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Title	Lord Robert Cecil as an internationalist: A mental map
Authors	Johnson, G
Type	Book Section
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/19251/
Published Date	2010

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CHAPTER NINE

LORD ROBERT CECIL AS AN INTERNATIONALIST: A MENTAL MAP

GAYNOR JOHNSON

Lord Robert Cecil, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood had a career in public life spanning more than half a century. He was a man with an impeccable political pedigree, being the son of the great nineteenth century Conservative Prime Minister, the Third Marquess of Salisbury, and a descendant of Robert Cecil, favourite advisor to Elizabeth I. He was known also for his personal and political integrity and for his staunch independence of mind. Because of this, many found him frustrating and difficult to relate to. For example, between 1903-1913 he championed the Free Trade lobby and openly defied the wishes of his cousin and party leader, Arthur Balfour.¹ But it is for his involvement in and promotion of the League of Nations and international peace after the First World War that he is chiefly remembered. Most of his remarks on these subjects date from the interwar period. But Cecil also remained an active commentator on international affairs for more than fifteen years after the outbreak of the Second World War, his last comments being on the conduct of the Korean War when he was almost ninety. Cecil also wrote about many more issues concerning international affairs than the League and the pursuit of peace. He wrote about European unification; about the diplomatic dynamics of the Cold War and the atomic age as well as the establishment of the United Nations. The history of the events about which Cecil concerned himself has been covered by numerous historical studies and consequently, it is not the intention of this chapter to cover them in detail here. Instead, the aim is to create a framework from which to construct a mental map of Cecil's attitude towards international affairs from the end of the First World War until his final remarks on Cold War diplomacy; to ask whether there was a consistent pattern in his thinking and to trace the origins of that. From

this, two prevailing themes emerge. First, that it is an oversimplification to view Cecil as an idealist, with an unrealistic belief in the willingness of the international community to relinquish war. Instead, he adopted a more pragmatic approach. On foreign affairs, he did not adhere to a particular party political message and believed that the most appropriate response to an act of aggression or breach of treaty should be determined by the willingness of the parties concerned to submit to League arbitration. The second theme relates to his attitude towards the general conduct of diplomacy. Here it is evident that Cecil was one of the few British statesmen who believed that the new conference diplomacy of the post-war First World War era provided the optimum framework for the promotion of international peace and diplomatic engagement: an attitude that frequently brought him in to direct conflict with the British government.

It is commonplace now to claim a link between childhood experience and adult attitudes, but in the case of Cecil this connection had a particular resonance. Unusually for one of his social class, Cecil was not sent away to school at an early age, but was educated at home, in a hermetically sealed world created by his parents at the family home, Hatfield House, until he was eleven.² He learnt that for those with the means to do so, a career in public life should be altruistic and determined by the moral and ethical code revealed in the Bible and as preached through the High Anglican Church. The principles that all men are equal in the eyes of God and that it was a Christian duty to obey the Ten Commandments and to live a life of Christian charity played a particularly prominent role in shaping Cecil's *Weltanschauung*. When he went up to Eton, his strong sense of morality led him to take the side of the bullied against the bully.³ After Oxford, he trained as a barrister and it was from the late 1880s that he began to develop an interest in international law, although he never practised it. All of the Third Marquess' children were imbued with a strong awareness of their father's contribution to late nineteenth century politics. So much so that when the Third Marquess died in 1903, Cecil's desire to preserve his father's legacy fuelled his decision to abandon the Bar in 1906 and to enter the House of Commons as Conservative MP for East Marylebone.⁴ Cecil's role in Edwardian politics falls outside the remit of this discussion, but it is important to note that it was during his career as an internationalist that he believed that he was most in tune with his father's moral code. He wrote: "...I am convinced that, in advocating the creation of an international organisation for the maintenance of peace, I was carrying out the lessons which I had, consciously or unconsciously, received from my father".⁵ Like his father, Cecil was not snobbish about

the more parvenu members of the Conservative party, such as the Chamberlain clan, despite, in their case, seldom agreeing with their policies. Instead, he viewed himself as a “progressive Tory”.⁶ This he defined as being wedded neither to the view that change was “profoundly disagreeable” nor embracing “change for its own sake”. Instead he took the view that “If something seems wrong, I have always been anxious to put it right.”⁷

