

*Some Notes on British Policy in 1939*

The idea that Germany was mainly responsible for the coming of war in 1914 is commonly supported by a number of specific points. The German government is criticized, for example, for its “reckless” decision to give a “blank check” to Austria at the beginning of the crisis.<sup>1</sup> The issuing of the “blank check,” it is argued, allowed Austria to take a harder line in the crisis than would otherwise have been possible. A tough Austrian line, moreover, was by no means unwelcome to the Germans; indeed, the argument runs, they were unwilling to press for a compromise that would settle the crisis—at least not until war was just a day or two away. And they pursued that policy—a policy strongly influenced by “preventive war” thinking—knowing full well that it could lead directly to a major European war.

As a description of German policy, most of these points are essentially correct. The Germans did give Austria a “blank check,” and they were on the whole not interested in a negotiated settlement. They clearly wanted Austria to move against Serbia in 1914, knowing that that might well lead to a European conflagration. And they were willing to pursue that policy in large part because they had come to think, at least to a certain degree, in preventive war terms. But if all this is true, does that necessarily mean that Germany was mainly to blame for the war?

When I wrote my paper on 1914, it seemed to me that one could get some insight into that question by looking at other historical cases that were similar to the 1914 case in certain respects—that is, where commitments were given that limited a country’s freedom of action in various ways, where policies were adopted that leaders knew might well lead to war, where compromise was not a major goal, and where a country’s course of action was strongly colored by preventive war thinking. If, despite the fact that a government was pursuing such a policy, we still tend to look favorably on what it was doing, then that would suggest that the common yardsticks that are used to judge German policy in 1914 cannot in themselves provide an adequate basis for judgment, and that we need therefore to approach those issues of assessment in an essentially different way.

So in the paper I looked briefly at three cases of this sort: British policy in 1939, American policy in 1941, and American policy in 1962. In each case, I claimed, the government in question was deliberately willing to “risk war.” I also claimed preventive war thinking came into play in a major way in the two American cases, and (in an earlier draft of the paper at least) I claimed that the British guarantee to Poland of March 1939 was a “blank check.” What I want to do here is look in greater detail at the 1939 case from this point of view. Can British policy in 1939 really be compared with German policy in 1914? Is there a genuine parallel here? And what do the historical findings tell us about the basic issues we’re trying to grapple with—the general question of responsibility for an armed conflict, and also the question of how to assess it?

To begin with, we need to consider the important issue of whether a “blank check,” of the sort that Germany gave Austria in early July 1914, was issued to Poland in March 1939. The British guarantee, announced in Parliament on March 31, 1939, was to cover the interim period before consultations with other governments were concluded. If, during that period, Prime Minister Chamberlain announced, any action took place “which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Thomas Otte, for example, writes: “German diplomacy was reckless beyond belief. With the ‘blank cheque’ the Zweibund alliance with Austria-Hungary ceased to be a restraining alliance, and Berlin had no real influence over Habsburg decision-making, much to the chancellor’s evident frustration at the end of July. The Germans were not criminal in their intent; they were criminally stupid.” Cambridge University Press Virtual Roundtable on “Beginning the Great War,” July 2, 2014 ([link](#)). See also Thomas Otte, *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 103, 176, 516-17.

lend the Polish Government all support in their power.” This represented a watering down of the draft statement the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, had prepared and which had been discussed by the Cabinet the previous day. That earlier draft had said nothing about any interim period and would have had Chamberlain declare directly that “in the event of resort by the German Government to any action which the Polish Government feels obliged to regard as a threat to their independence and accordingly to resist, His Majesty’s Government will at once lend the Polish Government all support in their power.”<sup>2</sup> That draft reflected Lord Halifax’s view that it should be up to the Poles to decide what constituted a threat to their independence, and thus when the guarantee would become operative. That meant that even a German move limited to Danzig would trigger British involvement in a war. Halifax, who by this point was probably the most important policymaker on the British side, “thought it was difficult to find any better test than the decision by Poland whether to regard [the seizure of Danzig by Germany] as a threat to her independence which she must resist by force.”<sup>3</sup>

But the British government soon had second thoughts. Chamberlain especially, it seems, did not want Britain to be automatically committed to war in the event the Germans limited their action to the Free City. He emphasized to the Cabinet (and in a widely quoted letter to one of his sisters) that it was Poland’s independence that was being guaranteed, not her territory—and that it would be up to Britain to decide when Poland’s independence was threatened. An editorial in the *Times* of London, approved by Chamberlain and Halifax, made much the same point, suggesting (not least to the Poles) that Chamberlain was trying to weasel out of the guarantee. That in turn led the Foreign Office to issue a statement rebuking those who were trying to minimize the importance of what had been decided: the U.K., it said, did “not seek in any way to influence the Polish Government in the conduct of their relations with the German Government.”<sup>4</sup> But texts of this sort were ultimately of secondary importance. The main point is that for both international and domestic political reasons, Chamberlain would find it hard to wriggle out of the commitment even if he wanted to.

So most historians take the view that the guarantee placed major limits on Britain’s freedom of action.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the two most important works that focus on British policy in this period—Simon Newman’s *March 1939* and Sidney Aster’s *1939*—both characterize the guarantee as a “blank cheque,” and other scholars take much the same view.<sup>6</sup> D.C. Watt, for example, compared Chamberlain’s March 31 declaration to a move in a game of “Chicken” in which one driver ostentatiously throws the steering wheel out over the side of the car. The guarantee, he writes, “left no option whatever for the British Government. If the Poles took up arms, then Britain fought too. The decision, war or peace, had been voluntarily surrendered by Chamberlain and his Cabinet into the nervous hands of Colonel Beck and his junta comrades-in arms.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Notes of Cabinet meeting, March 30, 1939, Cab 23/98 ([link](#)), Annex A (ff. 177-78, equivalent to frames 180-81). Halifax had identified himself as the author on p. 3 of the minutes (f. 158, frame 161).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5 in the minutes (f. 160, frame 163); and also p. 14 ([link](#)). On Halifax’s pivotal position, see R.A.C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 215, and R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993), pp. 170-71.

<sup>4</sup> D.C. Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), pp. 186-87; Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, pp. 216-17; Simon Newman, *March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland: A Study in the Continuity of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 202; and Sidney Aster, *1939: The Making of the Second World War* (London: Deutsch, 1973), pp. 191-92. Anna Cienciala, “Poland in British and French Policy in 1939: Determination to Fight—or Avoid War?” *Polish Review* 34, no. 3 (1989) ([link](#)), p. 208, points out that according to an entry in the diary of the editor of the *Times* both Chamberlain and Halifax approved of the editorial.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gordon Craig’s review of Aster, *1939*, in the *Slavic Review* 34, no. 3 (September 1975), p. 597 ([link](#)): “With the Polish pledge, the British government . . . gave up a great measure of their own freedom of action. If Hitler chose not to be deterred, they had no honorable alternative to resistance.”

<sup>6</sup> Aster, *1939*, pp. 192 and 193, and Newman, *March 1939*, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Watt, *How War Came*, pp. 185-86. See also Alan Alexandroff and Richard Rosecrance, “Deterrence in 1939,” *World Politics* 29, no. 3 (April 1977) ([link](#)), p. 411. “Once the guarantee had been given,” they write, “all the damage was done.”

