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Chapter 4.

Lord Robert Cecil and Europe's Fascist Dictators: Three Case Studies, 1935-1939.

Gaynor Johnson.

Lord Robert Cecil, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, is a name synonymous with the work of the League of Nations, the international institution that emerged at the end of the First World War. The League's Covenant was enshrined in the resulting peace settlements, whose principal aim was to prevent future war. His commitment to the principles of collective security that underpinned the diplomatic approach of the League and the related issues of international disarmament policy are the subjects that have aroused most interest among historians, and was, indeed, what he was most noted for by his contemporaries.¹ Invariably therefore, the League's reputation, which is almost overwhelmingly negative because of its failure to prevent the world descending into world war for a second time in 1939, has influenced if not determined Cecil's reputation also. This examination of Cecil's approach to international affairs takes the form of a discussion of his views on two international events and a diplomatic strategy that together have been viewed as the start of Europe's final diplomatic crisis that resulted in the outbreak of the Second World War: the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1936 and the British policy of appeasement associated primarily but not exclusively with Neville Chamberlain.

Within Cecil's career as an internationalist, which dated back to the creation of the League during the First World War, these events have a slightly different significance. Mussolini's decision of invade Abyssinia in August 1935 and thus begin a war that was to last for ten months, was not the first time that the League's authority had been challenged, nor was it the first occasion on which it appeared that that Geneva-based organisation's response was disappointing to its supporters. Likewise, Franco's ultimate success in the civil war in Spain was not the first time that Cecil had witnessed the rise of a European fascist dictator, nor with it, the addition of a further potential threat to diplomatic stability in Europe. So why do they matter? Taken collectively, they indicate the start of a process in Cecil's mind – one that would lead him to begin to re-examine the dynamics of European diplomatic relations in the 1930s, to hone his views on the potential for a second European war, and to consider how to make the League more responsive to the challenges these considerations raised. This, in turn, should have a bearing on his wider historical reputation and that of the League.

The diplomatic history of Europe in the interwar period and the rise of the extreme political right have been examined by numerous historians and does not bear detailed repetition here.² In contrast, the history of the League of Nations and its involvement in international diplomacy during the interwar period has been regarded hitherto as an unfashionable subject, although it has significant bearing on the subject matter under consideration in this chapter.³ Zara Steiner's recent analysis of the diplomacy of the 1920s is a notable exception because it demonstrates that when discussing the effectiveness of the League, we should not simply focus on its failure to prevent war in 1939, but acknowledge that in the area of humanitarian work, it was highly successful.⁴ This paves the way well for a wider discussion of Cecil's involvement with that organisation. That said, historical opinion about the League as an organisation and the way it operated diplomatically still falls into two camps. That it was a brave innovation that was doomed to failure because no one knew how to make it work,⁵ or that the League ran on naïve principles of goodwill and co-operation that lacked sufficient respect and bite to meet the challenges to the international order posed by the fascist dictators.⁶ An examination of Cecil's attitude to and relationship with the League suggests that neither interpretation is satisfactory. In the past, scholars have made mention of Cecil's passionate promotion of its work by leading the British delegation to the League in Geneva and through his presidency of the League of Nations Union. From this they have deduced that he, like the League, had an excessively principled and unrealistic approach to international affairs, especially during the interwar period. This chapter argues that this analysis is misleading and sometimes incorrect.

Within the international community, by 1936, Cecil was the unchallenged authority on the history and operation of the League, having been involved in its creation during the First World War, and having led the British delegation at Geneva for much of the 1920s. But his knowledge and experience of international affairs did not stem exclusively from his work at League headquarters. He had been Acting Foreign Secretary during the crucial months between the Armistice in November 1918 and the start of the Paris Peace Conference three months later. More significantly, he had served as a Cabinet minister during Baldwin's second government specialising on League affairs and had worked closely with the then Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, in formulating British policy on

disarmament, resigning on that issue in 1927. His departure from the Cabinet breathed fresh life into his work as President of the League of Nations Union, the organisation established to promote the work of the League and the cause of international peace among the people of the member states as well as in government. It was from his position as President that he passed comment on the events of 1935 and 1936. In 1935, Cecil was seventy-one years old and considering how and when to make way for the next generation of supporters of the League. Nevertheless, his reputation was such that he still retained the respect and the ears of all of the most significant politicians of the time, both in Britain and in Europe. Thus it was from this dual perspective: a consciousness of his own work drawing to a close and the need to encourage a new generation of supporters of the League, and his desire to be the bridge between the two that shaped his perspective of international affairs during the 1930s. And with each passing year until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Cecil felt this burden of responsibility progressively more acutely.