That said, this fluid approach to politics ultimately set Cecil somewhat apart from his father and brothers, who were staunch supporters of the Conservative party. To him, it was the policy that mattered, not which party was expounding it. His resignations over the disestablishment of the Welsh Church in 1919 and over Austen Chamberlain’s conduct of the Geneva Naval Conference in 1928 demonstrated that he was willing to place religious belief and personal principle over party loyalty. His decision to move to the Cross Benches of the House of Lords after 1935 was made because he disagreed with the Conservative-driven policy of appeasement of Europe’s fascist dictators. While Cecil never left the Conservative party, it was with the Liberals that he frequently felt that his natural sympathies lay. Before the First World War, he had contemplated joining their ranks because the Conservatives had sold their soul over Tariff Reform and the reform of the House of Lords.⁸ After 1916, the main stumbling block to joining the Liberals lay in the person of the party leader and Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, whom he later described as “quite as sordid as the worst Tories with class hatred and secularism...”.⁹ After the war, as Acting Foreign Secretary, he despised Lloyd George’s egotistic conduct of the peace negotiations and the subsequent conferences they spawned as well as his “eclipsing” of the Foreign Office.¹⁰ It is for this reason that during Lloyd George’s second administration, Cecil pressed for the former Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to challenge the Prime Minister for the leadership of the Liberal party. At no point did Cecil claim that if his preferred course of action was successful that he would join the Liberal party, but the fact that he lobbied Grey and Asquith, as well as other leading Liberals, such as Walter Runciman, suggests that he entertained the possibility.¹¹ It is unusual for a member of one political party to lobby for a change in the leadership of another for reasons which he thinks will be beneficial to them if he was not entertaining serious thoughts about transferring his political allegiance. Cecil also believed that the Liberals were also more likely to be responsive to the promotion of the work of the League of Nations.¹² The Conservative policy of “passive conservatism”, while it made sense in controlling the economy, was dangerous when applied to

foreign affairs, although the most likely reason why Cecil did not join the Liberals was because of family pressure.¹³ What was required was a vigorous, dynamic strategy to deal with the residual diplomatic and political issues stemming from the First World War that required Britain to take an unambiguous leading role. At the centre of it should be the League of Nations dominated by Britain.¹⁴ But it is important to consider whether Cecil would have been less willing to leave for prolonged periods in Geneva as head of the British delegation to the League had he felt that the political and ethical questions closest to his heart had a natural home in the political party he had been brought up to support.

It is reasonable to see the First World War as marking the most significant watershed in Cecil's career in public life. And it has frequently been claimed that it was the scale of that conflict and the enormous cost in human life that it demanded that were in the forefront in his mind when he became one of those instrumental in seeking permanent ways of ensuring that no such event would happen again through what became the League of Nations.¹⁵ Cecil was far from alone in his thinking, of course, and there were many who attempted to produce much deeper intellectual justifications for their points of view than he did. Nevertheless, Cecil did view the First World War as being uniquely "uncivilised". War had always demanded casualties, but there was something about man's new capability to wage war on an industrial scale that set that conflict apart and so gave the need to prevent further occurrences particular impetus. Hence the need to strive for what he termed "civilisation", that is a world in which Christian principles of tolerance would provide a framework of understanding that would help underpin the work of the League and thus a rejection of the use of war to resolve diplomatic conflicts.¹⁶ Cecil was no more specific than this in his definition, although his assumption that Britain would be in the vanguard of the pursuit of this goal and his subsequent statements on European political extremism make it clear that this "civilised" world would be one in which the British Empire would continue to exist and in which parliamentary democracy would prevail.

That said, Cecil never devoted much of his energies to the consideration of British imperial issues.¹⁷ Like many during the First World War, he believed that it was important to protect British interests in the Middle East against the ambitions of the French in that region.¹⁸ He was also not alone in considering that a second global conflict would cause irreparable damage to Britain's relations with her empire.¹⁹ But he seldom concerned himself with countries outside the North American and European arenas. This is significant because the British delegation to the League, which Cecil headed for much of the interwar period, also

represented the interests of many of Britain's colonial possessions. He clearly did not view the League as a venue for the promotion of British imperial harmony.