Some British leaders at the time viewed the guarantee in those terms. But the fact that Britain was sacrificing her freedom of action was not always seen as a bad thing. One Cabinet minister, Lord de la Warr, wrote Halifax a few days before the guarantee was issued that he wanted commitments “so watertight that he [Hitler] (and we!) cannot get around them.”<sup>8</sup> Another minister wrote that after the decision on the guarantee was taken, “we realised that we were burning our boats” and that Britain might now be committed to war.<sup>9</sup> The British were, in a sense, making a move in a bargaining game: by sacrificing their own freedom of action, they were putting pressure on their adversaries to pursue a more moderate policy.<sup>10</sup> And in a sense that move was more significant than the corresponding German move in 1914: a pledge made in public in such a dramatic way was bound to limit Britain’s freedom of action to a far greater degree than the secret “blank check” issued to Austria at the beginning of the July Crisis would constrain German behavior, since a private pledge is much easier to renege on than a public one.

The effect of Germany’s blank check in 1914, it is commonly argued, was to make it easier for Austria to take a hard line in the crisis.<sup>11</sup> And that effect was not unintended: the Germans now wanted Austria to bring matters to a head with Serbia. And they pursued that policy knowing that it could lead directly to a great European war. That policy, furthermore, was strongly colored by preventive war thinking—by the idea that if war was inevitable, given the way the strategic balance was shifting it was better to fight now rather than later. Was British policy in 1939 cut from the same cloth?

What is striking here is that according to a number of experts in this area one of Britain’s main goals in issuing the guarantee was to make sure that Poland was not too accommodating in her negotiations with Germany over Danzig. A deal that those two countries reached over that issue might mean that Poland had gone over to the German camp. The British therefore, this argument runs, did not want a negotiated solution that would allow Germany to annex Danzig. Even Chamberlain thought a deal of that sort would be “very distasteful.”<sup>12</sup> But a guarantee, especially one that covered Danzig, would make it less likely that Germany and Poland would reach an agreement. As Halifax pointed out (in a slightly different context), while the western powers could not force the east European countries to resist German pressure, “the knowledge that

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It was no longer possible to put the kind of pressure on Colonel Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, that the British had used against President Benes of Czechoslovakia the previous year.”

<sup>8</sup> Newman, *March 1939*, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204, citing Aster, *1939*, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 43-49.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 102-103 ([link](#)).

<sup>12</sup> Notes of Cabinet meeting, March 30, 1939, p. 7, Cab 23/98 ([link](#)), f. 162 (frame 165). The problem here was that a guarantee was also distasteful, since the British had long been hoping for a “peaceful” settlement that would return Danzig to Germany. See Anna Cienciala, “The Foreign Policy of Józef Pilsudski and Józef Beck 1926-1939,” *Polish Review* 56, nos. 1-2 (2011) ([link](#)), p. 123, esp. n. 20. So it is not surprising that the evidence supporting this claim about the purpose of the guarantee is thin, and that there is a good deal of evidence that points in the opposite direction. See, for example, Halifax’s comment in a meeting with French leaders on May 20 that the British were “anxious to see agreement reached about Danzig between Poland and Germany.” *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, vol. 5, p. 609, henceforth cited in the form: DBFP:III:5, p. 609. One has the sense, in fact, that even at the time the guarantee was issued British thinking in this area was a little muddled. At the same meeting, for example, where Chamberlain expressed his concern that Poland was “giving way to Germany” in her talks with that power, he also insisted that the British guarantee should not force Britain to go to war on a matter that “did not affect the independence of Poland”—and it is clear from context that he thought a German seizure of Danzig fell into that category. So on the one hand he seemed to oppose the idea that Britain should go to war because the Poles would not sanction a German takeover of Danzig, but on the other hand he did not like the idea of Poland entering into an agreement with Germany that would allow the Free City to be incorporated in the Reich. Notes of Cabinet meeting, March 30, 1939, p. 6, Cab 23/98 ([link](#)), f. 161 (frame 164).

Great Britain and France would come to their support would undoubtedly stiffen Poland and Roumania in resisting German attempts to undermine their independence.”<sup>13</sup>

Who were the scholars who argued along these lines? R.A.C. Parker was one of them. In his important book on *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, he claimed that the guarantee to Poland was designed mainly “to prevent Polish-German agreement.”<sup>14</sup> But by far the most important argument of this sort was developed by Simon Newman in his book on the British guarantee to Poland. That book, to judge from the reviews, is taken quite seriously by many historians. No less a figure than A.J.P. Taylor, for example, wrote that Newman had “solved the mystery” of why the guarantee was issued “and in doing so has produced the best and most original book on war-origins for many years.” The historian’s job is “to set the record straight,” Taylor wrote, “and Newman has done it triumphantly.”<sup>15</sup> So it makes sense to take a close look at Newman’s argument.

That argument was certainly original. The British, according to Newman, issued their “blank cheque” in order to “ensure a German-Polish deadlock.”<sup>16</sup> They did not want a peaceful settlement of the Danzig issue—not at this point, at any rate. They were instead throwing down the gauntlet. The guarantee was a “deliberate challenge” to Germany.<sup>17</sup> It was not simply that British leaders felt they needed, for material reasons, to keep Poland on their side—that is, to make sure that if war came Germany would have to fight on two fronts. That argument was made, but they did not think Poland could hold out for long if war broke out, and the “decisive consideration” in Newman’s view was psychological in nature. A failure to take the lead “in challenging any further German expansion” would lead to so drastic a shift in the “moral and psychological balance” in favor of Germany that Britain’s position as a great power would “be irretrievably destroyed.”<sup>18</sup> And the British opted for that policy knowing full well what the consequences would be. “The guarantee to Poland,” Newman writes, “was never really thought of in terms of deterrence.”<sup>19</sup> “Nobody believed,” he says, “that a guarantee reduced the risk of war.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, in Newman’s view, the British actually wanted a showdown with Germany—a showdown which they knew would almost certainly lead to war. In support of that view, he quotes some extraordinary comments Lord Halifax made at a key meeting that took place a few days before the guarantee was issued:

There was probably no way [Halifax thought] in which France and ourselves could prevent Poland and Roumania from being overrun. We were faced with the dilemma of doing nothing, or entering into a devastating war. If we did nothing this in itself would mean a great accession to Germany’s strength and a great loss to ourselves of sympathy and support in the United States, in the Balkan countries, and in other parts of the world. In those circumstances if we had to choose between two great evils he favoured our going to war.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy meeting, March 27, 1939, C.P. 74 (39), pp. 18-19, Cab 24/284 ([link](#)), ff. 232-33 (frames 338-39).

<sup>14</sup> Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 214. See also Wesley Wark, “Appeasement Revisited,” *International History Review* 17, no. 3 (August 1995) ([link](#)), p. 550.

<sup>15</sup> A.J.P. Taylor review of Simon Newman, *March 1939*, *English Historical Review* 93, no. 366 (January 1978), pp. 238-39 ([link](#)).