The history of Mussolini's decision to invade Abyssinia in the summer of 1935 has been covered in detail by comparatively few historians and is frequently accorded little more than a passing reference in histories of the origins of the Second World War.⁷ That said, the points that have the greatest bearing on understanding Cecil's perspective on the crisis are: the ability of the British and French governments to enforce the relevant clauses of the League Covenant, the debate concerning the imposition of sanctions and the implications of the crisis to British strategic interests in north Africa and the Middle East. The outbreak of the Italo-Abyssinian war also coincided with an important domestic reappraisal of Britain's relationship with the League through the findings of the Peace Ballot – an exercise in which Cecil played an important role.⁸

And it is with the Peace Ballot and its relation to the British International Peace Campaign (IPC) that it is appropriate to begin this analysis.⁹ This illustrates that between 1935 and 1936, Cecil's leadership of the British peace movements, broadly conceived, was in crisis. The details of the history of the Peace Ballot campaign have been detailed elsewhere, although it still remains an aspect of the history of the League that is under-researched.¹⁰ The findings of the ballot, in which thirty-eight per cent of the British people expressed their views, largely favourably, about the League, provided heartening evidence that while support for that organisation was not as extensive as Cecil would have liked, it provided a foundation for improvement. And as the ballot coincided with the outbreak of the Italo-Abyssinian war, it provided a useful barometer of public confidence in the League at a time of diplomatic crisis.¹¹ But that said, the main point to note here is that between 1935 and 1936, the work of the League was fundamentally compromised not simply by international events, but by the international politics of peacemaking and the promotion of peace. And on this issue, Cecil's role was of crucial importance.

By the outbreak of the Italo-Abyssinian war, Cecil had pinned his hopes on the success of the *Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix*, a collective security initiative launched by the French popular front government in the autumn of 1935.¹² He was convinced that only by joining this initiative could fresh life be breathed into British support for the League, and it was launched in Britain under the banner of the International Peace Campaign (IPC) in 1936, and chaired by Cecil.¹³ The fate of the IPC reveals much about Cecil's judgement. From the outset, it was unclear what the relationship would be between the IPC and the work of the League of Nations Union, the latter which Cecil also chaired. Cecil threatened resignation unless a suitable rapprochement could be reached, and in order to prevent this both organisations agreed to seek other means of co-operation, but without success.¹⁴ Therefore, during the crucial years under consideration here, the work of both bodies was compromised by this lack of clarity, with both suffering a financial crisis as their membership became effectively divided, with Cecil eventually resigning as president of the IPC in 1939.

The importance of the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion was, for Cecil, also evident during the Abyssinian crisis, and, indeed, he claimed in his memoirs to have warned Eden about Mussolini's likely exploits in that region as early as 1934.¹⁵ Reflecting on the events of the 1930s in a letter to his brother, the Marquess of Salisbury, Cecil noted that if public opinion within Britain and France had denounced Mussolini's actions with sufficient vigour, then the governments of those countries would have been compelled to take a "strong line with the Italians."¹⁶

Analysing the Abyssinian crisis also provides insights into Cecil's view of the state of the relationship between Britain and France and the ability of those countries to work together to maintain peace. This is an important issue because the League of Nations, especially the Council, was dominated by those two countries. Consequently, the ability of British and French diplomacy to contain the foreign policy aspirations of the fascist dictators would have a profound effect on the diplomatic reputation of the League. But for one who professed such a profound belief in the strength afforded by collective security and, parallel to this, collective action should the circumstances arise, Cecil was not convinced that France would be an effective partner for Britain. In the final weeks of

1935, he abhorred the efforts of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, to curry favour with his French opposite number, Pierre Laval, long before the conclusion of the notorious Hoare-Laval Pact.¹⁷ The French were allies to Britain only when it suited them to be.¹⁸ They were, he told Winston Churchill in the spring of 1936, more to blame for the entire crisis than the British. "Whatever may be said about the British government it is nothing to the perfidy of men like Laval and Flandin."¹⁹ Although what is not clear from his discussions of international relations during this period, is how the Anglo-French entente could be reaffirmed and given clearer direction. This was a point that he never fully addressed and yet he would have realised that, despite the problems it entailed, the Anglo-French relationship would be at the heart of a reinvented League.²⁰ This and another related issue on which he did have more to say, and that was how to give the League more effective diplomatic teeth in the face of challenges to its authority by governments that simply ignored international law.