On European diplomatic issues, Cecil's opinions were much more transparent. He did not share the pro-French sympathies of the interwar Foreign Office. While he understood the French need for security, Cecil viewed the Entente Cordiale sceptically, observing that "if you try and deal with them from the Anglo-Saxon point of view you merely prepare for yourself disappointment...".²⁰ The stresses within the Entente Cordiale were caused not so much by a British failure to understand French security needs, but because after the First World War, Britain lacked the financial and industrial strength to take the lead in the regeneration of Europe.²¹ During the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-6, Cecil urged the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, to take a firm line with the French who he feared were likely to capitulate against Mussolini. The use of sanctions against the Duce was essential because if they were not deployed, there was a danger that the British would also appear to be adopting a weak line. Or, as Cecil put it, "...an ineffective friend is even more hated than a frank opponent, and France comes in to the first category".²² If the British diplomatic stick did not work in Paris, then the French should be made to see that "...what is sauce for the Abyssinian goose will be sauce for the French gander."²³

Likewise his attitude towards Germany was also somewhat at odds with the policy of reconciliation that was such a feature of British government policy during the interwar period. What the Germans required, he argued, was a firm hand, because "[T]hey are stupid people...and very backward in intellectual and spiritual civilisation. The reason they advocate force is because it is really almost the only way of dealing with their own people." A policy of "sweet reasonableness" was unlikely to yield results.²⁴ That said, even in matters concerning Germany, diplomatically there was little that could not be resolved if she remained in the League. He went against the wishes of the Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, during the League Council Crisis of 1926, openly promoting German admission to a permanent seat on that body, and despite his exasperation at Hitler's foreign policy exploits a decade later, never lost hope that a German delegation would once again return to Geneva.²⁵ However, by 1936, Cecil was on record as being "...one of those who believe that Germany is preparing for war." In what proved to be a prophetic anticipation of the policy of appeasement, he argued that Hitler "...intends to make a variety of demands which, she believes, may end in war and she is preparing herself for that contingency," because "it is

impossible to believe that Germany would have spent vast sums of money, would have carried an elaborate war propaganda, would have run the risk of hostility caused by the anxiety of her neighbours unless she has in mind the eventuality of war..."²⁶

Cecil's attitude towards the role of the United States in international diplomacy after 1919 was centred on American absence from the League of Nations.²⁷ He was not resentful of this, but convinced him that the Americans required special treatment, additional incentives to play a leading role in defending the post-war peace settlements and in the economic regeneration of Europe.²⁸ To this end, he made a number of visits to Washington, primarily as the guest of the Carnegie Foundation and undertook a lecture tour in 1923 of New England, visiting Boston and New York, to promote the work of the League. This tour also coincided with the realisation that a purely European solution to the reparations problem was unlikely to be reached. To this end, he told the American journalist, Frederick Dixon: "...Would it not be well...for the 2 sides of the Atlantic to take counsel together? To talk things over? And if that is to be done is it not better that such talk should be not just isolated efforts, but part of a regular scheme so that they shall produce some permanent effect, and not just run away into the sand?"²⁹

In other areas of international diplomacy, he recommended British tolerance of the American position. During the Geneva Disarmament Conference, Cecil recommended that the United States be given special leave to build cruisers carrying eight inch guns.³⁰ And during the negotiation of the Kellogg-Briand Pact the following year, when Austen Chamberlain raised concerns about American insistence on retaining the Monroe Doctrine, Cecil was concerned that the Foreign Secretary's obstinacy might result in the American government abandoning the pact negotiations.³¹ During the 1930s, Cecil like his fellow League champion, Philip Noel-Baker, believed that some capital could be made by persuading the United States to adopt an associate role inside the League. To this end, as late as 1938, he recommended that pressure be brought to bear on the Roosevelt administration to send a delegation to League "because the future of peace depends on it."³² By the spring of 1941, Cecil had concluded that American involvement in European affairs after the Second World War was essential because the events of the past half century had demonstrated that the European powers alone could not be trusted to make peace in Europe.³³