<sup>16</sup> Newman, *March 1939*, p. 196. This is an important theme in Newman’s book: see *ibid.*, pp. 136, 156, 164, 173, 194-95, 204, and 219.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. See also *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 152-53. For the original document, see Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy meeting, March 27, 1939, C.P. 74 (39), p. 15, Cab 24/284 ([link](#)), f. 229 (frame 334). Note also Halifax’s comment on p. 17 of this document

This certainly made it seem that issuing the guarantee—which was obviously not a policy of “doing nothing”—was virtually tantamount to a decision to go to war, not right away of course, but at some later point. “What Halifax was saying,” Newman comments, was that the guarantee was “to serve as a pretext for going to war with Germany.”<sup>22</sup> Germany, it is often said, was mainly to blame for the First World War because she adopted a policy which she knew might well lead to a European war; but if Newman’s interpretation is correct, Britain in 1939 also pursued a policy which was even more likely to lead to a European conflagration. And the war guilt question is not entirely absent from Newman’s analysis: Newman thinks that “in choosing the path that they did in March 1939, the British government took upon themselves a certain measure of responsibility for the conflict that ensued.”<sup>23</sup>

But why would the British pursue such a policy? Newman stresses the importance of the “moral and psychological balance,” but perhaps there is another factor that should be taken into account. This is that the British had embarked on a major rearmament effort, which they knew could not be sustained indefinitely in peacetime. The Nazi regime, however, could continue to rearm at its present pace even without a war.<sup>24</sup> That implied that if there were no war the military balance would inevitably turn against Britain. And that in turn meant that the British government had a certain incentive to bring matters to a head with Germany in 1939. If so, couldn’t that factor have played a key role in shaping British policy that year? One leading scholar, Richard Overy, thinks so, and has argued along these lines in a number of books and articles.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence Overy presents to support that theory is rather thin, but there’s one piece of evidence that is quite suggestive in this context. This is a comment Lord Halifax made in a February 1939 Cabinet meeting—that is, even before the Nazi seizure of Prague in March. The Cabinet was concerned with the question of how much of a military build-up the country would be able to afford. It was quite clear that a high level of defense spending, of the sort that was being contemplated, was unsustainable in peacetime. Should the British government, in the name of long-term economic stability, therefore reduce military spending now? Halifax said no. He clearly felt Britain had to build up her military power to maximum extent possible because matters would soon come to a head. “He was satisfied,” he said, “that the present state of tension could not last indefinitely and must result either in war or in the destruction of the Nazi regime.” He was

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that a particular sentence in a draft telegram the meeting was considering “meant that we should go to war, and if so he agreed that we ought to say so.”

<sup>22</sup> Newman, *March 1939*, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>24</sup> The Cabinet discussed these issues in July. The discussion was based on two papers prepared by Treasury officials, one on the “German financial effort for rearmament,” and the other on Britain’s financial position. As one Cabinet minister noted in the discussion, “these papers held out a dismal prospect for this country but not for Germany.” The Treasury analysis, he pointed out, suggested that “Germany could keep up her expenditure on armaments indefinitely.” He referred specifically to paragraph 19 in C.P. 148 (39), which had indeed made that point. Notes of Cabinet meeting, July 5, 1939, p. 12, Cab 23/100 ([link](#)), f. 122 (frame 245); C.P. 148 (39) and C.P. 149 (39), Cab 24/287 ([link](#)), ff. 318-324 (frames 479-490).

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Overy, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 2d ed. (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 62, 69–73; Richard Overy, “Germany, ‘Domestic Crisis’ and War in 1939,” *Past and Present*, no. 116 (August 1987), pp. 167–68 ([link](#)), reprinted in Richard Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 231–32; and Richard Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 100. On the role of economic factors in the making of British policy at this time, see also R.A.C. Parker, “Economics, Rearmament and Foreign Policy: The United Kingdom before 1939 - A Preliminary Study,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 10, no. 4 (Oct., 1975) ([link](#)); Paul Kennedy, *The Realities behind Diplomacy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 301-16; and G. C. Peden, “A Matter of Timing: The Economic Background to British Foreign Policy, 1937-1939,” *History* 69, no. 225 (1984) ([link](#)). The figures Peden gives (p. 25) on the comparative defense burden (for Britain, Germany, and France) are of particular interest in this context.

supported by his Cabinet colleague Oliver Stanley, President of the Board of Trade, who said that “it was clear that some of the conditions under which we were now living could not last much longer—perhaps not for another year—and the present was probably the crucial year.”<sup>26</sup>

How are these comments to be interpreted? It is quite clear that Halifax thought Britain would be taking a very tough line. He was not thinking at this point in terms of an accommodation with Germany, or even in terms of deterrence; the policy adopted would lead either to the fall of Hitler or to war with Germany. And that policy was linked in his mind to the rearmament question. A high level of spending now, although unsustainable in the long run, was tolerable for the time being because matters were coming to a head—in large part as a result of the policy Britain would be pursuing. But because these issues were linked, it seems quite possible that the connection also ran the other way—that because the rearmament effort was unsustainable Britain had to pursue a tough policy in 1939. Stanley for one seemed to be thinking in those terms: there would “come a moment,” he said in July, “which, on a balance of our financial strength and our strength in armaments was the best time for war to break out.”<sup>27</sup>

As I say, the evidence supporting the Overy interpretation is thin, even for this phase of the crisis. But if valid, it would tend to support the basic Newman thesis about Britain looking for a “pretext” for bringing matters to a head with Germany. And I do want to consider the question of whether Newman’s basic line of argument is valid. But first I would like to pause briefly and do a little thought experiment. Suppose Newman was right. Suppose the British really wanted a showdown with Germany. Suppose Halifax’s warlike comments are to be taken at face value and that the Polish guarantee really was just a pretext for bringing matters to a head with Germany sooner rather than later. And suppose, finally, that Overy is correct that concerns about the shifting balance played a key role in shaping British policy in 1939. Assuming all those points are valid, would that in itself mean that Britain was, at least in large measure, responsible for the war?

I myself do not think so. I personally think that given the nature of Nazi policy—and especially Hitler’s demand for a “free hand” to conquer Lebensraum in the east, a goal he did little to conceal<sup>28</sup>—a very tough line of that sort is fully defensible in moral terms. But all this has a certain bearing on how we think about 1914. The main point is that the issuing of blank checks, a willingness to risk war, and a policy of bringing matters to a head with an adversary because of concerns about how the military balance is shifting, are not necessarily in themselves to be condemned. It all depends on context. Hitler, to be sure, posed a much more serious threat to Britain in 1939 than Russia did to Germany twenty-five years earlier, and that point certainly needs to be taken into account when making a judgment. But the basic principle is the same in both cases: when dealing with these issues of blame and responsibility, the nature of the threat is of fundamental importance. The simple tests normally used when dealing with 1914 do not in themselves come close to providing an adequate basis for judgment.