Cecil's belief that the British government should act independently of France if necessary increased as the Abyssinian crisis deepened. For him the crucial issue was the debate about the imposition on Mussolini of economic sanctions as outlined under the terms of the League Covenant. This was the strongest protest the League could make against an act of aggression short of precipitating military action. As he was to write later, in 1937, "I am not, myself, the least afraid of splitting the League by pressing for vigorous action...in the ten preceding years I always found that the more vigorous the action proposed by the League, the stronger the League became...".²¹ Firmly offering his support to Eden's desire to impose oil sanctions on Italy, Cecil was dismayed by the French reluctance to follow suit on the grounds that if the Duce resisted, Hitler might be compelled to go to his assistance, thus precipitating a European war. It might be the Führer's intention to "smash the League" at some point, but there was little evidence to suggest that that point had yet been reached.²² In the meantime, Mussolini was a much clearer and more present danger to the effectiveness of the League. Furthermore, if the League took no action against him, then that in itself could be interpreted in Rome and Berlin as offering a *carte blanche* to mount a wider challenge to international law, including the flouting of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno.²³ After the crisis in Manchuria in 1931-32, in which the League had appeared ineffective, it was of vital importance to Cecil that it should acquit itself better over the Italo-Abyssinian war. The crisis in the Far East had also underlined the fragility of the Franco-British relationship, so it was important that even if the British and French could not agree on a policy concerning the new crisis in Abyssinia, they should not act in a way that would harm the League.

During the Abyssinian crisis, Cecil was not as resolutely opposed to any kind of diplomatic agreement with Mussolini as he was to be with Hitler later in the decade. In July 1935, when Eden came under attack in the British press for his proposals to prevent war in North Africa by reaching a diplomatic rapprochement with Mussolini, Cecil, reflecting the opinion of the executive committee of the League of Nations Union, stated that "had it succeeded everyone would have applauded the offer and they were proportionately indignant that because if had in fact failed you should have been attacked in the way you have been."²⁴

But the most significant feature of Cecil's discussion of the Abyssinian crisis was his clear faith that the League of Nations was held in sufficient diplomatic and political respect by the international community so as to be able to either solve the problem in its entirety or, at the very least, to diminish its importance significantly. There is no indication during the spring and summer of 1935 that Mussolini's challenge to the League's authority would provide anything other than a fair and positive test of that organisation's ability to exercise its authority. He made no mention, as so many historians of the League were later to do, of the Abyssinian crisis providing the last opportunity for it to rein in an over-ambitious Italian leader in the short term and prevent a wider European war in the long term. However, what was of paramount importance to Cecil was that it should be the British government that should take the leading role in steering League policy on the crisis, and that in so doing, should make it clear that Britain was committed to the principles of collective security.²⁵

That said, Cecil was also clearly aware of the wider context that the Abyssinian crisis presented to international affairs. In August 1935, a matter of weeks after hostilities broke out, he wrote to the Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, expressing the view that the British government should consider the "now unquiet state of the world"; to understand Mussolini's actions not only within the context of the League Covenant, but also how they related to the spirit and the letter of the Locarno Pact of 1925 and the Kellogg-Briand pact concluded three years later. In Cecil's view, these three expressions of international law should, henceforward, always be viewed collectively.²⁶ This could be viewed as a suggestion by Cecil that the League Covenant was no longer held in sufficient respect as to be able to contain challenges to its terms alone. That without the threat of the consequences of infringements of the other two agreements also being brought into the diplomatic equation, little notice would be taken of a breach of the League Covenant. This would be to miss one of the key points about

Cecil's attitude towards international diplomacy. For him it was entirely consistent for the League Covenant to dovetail with other international agreements, especially those concerned specifically with the preservation of peace, given the similarity of their purpose – collective security underpinned by a “collective” approach towards the promotion of peace.

Cecil also believed that diplomatic lessons could be learnt from the Manchurian crisis to make the League's response to the Abyssinian crisis more effective. During the Far Eastern crisis, the League Council had been hamstrung by the unanimity rule that was attached to its decisions rendered impotent by Japanese membership of that body. Cecil believed that it was important to have a contingency measure in place should the Italians, also permanent members of the League Council, decide to block British preferred policy towards Abyssinia.²⁷ He pointed out to Hoare that it was possible for the Council to conduct a vote which if not proving to be unanimous, could be treated as a “recommendation” to each of the countries which voted for it to act upon it.²⁸ Cecil pointed out that if, for example, the Council failed to vote unanimously in favour of withdrawing members' diplomatic representatives from Rome, then the British delegation should promote the use of the “recommended policy” convention.²⁹

Cecil's thinking was also partly influenced by the view that if the League simply employed economic sanctions against Mussolini, as the Covenant made provision for, then it would not be sufficient to contain the Duce's ambitions. By introducing some element of flexibility to the options open to the League Council, the League was more likely to be successful in its endeavour. Cecil was also mindful that

the withdrawal of diplomats from Rome would have a significant psychological effect on Mussolini, who had during his first years in power, been willing to court the approval of the international diplomatic community.³⁰ Although it would also have been true that if the British and French governments decided to recall their ambassadors to Rome, then any pretence at a Locarno spirit would have been dead, as would be the Stresa Front. It was the likely impact of the consequences of these developments, especially the absence of the means of using Mussolini to rein in Hitler that persuaded the British and French not to sever diplomatic contact with the Duce's regime.

