cit.*, p. 323), the United Kingdom population stood at 46,048,000 in 1914.
15. George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, Paladin (paperback edition), London, 1983, p. 14.
16. Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage*, William Heineman, London, 1909, p. 172.
17. Arthur Bryant, *The Story of England: Makers of the Realm*, The Reprint Society, London, 1955, p. 285.
18. Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-78.
19. Sources: United States, *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*, Basic Books Inc, New 1976, p. 224; Germany, B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1975*, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 821; Great Britain, Butler, *op. cit.*, pp 380-1.
20. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 393.
21. James L. Stokesbury, *Navy and Empire*, Robert Hale, London, 1984, pp. 286-7.
22. Mitchell, *ibid*.
23. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
24. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
25. David Thompson, *Europe Since Napoleon*, Penguin Books, London, 1966, p. 558.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 473.
28. *Ibid*, p. 390.
29. NAVAL STRENGTHS IN 1914

	Germany	Great Britain
Dreadnoughts	16	24
Older ships of the line	22	36
Older cruisers	5	20
Small cruisers	14	35
Destroyers and Torpedo boats		
(new)	42	78
(old)	46	77
Submarines		
(offensive)	10	7
(defensive)	18	51

Source: Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics 1862-1914*, Allen and Unwin, Boston, 1984, p. 426.

30. Contained in, G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley (eds), *British Documents on the Origin of the War*, London, 1927 ff, Vol. II, p. 68 - quoted, Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *The Victorian Aftermath 1901-1914*, George Routledge and Sons Ltd, London, 1933, p. 58.
31. John Viscount Morley, *Memorandum on Resignation August 1914*, Macmillan, London, 1928, p. 6.
32. Quoted, Barbara Tuchman, *August 1914*, Macmillan, London, 1980 (1st published, 1962), p. 57.
33. *Ibid*, pp. 192-198.
34. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (translated Ralph Manheim), Hutchinson, London, 1969, p. 129.
35. *Ibid*.
36. Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 407.
37. That is to say, Michael Foot, Frank Owen and Peter Howard. Their pamphlet, *Guilty Men*, (Gollancz) came out just after the Dunkirk evacuation, and shows great skill in blaming the Conservatives for not having rearmed fast enough without once mentioning how the Labour Party had opposed every measure of rearmament until the April of 1939.
38. Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 450.
39. *Statistical History of the United States*, p. 10, p. 224. Current values of the Dollar taken from Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 385.
40. Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 385, p. 323.
41. Figure provided by Robert Conquest - cited, Stefan T. Possony, *Waking up the Giant: The Strategy for American Victory and World Freedom*, Arlington House, New York, 1974, p. 355.

COMMENT

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The view that an isolationist foreign policy is a necessary consequence of the libertarian outlook (a view more common amongst American than European libertarians) is not one I share. The arguments for and against isolationism have been explored in a number of past contributions to our Foreign Policy Perspectives series and will continue to be done so in future ones.

However, while I find the assertion of isolationism as some sort of moral axiom deeply unconvincing the *prudential* argument for isolationism at specific periods in time is a very different matter. Sean Gabb's case against British involvement in the First World War is most persuasive. And even if his case were to be refuted it nevertheless stands as an interesting demonstration of the relevance of historical scholarship to practical decision making.

Sean's less detailed remarks about the Second World War seem to me rather more problematic. It does seem clear that Hitler did not wish to destroy the British Empire. Its continuation as a major world power and, in spite of what he saw as its Jewish and plutocratic deformations, some sort of Aryan bastion was a central part of his hopes. Britain's declaration of war from, as Sean correctly points out, a ludicrously weak military position was a folly. It seems more a matter of amazing luck that Britain was not defeated. However, if Hitler did not constitute an *immediate* threat to British security, this does not mean that an isolationist policy was wise in perpetuity. Far from it. German National Socialism was, like Russian International Socialism, a revolutionary and expansive ideology. Its future aims and objectives, the dynamics of the economic and social system it was creating, might have led in many directions. Germany had a far more powerful and evolved existing civic order than had Russia. The revolutionary impetus of National Socialism might have been blunted. It might have evolved into a far more innocuous and less threatening authoritarian military dictatorship. Or, of course, it might have become even *more* revolutionary. National Socialist doctrines were already beginning to be harnessed by "anti-imperialist" groups elsewhere in the world. The National Bolshevik and pro-Russian factions might have triumphed and the West might have found itself facing a massive Russo-German anti-capitalist revolutionary alliance.

The best option for Britain, it seems to me, was probably to have stood aside. But it should have exerted itself to the full in a massive re-armament programme and a fundamental restructuring of its Empire and its alliances. Judicious covert intelligence, and possibly assassination, operations, should also have been im-

plemented to influence the internal policies of the Nazi empire.

But what about the moral dimensions of the issue? If Britain could have stood aside, *should* it have done so? Should European Jewry, let alone everyone else, been consigned to the genocidal and repressive horrors of National Socialism? European Jewry probably could have been saved, and far more effectively than was actually done in reality, without recourse to war. Britain could and should have lifted all barriers to immigration for refugees from Nazism - which it never did! The "Madagascar" solution (i.e. mass deportation of the Jews) rather than the "final" solution, was favoured by many Nazis as the easiest solution to the "Jewish problem".

The unpleasant fact is that Britain *has* repeatedly stood aside when whole populations have been massacred and brutalized. The populations of the Soviet Union, its Eastern European empire, the peoples of China, Vietnam, Cambodia etc. (let alone the petty despotisms of the Arab and African states) have individually or overall been subjected to class and racial genocides and repressions which not merely equal but exceed those perpetrated by the National Socialists. (The fact that the Soviet Union replaced Germany as the major repository, and exporter, of anti-semitism is another sick irony of history.)

So what final lessons can be learned? Expecting a judicious and/or moral foreign policy from even Western states demands a perhaps fanciful degree of optimism. At the time of writing, the Hong Kong Chinese are being betrayed, abandoned to the mercies of the Chinese communists. The Vietnamese boat people, dismissed as "economic refugees" (i.e. people who want a little of the economic freedom we enjoy) are being forced back to the depredations of some of the worst butchers in human history. These are crimes against humanity, and the Western politicians and civil servants responsible for such decisions, and for enforcing them, should be held responsible.

Libertarianism is not, or perhaps I should say *should* not be, a utopian creed. All one can do is exercise rationality to the full in the hope that we can proffer analyses and lessons that will go some way to solving the problems that confront us. Sean Gabb's essay is just such an exercise.