But to go back to the historical problems relating to 1939: what are we to make of the Newman argument about the British guarantee? The Newman book’s subtitle—“A Study in the Continuity of British Foreign Policy”—points to a basic problem. Newman’s claim was that Britain all along had been pursuing a balance of power policy. “The aim of this study,” he writes, “is to provide solid evidence for the view that Britain never intended Germany to have a free hand in eastern Europe at all. Thus the guarantee to Poland should not be interpreted as a revolution in British foreign policy, as has so often been argued, but should be seen as the culmination, or rather the explicit manifestation, of a strand of British policy going back to before September 1938 which has until recently been overlooked or ignored—the attempt to stem German

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<sup>26</sup> Notes of Cabinet meeting, February 2, 1939, p. 13, Cab 23/97 ([link](#)), f. 182 (frame 186).

<sup>27</sup> Notes of Cabinet meeting, July 5, 1939, p. 21, Cab 23/100 ([link](#)), f. 131 (frame 263).

<sup>28</sup> See Makins memoranda, June 11 and August 14, 1939, relaying Burckhardt’s accounts of meetings with Ribbentrop and Hitler, DBFP:III:6, pp. 43, 693 ([link](#)), pp. 43, 693.

expansion in eastern Europe by any means short of war but in the last resort by war itself.”<sup>29</sup> And if that had been British policy all along, there was no real need to show that Britain continued to pursue that policy after the guarantee had been issued. It could be taken for granted that such a deeply-rooted policy was bound to continue. And thus one could end the historical analysis in April 1939, as Newman does, and still conclude that British leaders, in issuing the guarantee, had determined on a course of action that led directly to war—that “in choosing the path that they did in March 1939, the British Government took upon themselves a certain measure of responsibility for the conflict that ensued.”<sup>30</sup>

I don’t think that Newman really proves that Britain had been pursuing a policy of this sort all along. To be sure, Britain (as he points out) had not been pursuing a pure appeasement policy.<sup>31</sup> But that point does not in itself mean that the British “were anxious to maintain the balance of power in Europe in 1938-9”—that the goal was to tie Germany down by an agreement that would “guarantee [British] security and preserve the European *status quo*,” and that the failure to contain Germany in that way “resulted in the commitment to go to war to prevent her from reaching full strength.”<sup>32</sup> It may well have been that there was no overarching strategic concept of either sort at the heart of British policy, only a strong desire to avoid war without at the same time totally ignoring British values and British interests. Newman at times suggests as much. The guarantee itself, for example, was in his view not the product of a well thought out policy. “The critical decisions in March 1939,” he writes, “were made in an atmosphere of panic, humiliation, and moral hysteria. A frantic urgency to do something—anything—replaced a calm consideration of the alternatives. There arose a clamour for action to cut off the possibility of another surrender to the forces of evil.”<sup>33</sup>

The argument that Britain had never pursued a real appeasement policy seems a bit odd, but Newman was not the only scholar to argue along those lines. Parker’s interpretation is much more moderate, but even he takes the view that Chamberlain was a lot tougher than we had been led to believe. Chamberlain, he writes, did not intend “to tolerate German threats” to Britain’s position as an independent great power, “or to allow Germany to reach a position in which such threats could be made.”<sup>34</sup> Chamberlain’s policy, in his view, “meant intervention in continental Europe to induce Hitler’s Germany to insist only on expansion so limited that it would not threaten the safety or independence of the United Kingdom. In retrospect this appears a bold, venturesome policy, certain, given the ambitions to Hitler, to lead to an Anglo-German war.”<sup>35</sup> But I don’t think the evidence Parker presents really proves that this was the case.

The most important test of whether that interpretation is basically correct—that is, of how determined the British were to draw the line at some point—came in the summer of 1939. The prevailing view in the historical literature is that appeasement ended with the seizure of Prague—that it was now understood that Hitler could not be trusted, that a policy of deterrence had to be adopted, and that Britain would no longer give way to German threats. Perhaps the whole idea of a negotiated solution of the Danzig question was not entirely ruled out, but whatever happened would have to be decided in a free negotiation, among equals; there could be no new “Munich.”

Thus Richard Overly, in his recent little book on 1939, wrote that what happened to Czechoslovakia in March “had ended any illusions that Hitler could be restrained within a framework acceptable to British and French

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<sup>29</sup> Newman, *March 1939*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 217.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

interests.”<sup>36</sup> The real goal now “was to deter or restrain further German action in any part of Europe and to use Poland as their sticking point.”<sup>37</sup> Even Chamberlain himself felt the time had come to draw the line. “From March 1939 onwards,” he writes, “Chamberlain—described by a parliamentary colleague as ‘a man not of straw, but of iron’—turned his singleness of purpose and unyielding temperament to the task of obstructing any further violence to the European order.”<sup>38</sup> Halifax was even “more ready than Chamberlain to make it clear that Hitler’s international behaviour could not be tolerated.”<sup>39</sup> Overy clearly rejects the idea that Chamberlain and Halifax were still at heart “appeasers looking for a way out of their obligations.”<sup>40</sup> To be sure, he admits that they did not rule out the idea of a negotiation on Danzig, but it would have to be “an equal negotiation, without menaces”; the British goal was “to deter Hitler, or force him to negotiation without threats.”<sup>41</sup> That policy in his view was not abandoned even at the peak of the Polish crisis in late August. “The danger of war” at this point, he writes, “remained a grave one, but the whole of Western and Polish strategy had been predicated from earlier in the year on the idea of deterrence. Since Hitler had apparently forced himself into a corner over the confrontation with Poland, the West also left open the path to possible negotiation, not on the lines of the Munich agreement the year before, but on equal terms, without threats of violence or unilateral action.”<sup>42</sup> The Foreign Office, at this phase of the crisis, was thus determined “not to press the Poles to negotiate”; the Cabinet took the same view. “Firmness, it was assumed,” Overy concludes, “would pay dividends.”<sup>43</sup>

Parker on the whole also gives the impression that British policy in the period immediately preceding the war was relatively firm. The British government, he writes, had to make a basic decision in August 1939: “should Hitler’s attempt to build an impregnable thousand-year German Reich by threat and conquest be tolerated or resisted?” The answer was never really in doubt: “So strong was the British sense of power and the corresponding assumption of obligation that British opinion adopted without discussion the task of defeating Hitler.”<sup>44</sup> Very few British policy-makers thought “the Poles should be coerced into a settlement”; as for Chamberlain himself, “the only settlement he would, or could, accept would be one that appeared compatible with Polish independence.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, he also sometimes suggested that appeasement did not die in March 1939: “the German occupation of Prague,” he had argued earlier in the book, “did not change Chamberlain’s policy but it made it much more difficult for him to put it into effect.”<sup>46</sup> And he concludes one of his chapters by saying that after March 1939 Chamberlain was compelled “to accept, in appearance, much of the alternative [hard-line] policy pressed on his government,” because he felt he had to remain in office to prevent his country from pursuing a policy that would lead to disaster: “he tried until the last

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Overy, *1939: Countdown to War* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 330.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

minute to avoid it by tireless application of the policy he believed to be correct and clung to appeasement until the end.”<sup>47</sup>