Furthermore, Cecil believed that if recourse were made solely to economic sanctions, it would also indicate an excessive willingness on the part of the British government to give in to what he viewed as a weak French response to the crisis. Instead of making a more robust rebuttal of Mussolini's actions, Cecil believed that the French would simply rely on the effectiveness of a policy that, if successful at all, would take more time than was acceptable to work. In November 1935, he used his correspondence with Eden not only to make this point but also to launch a more scathing criticism of the French attitude towards their willingness to work in partnership with the British to give bite to the League Council's decisions. He wrote: “The result will be a growing indignation with the League and particularly with this country and, I believe, with France, for generally speaking, an ineffective friend is even more hated than a frank opponent, and France comes into the first category.”³¹ The British government should waste no time in advocating the introduction of economic sanctions, especially relating to oil, and should go ahead with their implementation regardless of French attitudes to this. Although he was mindful that the use of economic sanctions would impact on the Italian population as a whole, while, as he pointed out to Eden, the withdrawal of diplomatic representatives would impact solely on the Duce's regime.³² By the spring of 1936, Cecil's hostility to the French approach towards the crisis had intensified. He advised Eden to tell his opposite number “quite plainly” that the success of the League's response to the crisis depended on the willingness of the French to stand shoulder to shoulder with the British government. Or as he put it: “what is sauce for the Abyssinian goose will be sauce for the French gander.”³³

Cecil followed this up in May 1936, after the armistice at the end of the war, with a paper on League policy towards the crisis and the deployment of sanctions.³⁴ This document represents an important statement on Cecil's views on what the consequences of the Italo-Abyssinian war should be to Mussolini. He recommended that sanctions be maintained, if not increased against Italy. Referring to his experience of the administering the implementation of economic blockade during the First World War, he wrote that “history shows that if pressure had been prolonged striking results would have been achieved which were sacrificed by a premature change in policy.”³⁵ The paper also contains significant references to his views on the connection between the need to take firm, decisive action against those who challenge international order and the pursuit of peace. The only individuals who were likely to be object to this were “a very small section consisting of extreme pacifists and those who dislike all forms of effective international organisation for peace.”³⁶

At the same time, writing two months after the start of the Rhineland crisis, Cecil was convinced that the “real threat” to European peace came more from Hitler than from Mussolini. While not being convinced that the threat of war was imminent, Cecil correctly predicted that Hitler would

nevertheless “make a variety of demands” to the Allies and that the Führer felt no “obligation to tell the truth in international affairs.”³⁷ That said, Cecil was also confident that “Italy is for the time being as much afraid of Germany as any of us” and that it was for this reason alone that Mussolini had not withdrawn from the League of Nations.³⁸

Cecil’s paper on the use of sanctions and the future of the League also contains important insights into his views on the effectiveness of that organisation. The Abyssinian crisis had not destroyed the League’s credibility. And he remained confident that if Hitler were to challenge international peace (he did not view the Führer’s policy in the Rhineland in such terms), then “such hostile action would be met by a combination of all the forces of the members of the League”.³⁹ Cecil concluded his paper with an analysis of what he thought ought to be the general objectives of British foreign policy. The principal aim should be the maintenance of peace. However, his approach was practical. Despite all of the calls for the preservation of peace made by the League and its supporters, they had “never yet succeeded in preventing a war.”⁴⁰ Yet a return to the days in which countries went to war to defend the honour of their international reputation was unthinkable. The British government needed to be prepared to “make sacrifices” to ensure that the principles of collective security enshrined in the League Covenant were reinforced and given concrete support.

