

The Crisis in Foreign Policy [1938]

THE “CRISIS” TO which the title of this paper refers was precipitated by Anthony Eden’s sudden resignation from Cabinet on 20 February 1938. The proximate cause of this action was Eden’s opposition to a proposed normalization of relations with Fascist Italy (see A520: 30), but for several months the Foreign Secretary had been growing frustrated with the Prime Minister’s appeasement policy and his determination to pursue it on his own initiative. The rift between Chamberlain and Eden had dramatically exposed a dilemma that confronted not only British Conservatives but also the peace movement, a substantial element of which had been transformed into “the most ardent advocates of an adventurous foreign policy” (517: 10–11). Russell’s thoughts on the breach of unity inside the National Government, as well as some of the wider implications, were published in *Peace News* no. 90 (5 March 1938): 8 (B&R C38.06).

Far more explicitly than in any previous paper in the volume, this article highlighted the similarities between Russell’s brand of pacifism and the incumbent government’s attempted appeasement of the fascist dictators. Russell’s reluctant approval of the Prime Minister’s approach is obscured somewhat by his presentation of a plausible case for the more hazardous but, in most other respects, more palatable position taken by the recently departed Foreign Secretary. Whereas Eden’s underlying aims appeared to be consistent with what most pacifists were striving for, he wrote, Chamberlain’s “can be seen to be detestable” (516: 11). At the same time, however, the lately departed Foreign Secretary’s support for collective security had been “leading by an inevitable logic to another World War” (516: 4–5). The latter consideration weighed more heavily on Russell than did his contempt for the cynical and reactionary peace policy of the Prime Minister. In a deeply pessimistic summation, Russell concluded that the only realistic aspiration for the moment was “a peace like that under the Holy Alliance after 1815” (517: 37–8). This was not a “cheerful prospect” but at least it held the promise of stability, through which the deadly fear of war might slowly be eroded, followed by a gradual withering away of reaction and tyranny.

In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, Russell acknowledged that his view of Eden was “complex” (26 Feb. 1938, #1773). He was sending her his manuscript as a courtesy, for she had evidently raised the matter of the Foreign Secretary’s resignation in her most recent correspondence. “The Socialists are violent”, Russell continued to his former lover, “because they don’t like the victory of Franco or the

conquest of Czechoslovakia by Hitler, both of which, they think, Eden's policy would have prevented without war. I think war would have been involved."

The copy-text is a photocopy of the manuscript, which Russell enclosed with his letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell (RA REC. ACQ. 428). The typed copy referred to by Russell in this correspondence is not extant.

IN THE DISAGREEMENT between the Prime Minister and Mr. Eden, pacifists have reason, on the whole, to be glad that the views of the former have prevailed. The policy of so-called collective security, for which Mr. Eden stood, was leading by an inevitable logic to another World War, whereas the Prime Minister's policy at least postpones the issue for a number of years, during which there is a possibility of changes that will altogether prevent a first-class conflict. At the same time, Mr. Eden, though we are forced to dissent from his methods, has, I think, aims with which most pacifists sympathize; whereas Mr. Chamberlain's policy
10 which is now that of the Government, has aims which, when set out baldly, can be seen to be detestable.

Among the more immediate consequences of the now declared official policy—which is that of the City as opposed to the Foreign Office—are the following:

First, Franco will be victorious in Spain.

Second, no obstacle of any kind will be placed, either by us or by the Americans, in the way of the complete victory of the Japanese in China.

Third, in all likelihood Czechoslovakia will be absorbed by Germany without serious opposition from any Great Power, even the U.S.S.R.

20 Fourth, a government much further to the Right is to be expected in France, involving repeal of M. Blum's social legislation.

There is, I think, a more distant hope: that Germany and Italy may defeat the U.S.S.R. while England and France preserve a benevolent neutrality.

All these consequences, except the third, we may assume that Mr. Chamberlain not only foresees, but desires.

Mr. Eden's policy, in my opinion as in that of almost all pacifists, would have led, before long, to the destruction of European civilization in a war far more terrible than the last. But it is obvious that Mr. Eden neither
30 foresaw nor desired this result.

The Prime Minister's love of peace is of a strictly limited sort. He keenly favours the rearmament programme, and he is prepared to fight in defence of purely British interests on two conditions: first, that there is a reasonable probability of victory; second, that there is no danger of a blow to the cause of reactionary politics anywhere. One of his reasons for not wishing to fight Mussolini is that a defeated Italy might become socialist or communist; another is that a war with Italy would involve the defeat of Franco.

40 Ever since the beginning of the Abyssinian question—indeed ever since the Japanese aggression in Manchuria—Conservatives have been in a difficulty, namely that British imperialist interests were opposed to the interests of capitalism and reaction. The Japanese, the Italians, and the Germans have a political and economic system which many Conservatives

admire. The Russians are still thought dangerous, the Chinese are suspected of friendship with them, the French are their allies and have regrettable leanings to Socialism. Some Conservatives, like Mr. Eden and Mr. Winston Churchill, prefer, in this dilemma, the imperialist interests of Great Britain, but the majority prefer the interests of capitalism and reaction.