Well, had appeasement actually been abandoned after March 1939? How firm was British policy in the weeks before the war? For insight into this issue one turns naturally to Sidney Aster’s *1939*, a book that covers the events of that summer in some detail. And you do get the impression from the Aster book that the British were now pursuing a very tough line. In the whole period from the Nazi seizure of Prague in March to the outbreak of war in September, he writes, “never once did Chamberlain weaken in his distrust of Hitler. He repeatedly stated that ‘no undertaking by Hitler would be any use.’”<sup>48</sup> Some officials were worried at one point that appeasement was by no means dead, but Aster thinks there those concerns were unfounded: “What 10 Downing Street was doing to rouse such anger is a mystery.” “What is clear,” he goes on, “is that there was no wavering at No. 10 on fundamentals.”<sup>49</sup> As the crisis was coming to a head at the end of August, the government issued a statement saying it was “unthinkable” Britain would not carry out her obligations to Poland, and Chamberlain “stood by these fighting words.”<sup>50</sup>

But does Aster really prove that the British were “standing firm” in 1939? There are certain problems, first of all, with his use of evidence. Take, for example, his comment about Chamberlain never weakening in his distrust of Hitler. Aster quoted Chamberlain in that context as saying that “no undertaking by Hitler would be any use.” The source for this is the entry for July 10, 1939, in the published *Ironside Diaries*. Here’s a fuller extract:

Chamberlain said that no undertakings by Hitler would be any use. We must have some definite practical guarantee that with Danzig in the Reich, Poland would have practical rights equal to those she had now.<sup>51</sup>

What this shows is that Chamberlain was now contemplating handing over Danzig as part of a deal with Hitler; the mere fact that a deal was being contemplated presumed that an explicit undertaking from Hitler would have some value. Chamberlain, it seems, had in effect gone back to his view in February 1939 that “the only hope of doing business with Hitler is to take him at his word.”<sup>52</sup>

Aster’s own evidence, in fact, often seems to run counter to his basic argument about the British government’s toughness after the seizure of Prague on March 15. At the end of his chapter called “Appeasement Cremated,” for example, he quotes Lord Halifax as telling a German diplomat on August 9 that the British government was waiting for a signal from Hitler, following which, “given a period of calm, the British government would still be interested ‘to discuss appeasement questions.’”<sup>53</sup>

One particular document Aster discovered revealed much, in his view, “about the nature of appeasement after Prague.” It was in fact a stunning piece of evidence, but it scarcely supported Aster’s basic thesis. “I quite agree with you,” Halifax wrote to a Conservative M.P. on May 8<sup>th</sup>, “that we must try to drive into Hitler

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 327. Parker made this argument even more sharply in a more recent book. After the Germans moved into Prague, he notes, Chamberlain “was reduced to pursuing his policies by stealth. When, on 2 September, that became known, he came close to being turned out.” Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement*, p. 263; see also p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> Aster, *1939*, p. 217.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>51</sup> Sir Edmund Ironside, *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940* (London: Constable, 1962), p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Aster, *1939*, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> Aster, *1939*, p. 258.

the conviction that he can satisfy every German aspiration by peaceful means and that we are more than ready to forget the past and co-operate with him in this task.” “It was Hitler’s tragedy,” Aster goes on to comment, “that he failed to realise how much Britain was still willing to concede in order to secure peace. As Halifax admitted, Germany could have been satisfied on all points, providing Hitler gave up his habit of triumphal entries into foreign capitals.”<sup>54</sup>

Let me give one final example. According to Aster, Chamberlain, as the crisis was coming to a head in August, thought it would be “disastrous” to push the Poles into making concessions.<sup>55</sup> A few pages later, however, he quotes a comment Halifax made at an August 26 Cabinet meeting. If a “solution could be arrived at,” the foreign secretary said, “which had regard to Poland’s vital interests, and was subject to an international guarantee, it would be one we could recommend to Poland.”<sup>56</sup>

Does that point undermine his basic thesis? Aster says no. “There was no weakening in such words,” he comments, “nor any illusions about Hitler.”<sup>57</sup> What he does not note was that the Poles, according to the plan being considered, would be urged to allow Germany to annex Danzig; in exchange, they would be given a four-power guarantee. They would be asked to agree to this even before negotiations began. Aster later quotes Halifax (correctly) as telling the Italians on August 31 that the Poles could not be asked to make that concession in advance of the talks; what he fails to point out was that British policy had for the past two or three weeks been based on the notion that that was exactly what the Poles (if Hitler cooperated) were going to be advised to do.

What’s the story here? It is actually fairly easy to see what was going on from the published British and German diplomatic documents for the period, plus the British Cabinet records, all now easily available online. And it turns out that the British government was trying hard, beginning in mid-August, to work for some sort of political settlement, one which would involve Poland making major concessions to Germany. And the British sought to work closely with the Italian government in bringing about a solution of that sort.

That policy was sketched out, for example, in a meeting the British ambassador in Rome, Sir Percy Loraine, had with the Italian foreign minister, Count Ciano, on August 17. Ciano had just returned from an unpleasant meeting with Hitler in Salzburg; Hitler, he reported, was taking a very hard line on the Polish question. Loraine said that if Hitler was determined to impose his own will, a war was inevitable. Poland would accept an agreed solution, and Britain was very much in favor “of a direct and agreed settlement between Germany and Poland about the Danzig issue.” But the issue could not be settled by a German Diktat. Britain would go to war on Poland’s behalf if Hitler tried to solve the problem that way.<sup>58</sup>

Loraine was speaking personally, but Halifax let him know the next day that he agreed entirely with what his ambassador had said. Not only that, but he laid out a plan for a settlement that Loraine was asked to transmit to the Italians. An “agreed solution” would be “reached through free negotiation on equal terms between Germany and Poland”; the British would do what they could to make sure those talks succeeded. The big stumbling block here, he wrote, was that people could not be confident, if such an agreement were reached, that its provisions would actually be carried out. To overcome that, he proposed that the agreement would be guaranteed by other Powers. Halifax took the line that the substantive issue was not a major problem; this suggested that he thought an arrangement could be found that Hitler would find acceptable, and that in turn suggests he was thinking in terms of a settlement that would give Danzig to Germany, providing it could

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Loraine to Halifax, August 18, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 59-60.

be done in what was ostensibly a peaceful way. But this point about Danzig was not, at this point, an explicit part of the plan. The emphasis was on the idea that the settlement, whatever it was, would be guaranteed by the great powers. And what Halifax was really proposing was that the Italians, who he knew were thinking along similar lines, would work with the British in bringing about a solution of this sort. The Italians might try to persuade their German ally to go along with it, while Britain would put pressure on the Poles.<sup>59</sup>

The Italians soon relayed the British proposal to the Germans, and the British government itself took much the same line in Chamberlain's important August 22 letter to Hitler. "I cannot see," Chamberlain wrote, "that there is anything in the questions arising between Germany and Poland which could not and should not be resolved without the use of force, if only a situation of confidence could be restored to enable discussions to be carried out in an atmosphere different from that which prevails today." The letter went on to emphasize the point about a great power guarantee. There was little hope of bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion, Chamberlain pointed out, "unless it were understood beforehand that any settlement reached would, when concluded, be guaranteed by other Powers."<sup>60</sup>