Yet despite the League’s condemnation of the war in Abyssinia, the fact remained that few European powers were conscious that, despite the illegal nature of the conflict, the African war was comfortably remote and offered little chance of triggering a wider conflict. The second crisis under consideration in this chapter was none of these things. The outbreak of civil war in Spain in the summer of 1936 was a war on European soil and one that, from the outset, had clear ideological dimensions that reflected the growing political divisions within Europe.⁴¹ Cecil outlined his views on the general significance of the Spanish Civil War in a letter to the Foreign Office’s Permanent Under Secretary, Sir Alexander Cadogan, early in 1938.⁴² This letter reveals much about Cecil’s approach to statecraft during this period. When the Spanish Civil War had begun, Cecil had argued that it was unlikely to yield an outright victor.⁴³ If a ceasefire could be secured, the country could be partitioned in which the existing democratic government would prevail in the east of Spain, providing a geographical and political method of containing a regime led by Franco in the west. National government would be overseen by an independent head of state who would agree to liaise with both governments and who would, after three years, hold a plebiscite under the auspices of the League of Nations, in which the Spanish people would decide finally which regime they preferred.⁴⁴ It is unlikely that this strategy would have worked for a number of reasons. As the most powerful members of the League Council, the British and French government would have had to play a leading role in the implementation of this strategy and it did not sit well with either their practical commitment to the League or to their respective policies concerning intervention in the Spanish conflict.⁴⁵ Cecil’s strategy also underestimated the vast complexity of the war and its origins, with its bitter political, social and economic factionalism. Cecil’s proposal would never have been acceptable to either the Spanish democratic government or to Franco, both of which wanted the war to produce complete vindication of their cause. And lastly, there was little impetus for the war to be brought to an artificial halt. The Spanish Civil War was one of the few conflicts in the twentieth century that did not bring about the general disapprobation of the international community. On the contrary, many countries played a willing, if often indirect, part in it.

Cecil himself was not blind to the diplomatic awkwardness the war produced. In discussing the conduct of the war with his nephew, Bobbety Cecil, the future Fifth Marquess of Salisbury, in February 1937, Cecil admitted that if, for example, the Spanish government had appealed to the League for assistance after the Italian navy had shelled Malaga in the autumn of the previous year, he did “not see what answer the League would have...”⁴⁶ Yet under the terms of the League’s Covenant, the illegality of the Italian act was clear and furthermore the consequences to League members were also transparent. The aggressor would be subject to sanctions while the victim of the attack could look to the remainder of the League’s members to offer assistance. Cecil realised that the British policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War was likely to be viewed in Whitehall as a convenient excuse not to uphold the terms of the Covenant. There was also the matter, once again, of the impact on the now very flimsy Stresa agreement of any British or indeed French action against Italy.

That said, however, as with the Abyssinian crisis, Cecil’s observations on the events in Spain between 1936 and 1939 also acted more as a barometer of his views on the Anglo-French relationship and on the strength and effectiveness of the League of Nations. As they had been during the Abyssinian crisis, it was evident during the Spanish Civil War that Cecil believed that League policy would be most effectively implemented if exercised in tandem with the French. Although – and this is a significant point – he also made it clear that if the French proved to be unwilling partners in this strategy, then the British government should be willing to act alone. Nevertheless, Cecil’s comments

concerning the war in Spain demonstrate that by the summer of 1936 and during the remaining years before the outbreak of the Second World War, Britain would not be able to contain an act of aggression on European soil without French assistance. The event that had caused Cecil to revise his approach was Hitler's decision to remilitarise the Rhineland in March 1936. It was not so much the comparatively noncommittal response of the British and French governments to this act that concerned him, but the potential threat to European security should the Italian and German dictators decide to act in tandem with one another. He was convinced that the success of Mussolini's expedition in Abyssinia had spurred Hitler into this flouting of international law. Furthermore, the tame response of the League to the crisis in North Africa had shown that the idea that acts of aggression could be contained through the deployment of international collective security had little meaning in reality. In addition, in the unlikely event that Hitler should have wished Germany to rejoin the League to pursue his foreign policy agenda through peaceful, lawful means, then it would be apparent to the Führer, on showings to date, that the League was unlikely to be able to offer an umbrella under which to do this effectively.

The willingness of Mussolini and Hitler to offer military support to Franco demonstrated to Cecil the potential threat to Europe of a more concrete Italo-German alliance. Cecil's thinking was determined more by an attempt to assess the territorial ambitions of Germany than those of Italy, even though, by the middle of 1936, it had been the Duce who had hitherto proved to be the more bellicose. Both in terms of the war in Spain and within the wider European arena, he was convinced that of the two countries, Italy would form the junior partner in any strategic or military alliance with Germany.⁴⁷ At the same time, an unnecessarily aggressive stance taken by the British and French in an attempt to counterbalance any combined threat that might emerge, could be self-defeating, and may itself provoke war. Consequently, the word balance occurs frequently in Cecil's correspondence during the mid to late 1930s – not so much in the context of the need for a balance of power but for a considered approach in which acts of aggression were roundly condemned and, if necessary, met with force. But only after all other avenues of diplomatic negotiation had been exhausted. In the short-term, Cecil was also mindful that an attempt to construct an overt Anglo-French alliance aimed at the territorial ambitions of the German and Italian dictators would destroy the Stresa Front, which remained a key strategy for reining in Hitler until the German Anschluss with Austria.