Socialists and Communists have found themselves in a similar difficulty. The causes which they have at heart have become bound up with British and French imperialism, which Moscow has been supporting. Former pacifists have become the most ardent advocates of an adventurous foreign policy, and have found themselves compelled to acquiesce in rearmament. It is like the duel of Hamlet and Laertes, in which the combatants exchanged foils. The result, in that case, was fatal to both.

Pacifists neither love the dictatorships nor desire to attempt their overthrow by means of war; they cannot, therefore, agree either with the Prime Minister or with the Labour Party. Ever since the Communists acquired power in Russia in 1917, Socialists, misled by the outward success of the Bolsheviks, have come more and more to believe that force is the only method of achieving their aims. Violence on the one side begets violence on the other; Moscow's belief in force was largely responsible for Fascism, and Fascism converted many of our still hesitating Socialists to the belief that their doctrines could only be spread by means of aeroplanes and poison gas under the control of a reactionary government. This amiable dream Mr. Chamberlain has rudely dispelled, and the armaments for which the Labour Party voted are to be used—as they ought to have foreseen—for purposes which they detest.

Dictatorship, whether of the Right or of the Left, is a product of war, and will not be destroyed by more war. It will disappear when the nations where it exists grow tired of it, and that will be when they cease to feel insecure. If a stable peace, however reactionary, could be established, the mood of violence would fade, and the world would take a turn for the better. When you threaten a man's life, he does not think what a fine fellow you are, but sets to work to threaten yours. If you wish democracy, or socialism, or any other doctrine except militarism and tyranny, to spread and make converts, it is not at the point of the bayonet that you must offer it.

The Prime Minister's policy offers us a peace like that under the Holy Alliance after 1815—a peace imposed by reactionary tyranny, and punctuated by little wars for the suppression of local revolutions. It is not a cheerful prospect, but I think it is preferable to another world war. And the reaction will not last forever. When once the dread of a great war ceases to overshadow men's minds, the tyrannies will soften and then fade away. But so long as we crusade against them they will endure, and in the end our crusading zeal will saddle us with a similar tyranny at home.

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516: 1 **disagreement ... Prime Minister and Mr. Eden** See Headnote.

516: 12–13 **now declared official policy ... City ... Foreign Office** On the predisposition to appeasement of British financial institutions, see A26: 42. Notwithstanding Eden's resignation on policy grounds, and the anti-German credentials of certain of his officials (notably those of the recently departed permanent under-secretary, Sir Robert Vansittart), the Foreign Office as a whole was neither so unsympathetic to the "now declared official policy" as outlined by Russell or quite so pro-French as he imagined it to be.

516: 15 **Franco will be victorious in Spain** The military position of the Spanish Republic was becoming increasingly untenable as Russell wrote this paper. Bilbao, the last Republican stronghold in the north, had fallen in June 1937, and in March 1938 Franco would launch a successful four-month campaign to split Republican forces by driving to the Mediterranean Sea between Madrid and Barcelona. Madrid would ultimately fall in April 1939.

516: 18 **in all likelihood Czechoslovakia will be absorbed by Germany** In a speech to the Reichstag on 20 February 1938, Adolf Hitler pledged his support for the ten million ethnic Germans "who are not in a position to secure along our frontiers their general human, political, and philosophical freedom by their own efforts" (*The Times*, 21 Feb. 1938, p. 9). After executing the *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938 (see A47: 21), Hitler immediately turned his attention to Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, which would be ceded to Germany in Septem-

ber 1938 by the infamous Munich Agreement. All remaining Czech territory was annexed by Germany in March 1939, while a fascist puppet regime under Jozef Tiso was installed in Slovakia.

516: 21 **M. Blum's social legislation** See A446: 13–15.

516: 31–2 **He keenly favours the rearmament programme** Although reviled in the more polemical literature of appeasement for systematically denuding the country of the military means by which international aggression might have been more effectively deterred, Britain's last pre-war Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940), always conceived his conciliatory diplomacy as a complement to rearmament. A staunch advocate of air power in particular, as Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1931 and 1937 Chamberlain had also become convinced in the indispensability of economic stability as a “fourth arm” of defence, which must not be imperilled by extravagant expenditure on too rapid rearmament. His policy of concessions to dictators was justified as an interim expedient until such time (it was never entirely clear when this would be) as Britain's military strength was sufficiently restored as to be able to exert a deterrent effect.

516: 40 **Japanese aggression in Manchuria** See A5: 26–7.

517: 3–4 **Some Conservatives ... imperialist interests** See A446: 30–1.

517: 12–13 **duel of Hamlet and Laertes ... exchanged foils ... fatal to both** In the final scene of *Hamlet*, King Claudius and Laertes plot to kill Hamlet in a duel by using a poison-tipped foil. Although Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, the lethal foil and Hamlet's rapier are inadvertently exchanged, leading to the death of both men.

517: 37–8 **peace like ... Holy Alliance** See A168: 19.

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A photocopy of the manuscript (“CT”) shows that the original was probably written in ink and that it is foliated 1, 2–6. As no substantive variation was revealed by a collation of CT with the published version in *Peace News*, the textual notes record only the two emendations that Russell made to his manuscript.

516: 36 Mussolini CT] *above deleted Italy*

517: 21 hesitating CT] *inserted*