The language here was guarded, but it is quite clear that the British were thinking in terms of a deal. It is not just that the language itself was suggestive. There would obviously be little point in negotiations if Poland was going to be allowed to insist essentially on keeping things as they were. But we actually know from British sources the sort of deal Halifax and Chamberlain had in mind. The Poles would agree in advance to allow Danzig to be incorporated in the Reich; in exchange, the Germans would agree, also in advance of any formal negotiations, that the settlement reached would assure Poland of her independence and secure her economic rights in Danzig, and that the settlement, when it had been negotiated, would be guaranteed by the great powers. That this was what the British were aiming for is clear, for example, from a "most secret" annex to the Cabinet minutes for August 24, 1939:

The Foreign Secretary said that after speaking to the Prime Minister he had telegraphed to Sir Percy Loraine [British ambassador in Rome] to say that he did not think it was possible for His Majesty's Government to suggest to the Polish Government that they should negotiate with Germany on the antecedent condition of the return of Danzig to the Reich, unless --

- (a) The Polish Government could be assured that her independence and vital economic rights in Danzig would be secured:
- (b) That any arrangement so reached would be internationally guaranteed.<sup>61</sup>

The phrase about the return of Danzig being an "antecedent condition" is particularly worth noting. Aster had suggested that the Poles could not be asked to permit the transfer of Danzig prior to the talks, but this document shows that that was precisely what the British were planning to do.

A watered-down version of the plan that Halifax outlined for the Cabinet was passed on to the Italians that very day; a day later Halifax made it even clearer, in a telegram to Loraine, what he had in mind.<sup>62</sup> That the British were thinking in these terms is clear from a number of other documents (included in a volume of the

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<sup>59</sup> Halifax to Loraine, August 19, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), p. 76. For an earlier Italian suggestion of this sort, see Loraine to Halifax, August 11, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), p. 658.

<sup>60</sup> Chamberlain to Hitler, August 22, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 127-28, 170-72. The French were informed of the gist of the proposal the next day. *Ibid.*, p. 148; see also p. 247. For the Italians passing on the British proposal to Germany, see Woermann memorandum, August 23, 1939, *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, series D, vol. 7 ([link](#)), pp. 234-35 (with text of proposal) [henceforth cited in the form: DGFP:D:7, pp. 234-35].

<sup>61</sup> Annex II to minutes of August 24, 1939, Cabinet meeting, Cab 23/100 ([link](#)), f. 363 (frame 729).

<sup>62</sup> Halifax to Loraine, August 24 and 25, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 186, 240-41. That latter document has to be viewed in the light of the telegram Halifax was responding to: see Loraine to Halifax, August 25, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 215.

*Documents on British Foreign Policy* published in 1954).<sup>63</sup> The plan was not discussed with the Polish government, since the British only intended to move ahead with this idea if they first got the green light from Hitler, which never happened.<sup>64</sup>

But Halifax was doing some preliminary spadework with the Poles. He began to put pressure on them to resume contact with the Germans. One of his moves was particularly revealing. On August 23, the Italians had suggested that Britain “should give counsels of moderation to Polish Government and *in particular urge them to re-establish direct contact with the German Government without delay.*” Loraine replied that the British would find it hard “to give such counsel at Warsaw at a moment when a formidable concentration of German troops was flowing eastwards towards the Polish frontier.” But Halifax agreed with the Italians and not with his ambassador; acting on Mussolini’s suggestion, he decided to tell the Poles that it was “essential” that they should “make an effort to re-establish direct contact with German Government.” He soon was urging the Poles not to rule out the possibility of talks with Germany on the Danzig question.<sup>65</sup> All this shows that the whole idea of making sure that the negotiations could only take place in an atmosphere free from military threats was by now not being taken too seriously.

Halifax clearly wanted the Poles to enter into negotiations with Germany—even, in effect, with a gun to their heads—and to that end he felt it was important not to frighten them by letting them know what the British plan was. His ambassador in Warsaw, for example, was instructed to give no indication that Britain was working with Italy. Nor were the Poles to be given any indication “of the kind of procedure for possible negotiation that we have been turning over in our mind.”<sup>66</sup> The British also sought to mislead the Poles about Hitler’s attitude as expressed in a meeting he had with the British ambassador on August 28; they were deliberately not told, for example, about Hitler’s references at that meeting to “annihilating Poland.”<sup>67</sup>

Halifax was clearly determined to move ahead with his plan, even though he was quite aware of the risks he was running. Allowing Hitler “to recover Danzig bloodlessly,” Foreign Office officials pointed out, would improve Germany’s position and weaken Britain’s; the world would “despise and blame us if we allow Hitler to play his old game of securing concrete concessions in return for purely illusory promises.” Halifax agreed these were serious concerns. He admitted that it might well be that “no permanent settlement in Europe is possible with the Nazi Régime still in control in Germany.” But none of this meant he should abandon his policy: he did not think, he wrote, that those objections “ought to be conclusive in favour of not working for a peaceful solution on proper terms now.”<sup>68</sup>

There was of course no settlement of the sort Halifax had in mind. But this was not because the British, in the final analysis, were no longer willing to make major concessions to Germany. It was because Hitler was simply not interested in settling the crisis on the terms the British were now prepared to offer him. He was determined to “liquidate” Poland; and if that meant going to war with the western powers as well, that was

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Malkins memorandum, August 25, 1939, *ibid.* ([link](#)), p. 246, and the Strang minute of August 15, 1939, DBFP:III:6 ([link](#)), pp. 760-61.

<sup>64</sup> For the point about a green light from Hitler being essential before the Poles could be approached on the subject, see Halifax to Loraine, August 24, 1939, Halifax to Phipps, August 25, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 186, 247.

<sup>65</sup> Loraine to Halifax, August 23, 1939, and Halifax to Kennard, August 23, 25 and 26, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 144-46, 169, 250, 292. Emphasis in original text. For the point that the August 23 démarche had been triggered by Mussolini’s suggestion, see Halifax to Loraine, August 24, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>66</sup> Halifax to Kennard, August 25, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>67</sup> Kennard to Halifax, August 29, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 373, referring to Henderson to Halifax, August 29, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>68</sup> Minutes on Henderson to Halifax, August 29, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 354.