However, frustrated by the attitude of the British government to the Peace Ballot the previous year, and through a desire because of advancing age to take a less prominent role in the work of the League of Nations Union and its affiliated peace campaigns, Cecil increasingly became a facilitator of debate concerning the legality of the Spanish war, rather than a leading participant. He allowed his London home to act as a venue for meetings between members of the British, French and Spanish delegations to the League in which suggested policy strategies for the British government to adopt were drafted. Cecil, although no longer a member of the British delegation himself, gave particular support to the establishment of an independent committee of enquiry under the auspices of the League to review the situation in Spain, especially to ascertain the degree of foreign intervention in the conflict and to bring any humanitarian issues to the notice of the international community. The policy of non-intervention in the Spanish conflict advocated by the British government was proof to Cecil that the British approach towards challenges to peace and to democracy had become as weak as those of the French.⁴⁸ Neither country had a clear wide-ranging strategy on how to contain the spread of fascism in Europe and consequently, it was likely that, as in 1914, the two countries would be drawn, irrevocably, into a war that was not of their creation. Before the First World War, the diplomacy of Grey and Haldane had “lacked clarity”; Baldwin and later Chamberlain could not afford to repeat the mistake.

The final part of this assessment of Cecil's attitude towards three important aspects of international diplomacy in the 1930s is concerned with the most well-known and widely debated among historians, the policy of appeasement pursued primarily, but not exclusively, to accommodate Hitler's territorial ambitions after 1937. The subject is included here not simply because it was an important and controversial feature of British foreign policy during the 1930s and because the other two case studies that precede it are intimately linked to it. Cecil himself believed the decision to appease Hitler, that is the granting of territorial concessions in return for the maintenance of peace, to be of great relevance to understanding the British diplomatic mindset of the period, but also because, as he was to reflect to his brother in 1941: “As I see it practically the whole of the international events from 1920 to 1939 have been the result of a colossal scheme for the regeneration of Germany and the expansion of Japan and Italy which is to end in the domination of the West by Germany and the East by Japan...”⁴⁹ Cecil then went on to say that after the war was over, nothing less than “main force” would be required to contain the Axis powers from future acts of aggression in order to “avoid the mistakes of the past.”⁵⁰

Because of his enthusiastic promotion of the peace campaign and the work of the League, Cecil has often been incorrectly labelled as a pacifist. To assume that this was the case is to miss the

point about the way in which the League operated, with its emphasis on collective security, and of Cecil's attitude to the conduct of international affairs. To him it was of paramount importance to explore every avenue to preserve peace but which made it clear at the same time that acts of aggression or bellicose posturing would not be tolerated. Consequently, when the Chamberlain government decided to adopt a policy of appeasement towards Hitler, Cecil believed that such an approach was wrong-headed and dangerous.⁵¹ That said, it is important to note that Cecil himself was not always capable of suggesting a better alternative strategy that took into account the realities of the diplomatic situation at the time. Initially, Cecil's preferred course of action was to persuade Chamberlain and Daladier to refer the Sudeten question to the League. Not only was Chamberlain a known sceptic about the effectiveness of the League, but there was little evidence to suggest that Hitler would have been bound by a League ruling on the question.⁵² Still less is there reason to believe that the Czech delegation to the League would have voted in favour of ceding some of their homeland to Hitler when given a choice in the matter.⁵³

Finding little support, unsurprisingly, for his preferred course of action, Cecil then turned his attention to what he termed the 'fundamental premise' of the policy of appeasement itself. It was, he told both Eden and Halifax, vitally important for Britain to stand up to Hitler and Mussolini, not to make concessions to them.⁵⁴ He accused Chamberlain of 'defeatism', of undermining Britain's reputation in international diplomacy by seeking humiliating rapprochements with the 'fascist thugs', Hitler and Mussolini.⁵⁵ Like many sceptical about the long-term effectiveness of appeasement, Cecil was particularly scathing in his criticism of Chamberlain's meetings with Hitler over the future of the Sudetenland. In September 1938, he asked Halifax: 'Is it possible to prevent the Prime Minister from sending any more communications to Hitler?...It really is madness, believe me. We ought to do exactly the opposite. We ought to be making, openly and will full advertisement every possible preparation for war.'⁵⁶ Six months later, he complained to Eden that 'The Munich settlement has quite definitely shown itself to be a Munich surrender...'.⁵⁷

Cecil's hostility towards the policy of appeasement stemmed from three sources.⁵⁸ First, he believed that to try to reach a rapprochement with a bellicose Germany was simply to repeat the mistakes made by the British government in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. In particular, it was important not to take it for granted that in the final analysis, the German government would shy away from actual recourse to war. Second, that the policy of appeasement stemmed from a position of weakness; of international diplomacy being dictated by a fear of war rather than by the desire to preserve peace. What was required, in his view, was a strong stand against Hitler that would have at its heart two apparently contradictory but in reality complementary strands to it. On the one hand, he supported the plans for British rearmament. It was essential for Britain, when faced by a militarily strong Germany to be able to punch her weight should war breakout.⁵⁹ This was at variance from some of the statements he had made during the Abyssinian war, where he had perpetuated the argument he had made since 1918, namely that the best way to avoid war was to remove the means of waging it. The events in Europe since 1935 had persuaded him that this was no longer a practical sustainable position. Cecil also felt uncomfortable with the idea that a non-democratic power dictating this important aspect of the European diplomatic agenda. Lastly, there was the simple moral argument as he had explained to Eden as early as 1933: 'how can Germans not be expected to demand tanks if the British are to keep theirs?'⁶⁰

Yet while some of Cecil's alternatives to the policy of appeasement involving the League may have lacked credibility, he was nevertheless mindful that as it was currently organised, the Geneva-based organisation was unable to respond adequately to the form in which the threats to European peace currently took. With characteristic optimism, Cecil viewed this situation as an opportunity for the League. When the League had been created, he argued, the severe and often simultaneous challenges to its authority posed primarily by Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese government had never been envisaged.⁶¹ Consequently, a new form of the League Covenant needed to be drafted to take this situation into account. This exercise, he was confident, would not only breathe fresh life into the work of the League, it would help to prevent war as much of the diplomatic energy currently expended in increasing diplomatic tension between the democratic and fascist powers would be deflected in this alternative direction. Clearly Cecil was unsuccessful in this endeavour, but his ideas should not simply be dismissed as yet another example of the many well-intentioned but ultimately futile proposals of the period. They once again act as a useful comparator between his ideas on how international diplomacy was configured in the late 1930s and its optimum method of working. His determination that the League would lead the peace-making process after the Second World War was revealed in a document he wrote just weeks after the outbreak of hostilities. In this statement, in which, ironically, he also made the same case for appeasing Germany that Lloyd George had made after the First World War,

Cecil wrote that: 'Means must be provided for dealing effectively with any international grievance, whether it is of a justiciable character or not'.⁶²

By the late 1930s, Cecil had been advocating collective security between states as the optimum method of preserving peace for twenty years.⁶³ Clearly the League, whose actions and responses had been underpinned by this principle, had had limited success. As part of plans to compel states to take greater account of the League and its decisions, Cecil advocated the creation of a wider system of (primarily) European co-operation that would complement and reflect the work of that Geneva-based organisation. In October 1938, Cecil drew up a series of such proposals including measures by which all acts of aggression were international crimes punishable not merely by sanctions but by accountability to the international court in The Hague. Setting generic limits for the reduction and limitation of armaments, something that had been much discussed since 1918 but which should form the basis of any peace settlement after the second major conflict. Cecil also anticipated correctly that the Soviet Union would be one of the major powers that would arbitrate the peace making process between the democratic and fascist powers. He was also in favour of the creation of what he termed a "European Committee", the body similar to the European Union – an alliance between all of the powers of Europe fostered on economic co-operation, commonality of purpose and on the prevention of war.⁶⁴ Cecil anticipated that this body would either be a sub-committee of the new post-war League or would be a separate affiliated body.⁶⁵ Britain was to be at the heart of both organisations and should use them to regain some of her traditional reputation of fair play and tolerance that he thought that had been lost in the half decade preceding.⁶⁶

One of the main objectives of this chapter has been to raise the profile of Cecil's attitude towards key elements on European diplomacy during the 1930s. That is to suggest that there was more to his thinking than simply his advocacy of the work of the League of Nations, important though that dimension is to understanding his attitude towards foreign affairs. What emerge are the thoughts of a man that were considered and forcefully expressed. The volume of letters that he wrote to the various foreign secretaries of the period which survive in the main collection of his papers in the British Library provide testimony to that. But he was not and did not claim to be an original thinker on any of the topics discussed in this analysis of his views. Cecil's views on the late 1930s are important, however, because there were few people outside the Cabinet better informed about the priorities of British foreign policy and about the constraints in which it operated. He was also the president of an important lobbying group dedicated to the promotion of peaceful resolution of international disputes that was centred on the League of Nations Union. To many in Britain, especially in the middle and upper classes, Cecil was the popular voice of authority and commentary on foreign affairs. Cecil was a regular speaker at public meetings throughout the interwar period. He wrote regular letters to the editors of *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* and his articles on recent developments on international affairs appeared regularly in *The Fortnightly Review* and in *Headway*, the League of Nations Union's monthly magazine. However, most of all, this chapter provides important evidence to suggest that while some of Cecil's ideas about resolving international disputes were poorly conceived and at times parochial, he was essentially a pragmatist and a realist, recognising that by the mid 1930s the League of Nations, the body he had done so much to create during the closing months of the First World War, needed to reform if it was to offer a credible alternative to diplomacy by force.