something he was now prepared to accept.<sup>69</sup> The Italians could scarcely believe how violent and (to their mind) how irrational German policy had become. As Ciano pointed out to Hitler when they met at Salzburg on August 12, a bit of flexibility would allow Germany to achieve her objectives without war; the western powers should not be “driven to the wall”; they needed an “honourable way out,” he said, “of which they would assuredly make use.”<sup>70</sup> Mussolini himself told the Germans on the 26<sup>th</sup> that he thought they could probably “attain all [their] objectives without resort to war.”<sup>71</sup> The British, it seemed, were desperately trying to reach a peaceful settlement. “Only today,” he told the German ambassador Mackensen, “he had received information from the British Ambassador which seemed to him to prove that the British were prepared to exercise the strongest pressure on Poland, if by so doing an armed conflict could be avoided.”<sup>72</sup> Earlier that day, Halifax had in fact told Loraine that it seemed that what Hitler had in mind was a partition of Poland (with the U.S.S.R.—the Nazi-Soviet Pact had just been signed); if Hitler took action along those lines, that would mean immediate war with Britain. But if, on the other hand, “the settlement were confined to Danzig and the Corridor,” a peaceful solution would still be possible.<sup>73</sup> And Loraine, Mussolini told Mackensen the next day, was doing everything he could to get the Italians to make some move that might head off a war. “In the course of the last twenty-four hours,” he said, Loraine had sent him “about a dozen letters.”<sup>74</sup> The Italians did what they could to get Hitler to accept the deal. Mussolini, for example, wrote Hitler on the 29<sup>th</sup> that “the British proposals contain the prerequisites and factors for reaching a solution favourable to Germany in all the problems which concern her.”<sup>75</sup> And the Italians themselves had suggested the previous day that even before talks began it would be agreed that Germany would get Danzig; this was very much in line with what the British had in mind. But Ribbentrop rejected the idea out of hand. He told the Italians “that matters had already gone too far for suggestions of this kind.”<sup>76</sup>

Hitler, it is important to note, did not deny that the British were willing to make a deal involving Danzig and the Corridor. He understood that they were desperate to avoid a war and had by no means dug in their heels on the Polish question. But evidence to that effect, to his mind, only served to show how right he was when he had decided to “liquidate” Poland. It suggested that the western powers would not come in if he attacked that country—not in any serious way, at any rate. The British guarantee, he thought, was hollow. The formula “Support with all our power,” he told German military leaders on August 14, was “not genuinely meant.” The proof was that “England does not give Poland money to buy arms in other countries.” British political leaders, he noted, were in fact “beginning to back down.” In their dealings with the Poles (he had learned from “tapped telephone conversations in Poland”), the British were “continuously putting on the brakes.” But he did not view that as a chance to get what he wanted without a general war. He had made up his mind. Poland was going to be destroyed. “The other nations must be given proof that there will be a shooting war no matter what.” The evidence about Britain’s efforts to avoid a conflict showed that that decision was correct—that the “worms” he had seen at Munich would back out at the last moment. The problem, as he saw it, was not that the British were taking a tough line on the Polish question. The problem was that they might come up with even more concessions: “Führer is concerned lest England hamper showdown by last-minute efforts.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hitler-Ciano meeting, August 12, 1939, DGFP:D:7 ([link](#)), p. 42.

<sup>70</sup> Hitler-Ciano meeting, August 12, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Mackensen to Foreign Ministry, August 27, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>72</sup> Mackensen to Foreign Ministry, August 26, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>73</sup> Halifax to Loraine, August 26, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), p. 267.

<sup>74</sup> Mackensen to Foreign Ministry, August 27, 1939, DGFP:D:7 ([link](#)), p. 353.

<sup>75</sup> Mussolini to Hitler, August 29, 1939, *ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>76</sup> Weizsäcker-Attolico meeting, August 28, 1939, and Ribbentrop-Attolico meeting, August 29, 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 392, 407.

<sup>77</sup> Extracts from Halder diary, entry for August 14, 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 553-55. For the German original: Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch: Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabs des Heeres 1939-1942*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962),

And “last-minute efforts” were in fact made. Even the German attack on Poland on September 1 did not put an end to the attempt to reach a negotiated settlement. The British, to be sure, insisted that negotiations could only take place after German troops had been withdrawn from Poland; but if that condition was accepted, Halifax told Ciano on September 2, “it would be possible to get back to the original basis of the negotiations”—that is, the deal the British had in mind relating to Danzig and the Corridor could then be worked out.<sup>78</sup> Chamberlain told Parliament that same evening that if the German government agreed to withdraw their forces, the British would “be willing to regard the position as being the same as it was before” the German invasion of Poland—“that is to say, the way would be open to discussion between the German and Polish Government of the matters at issue between them, on the understanding that the settlement arrived at was one that safeguarded the vital interests of Poland and was secured by an international guarantee.”<sup>79</sup> It is hard to believe that Halifax and Chamberlain really thought that the rump Poland that would emerge from such a conference could be truly independent, any more than the rump Czechoslovakia that had emerged from the Munich Conference had been. And it is hard to imagine that they really believed that the “guarantees” they had in mind would have been worth more to Poland than the guarantee to “Czecho-Slovakia” had been worth in March 1939—a point that must have occurred to British leaders at the time, but which, judging from the published documents, people preferred not to discuss at the time, at least not in any venue where their views would be recorded.<sup>80</sup> But none of this mattered much in practice, since there was no longer any real chance that the plan could be put into effect. The Parliament was appalled by Chamberlain’s September 2 statement, and Chamberlain and Halifax were forced by a near-revolt of their own cabinet to abandon their policy—at least for the time being.<sup>81</sup> And Hitler certainly was not willing at that point to agree to a solution of the sort the two British leaders had in mind.

For the Führer was obviously set on war, at least with Poland. Weeks earlier, Ciano had come away from a meeting with Hitler convinced that this was the case. It was clear to Ciano that no matter how much Germany’s opponents were willing to concede, Poland would be attacked. Hitler, he wrote in his diary, “rejects any solution which might give satisfaction to Germany and avoid the struggle. I am certain that even if the Germans were given more than they ask for they would attack just the same, because they are possessed by the demon of destruction.”<sup>82</sup>

What all this means is that many common arguments about British policy in 1939 have to be taken with a grain of salt. It was not as though the appeasement policy had died in March 1939—that the British had now drawn the line and were no longer inclined to compromise with Hitler. It was not as though they had decided “not to press the Poles to negotiate,” or that the only kind of negotiation the British were prepared to countenance was a negotiation between equals, conducted “without threats of violence or unilateral action.” And it was not as though they did not plan on making major concessions to Hitler regarding both Danzig and the Corridor in order to avoid a war. They in fact clung desperately to the hope that some agreement—

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ed. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, p. 11. For his famous comment characterizing his opponents in the West as “little worms,” see Hitler speech to military leadership, August 22, 1939, *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik, 1918-1945*, series D, vol. 7 ([link](#)), p. 170; the English translation in DGFP used a milder term. A horrified German officer gave an account of this speech (including the reference to the men of Munich as “worms”) to an American journalist, who then passed it on to the British. Ogilvie-Forbes to Kirkpatrick, August 25, 1939, with enclosure, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), pp. 257-60.

<sup>78</sup> Jebb minute of Halifax-Ciano phone conversation, September 2, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), p. 519.

<sup>79</sup> Halifax to Henderson, September 2, 1939, DBFP:III:7([link](#)), p. 521.

<sup>80</sup> This is based on a keyword search for the words “guarantee” and “Czecho” in DBFP:III:7([link](#)) and Cab 23/100 ([link](#)), both of which are keyword-searchable.

<sup>81</sup> For this remarkable story, see Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, pp. 339-42.