Notes.

- ¹ See for example the comments made by the British Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey in Diary entry, 20 Dec. 1920, Hankey Papers, HNKY5/1; diary entry, 11 Nov. 1923, Hankey Papers, HNKY5/1, Hankey Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge. For a more contemporary comment, see B.J.C. McKercher, *The Second Baldwin Government and the United States 1924-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 77. For Cecil's career as a Conservative MP during the Edwardian era in this respect, see, *et al*, A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics 1903-1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
- ² A useful work on the immediate context of this chapter is P.W. Doerr, *British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1998.
- ³ F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times 1920-1946* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988) is the best most recent study in this now neglected area of historical investigation.
- ⁴ Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ⁵ R. Henig (ed.), *The League of Nations* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973); R. Henig, 'New Diplomacy and Old: Reassessment of British Conceptions of a League of Nations, 1918-1920' in M. Dockrill, J. Fisher (eds), *The Paris Peace Conference, 1919. Peace Without Victory?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001), pp. 157-174.

6 F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations. Its Life and Times, 1920-1946* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988).

7 The most important study that has a bearing on this present discussion is: D. Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-1936* (London: Temple Smith, 1975).

8 Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), pp. 254-263.

9 Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *All the Way* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 171.

10 A useful discussion can be found in D.S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 155-59. The relationship between British League policy and public opinion is one of the main themes of H. McCarthy, *The League of Nations Union and Democratic Politics in Britain, c 1919-1939* unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2008.

11 Cecil, *All the Way*, p. 205.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

14 Cecil, *A Great Experiment*, pp. 263-4.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Cecil to Salisbury, 8 May 1941, British Library Additional Manuscripts (hereinafter BL Add Mss) Cecil Papers, 51086.

17 Cecil to Hoare, 22 Aug. 1935, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

18 Cecil, *All the Way*, p. 208.

19 Cecil to Churchill, 22 Apr. 1936, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51073.

20 Cecil, *A Great Experiment*, p. 264.

21 Cecil to Bobbety Cecil, 19 Apr. 1937, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51087.

22 Memorandum on Oil Sanctions by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood for Viscount Cranborne, 14 Jan. 1936, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51087.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Cecil to Eden, 11 Jul. 1935, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Cecil to Hoare, 22 Aug. 1935, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

27 Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), p. 266.

28 Cecil to Hoare, 20 Sept. 1935, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Cecil to Eden, 14 Nov. 1935, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 Cecil to Eden, 6 Mar. 1936, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

34 Memorandum by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood on League Policy, 26 May 1936, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 See also Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), pp. 281-3.

42 Cecil to Cadogan, undated, c. Jan. 1938, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51089.

43 Cecil to Cadogan, 14 Jan. 1938, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51089.

44 Cecil to Cadogan, undated, *op.cit.*

45 See also Cecil, *All the Way*, pp. 210-211.

46 Cecil to Bobbety Cecil, 15 Feb. 1937, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51087.

47 Cecil to Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, 16 Jan. 1936, Cecil papers, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51136.

48 Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), p. 271.

49 Cecil to Salisbury, 25 Aug. 1941, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51086.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Cecil to Neville Chamberlain, 13 Jan. 1938, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 50187.

52 Neville Chamberlain to Cecil, 24 Jun. 1937, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51087. See also R. Self, *Neville Chamberlain. A Biography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.249-250

53 Compare Cecil, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), pp. 310-11.

54 Cecil *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), pp. 301-2.

55 Cecil to Halifax, 30 Dec.1937, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51084.

56 Cecil to Halifax, 27 Sept. 1938, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51084.

57 Cecil to Eden, 17 Mar. 1939, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

58 Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *A Great Experiment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), p. 300.

59 Cecil to Stamford, 29 Aug. 1939, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51139.

60 Cecil to Eden, 24 Mar. 1933, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51083.

61 Cecil to Stamford, 5 Dec. 1936, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51139.

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- ⁶² Lord Cecil: Note on World Settlement after the War, 16 Sept. 1939, Cecil papers, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51146.
- ⁶³ For Cecil's role in the creation of the League of Nations see, for example, G.W. Egerton, *Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations. Strategy, Politics and International Organisation, 1914-1919* (London: Scholar Press, 1979).
- ⁶⁴ Cecil to Bobbety Cecil, 11 Oct. 1939, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51087.
- ⁶⁵ Memorandum by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, c. 4 May 1940, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51139.
- ⁶⁶ See also Cecil to Salisbury, 25 Aug. 1941, BL Add Mss, Cecil Papers, 51086.