<sup>82</sup> Ciano diary entry for August 11, 1939, in Hugh Gibson, ed., *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1946), p. 119. See also Malcolm Muggeridge, ed., *Ciano’s Diplomatic Papers* (London: Odham’s, 1948), pp. 296-304.

involving major concessions on the part of the Poles—could be worked out that could head off a war. If the policy based on that hope never came to fruition, that was because Hitler now refused to settle, even temporarily, for what the British were willing to give him. He was determined to “liquidate” Poland, and even the possibility of war with the western powers did not deter him.

Those points are of course by no means new. The idea that the British government had never really given up on appeasement was, for example, a basic theme in the well-known 1963 book by Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott on *The Appeasers*. Gilbert and Gott pointed out, quite correctly, that “the desire for a negotiated solution, even in the face of overt threats, had been manifest in the days and hours before the German onslaught.”<sup>83</sup> And Anna Cienciala took much the same view in her 1989 article, “Poland in British and French Policy in 1939: Determination to Fight—or Avoid War?” Britain’s objective, she says, “was to persuade Hitler to give up armed aggression and take what he wanted from Poland by way of so-called negotiations, in which the Poles would meekly concede his demands and thus save the peace”; the western powers, to save face, would, along with the other interested parties, guarantee the settlement.<sup>84</sup> Those authors presented some striking evidence, mostly from the published documents, to support that interpretation.<sup>85</sup> To be sure, those works were not perfect. The Gilbert and Gott book was written quickly and came out well before the British archives were opened up, and the interpretation it gave of key episodes—most notably, the issuing of the British guarantee to Poland in March—was rather weak.<sup>86</sup> And I think Cienciala went too far when she wrote that this “appeasement” policy was in place even when the guarantee was issued in March. She herself later pointed out that according to a recently released Polish document, Lord Halifax told the Poles on March 21 that Danzig would be included in the guarantee.<sup>87</sup> My sense is that while scholars in this school are basically right about British policy during the weeks before the war, they fail to understand how dramatically British policy shifted after March 31. People like Halifax really had been prepared to take a very tough line in the winter of 1939. But by the summer, well before the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed, the appeasement philosophy had reasserted itself. It was as though the British had been frightened by their own audacity, and, having issued the guarantee, sought to back-pedal as hard as they could—but there was a limit to how much backpedaling they could do, given the commitments they had made and political realities both at home and abroad.

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), p. 301.

<sup>84</sup> Cienciala, “Poland in British and French Policy in 1939” ([link](#)), p. 223.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, the juxtaposition on p. 280 of *The Appeasers* of the German demand that the Poles should be “strongly advised immediately to establish contact with Germany” with the British advice to the Poles (sent out immediately after Halifax had learned of the German demand) “to enter at once into direct discussion with Germany.” The point is made very effectively through the use of italics. The evidence supporting this general argument relates not just to British policy in August 1939; the basic conclusions also rest on an analysis of the “economic appeasement” efforts earlier that year, and on an examination of British behavior in the period after the German attack on Poland, especially during the “phony war” period of 1939-40. (The story Gilbert and Gott tell in their chapter on that period, one reviewer noted, was “something to be remembered with shame and horror.” C.L. Mowat review of *The Appeasers*, *English Historical Review* 80, no. 314 (January 1965), p. 217 ([link](#).) For the literature on “economic appeasement,” see the works cited in Peden, “A Matter of Timing” ([link](#)), p. 15 n. 1, and also Helmut Metzmacher, “Deutsch-englische Ausgleichsbemühungen im Sommer 1939,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 14, no. 4 (1966) ([link](#)).

<sup>86</sup> “The British offer of a guarantee to Poland,” they write, “was made on the assumption that Poland was in no danger.” But they then go on to point out in the next paragraph that “at the end of March [when the guarantee was issued] it seemed that Germany was about to invade Poland.” Gilbert and Gott, *The Appeasers*, p. 241. The book was written in only six months. See Richard Gott’s obituary of Martin Gilbert, *The Guardian*, Feb. 4, 2015 ([link](#)).

<sup>87</sup> Cienciala letter to the editor, *Polish Review* 53, no. 2 (2008), p. 271 ([link](#)). The document in question was also published in English translation in W. Borodziej and S. Debski, eds., *Polish Documents on Foreign Policy, 24 October 1938–30 September 1939* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2009), doc. 62. See also Cienciala’s review of this book in *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 22, no. 1 ([link](#)), p. 173.

How does this story relate to the issues I was concerned with in the “New Light on 1914?” article? One of my basic premises there was that if the goal is to get a handle on the question of how German policy in 1914 is to be judged, we need first to think hard about the question of how the standards used to make that judgment are themselves to be assessed. And my assumption was that one way we could do that was by seeing whether those standards provide an adequate basis for judgment in other important cases. If they do, then those standards would probably provide a solid basis for judgment in the 1914 case. If not, the yardsticks commonly used to judge German policy in 1914 would have a certain ad hoc quality and would in moral terms be less compelling.

And so probably the key point to note about the case we’ve been dealing with here is that in making judgments about British policy in 1939 scholars do not use the same criteria that are commonly used in the 1914 case. Those scholars who take the view that after Prague the appeasement policy was discredited and that the British government now took a firm line generally do not condemn it for doing so. It may have adopted a policy that it knew might well lead to a European war, but it is as a rule taken for granted that it was perfectly legitimate for it to pursue a policy of that sort. It may not (that argument runs) have been particularly interested in working for a compromise solution or in pressing Poland to negotiate with Germany, but that course of action is viewed as entirely proper. No one should hold it against the British that they took a firm line in this final showdown with Nazi Germany.

On the other hand, those scholars who say that the appeasement policy did not die in March 1939, and that British leaders remained appeasers until the very end, generally take a dim view of British policy in the weeks and months before the war. Their historical interpretation is different, but the moral standards are the same: the assumption is that it was right for Britain to stand up to Hitler, that the proper course of action was to draw the line, that the appeasement policy no longer had any legitimacy.

But those moral standards, shared by both sides in the debate about British policy in 1939, are very different from the standards applied in the 1914 case. Fischer condemned Germany for being willing to risk a European war, but no one (with the partial exception of Newman) condemns Britain for adopting a course of action it too knew would lead to war. If anything, the British are condemned for being too reluctant to risk an armed conflict. Germany in the 1914 case is blamed for doing too little to restrain Austria, and for giving Austria a “blank check.” But the British are never blamed for doing too little to make Poland accept a negotiated solution. The efforts of that sort Britain did make, when they are recognized at all, are generally viewed as rather dishonorable.

The point here, of course, is not that those judgments about 1939 are wrong, or even that this simple comparison shows that the judgments often made about German policy in 1914 are wrong. It is rather that the simple yardsticks often used as a basis for judgment in such cases are inadequate, not least because they cannot be applied consistently across cases. Those tests have too limited a reach. For a judgment to be even minimally satisfactory, it has to be based on the whole historical reality. For in some cases one can reasonably argue that it is perfectly legitimate, given the larger historical context, to adopt a course of action that one knows might lead to war—to emphasize deterrence and not accommodation, or even to allow concerns about the shifting strategic balance to play a major role in shaping policy. The question of how German policy in 1914 is to be assessed, it seems to me, needs to be approached with those considerations in mind.

--Marc Trachtenberg, October 2015