Cecil believed that the most effective way of preserving international peace was through the principles of collective security that underpinned the League Covenant. The Covenant was a contradiction: it was fixed yet

needed to be flexible. It provided a minimum rather than an absolute benchmark for determining that way in which states interacted with one another.³⁴ As such, it was important that the Covenant was allowed to evolve, to enable it to be responsive to the needs of the time. He supported the efforts to reform and update the Covenant instigated by Herriot and MacDonald in 1924 in what became the Geneva Protocol, although was not impressed by the outcome.³⁵ It had always been the intention when, for example, a joint Allied policy on disarmament had been formulated, that the Covenant would be amended to take this in to account because he favoured “leaving the Covenant as it is and doing whatever has to be done in order to secure disarmament by a separate instrument.”³⁶ But for the Covenant to work effectively, those charged with implementing it needed to do so fearlessly. When it became clear that the League would not be able to stem Japanese incursion in China after 1931, Cecil described the lukewarm response of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, to the crisis as “disastrous”.³⁷ As the 1930s progressed, his anger at the willingness of the British government to have truck with dictators who clearly intended to destabilise Europe, led him to move from the Conservative to the cross benches in the House of Lords in 1935, and to publish a number of direct attacks on that policy.³⁸

Cecil’s statements on appeasement date from two events during the interwar period. The first was the decision by the Baldwin government to reject the Geneva Protocol and to negotiate the security pact that became the Treaty of Locarno in 1925; with the second being the policy pursued by the Neville Chamberlain government between 1937 and 1939 towards the fascist dictators. Like many of his contemporaries during the 1920s, Cecil believed that the adoption of a policy of reconciliation towards Britain’s former enemies was a vital ingredient to obtaining long-term peace that there was little to be gained through the policy of retribution favoured by the French. However, for him, a vital initial ingredient to the success of such a policy was the confidence that no country had the means or the will to wage war. Without that commitment in place, no international agreement would be worth the paper on which it was written. By the mid 1920s, Cecil believed that the British government had moved away from the notion of collective security that was central to the ethos of the League. This was because, as he told the then Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, collective security had proved to be “...inconsistent with the spirit and essential requirements of the British Empire...”.³⁹ So, in effect, by 1925, Cecil believed that British commitment to the diplomatic principles that underpinned the League was at best shaky and at worst, that it had been totally abandoned. Instead, the British government

had decided to pursue “diplomacy by special agreement”, whereby tailor-made agreements were concluded with powers on a pragmatic basis as circumstances dictated.⁴⁰ That said, Cecil did not doubt the British commitment to maintaining international security and to achieving disarmament, he merely questioned the diplomatic tactics behind it. But, as he told MacDonald in 1930, it was also true that “...the vigour and success of the League depends on the attitude of this country.”⁴¹ And it was by their attitude towards the League that British politicians influential in foreign affairs during the 1930s were judged. He had more time for Eden’s insistence that the League could only stand up effectively to the fascist challenge through assistance from countries outside it, for example, the United States, than for Neville Chamberlain’s “sorrow over a moribund relation”.⁴² The latter’s “defeatism” that also encouraged other countries to reach humiliating rapprochements with Hitler and Mussolini was effectively a call to “abandon the League”.⁴³ Of Chamberlain’s agreement with Hitler in the spring of 1939, Cecil wrote that “The Munich settlement has quite definitely shown itself to be a Munich surrender...”.⁴⁴ He also put pressure on Halifax to persuade the Prime Minister of the error of his ways. “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.”⁴⁵

Much of the historical literature concerning the League of Nations has focussed on its failure to prevent the outbreak of war in 1939. It does not fall within the remit of this discussion to re-enter this debate. That said, in sketching Cecil’s mind map, it is important to examine his attitude towards the League in another context. That is, the League as an example of the new diplomacy. Zara Steiner has argued recently that it is debateable whether there was anything “new” about the way in which diplomacy was conducted in Europe after the First World War.⁴⁶ She is also not alone in claiming that the vogue for international conferences populated by as many expert advisors as diplomats that became synonymous with Lloyd George’s foreign policy seemed to have gone out of fashion by as early as 1922.⁴⁷ So from this, can we conclude that the new diplomacy, with the exception of a largely ineffectual League was defunct? To answer in the affirmative is to miss some essential points about the new diplomacy and, with that, about Cecil.

One of the essential purposes of the new diplomacy was to democratise the ways in which states interacted with each other and to promote democracy within those states. The conduct of post-war diplomacy should move away from an exclusive club of diplomats and officials and embrace

the insights offered by legal and financial experts. For Cecil, this process went a stage further. The war had done much to politicise most of British population and for Cecil, it was natural that the greater level of accountability the British people now expected of their governments should also be reflected in the way that international diplomacy was conducted. He set great store in the importance in the connection between the conduct of foreign policy and public opinion. When the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey attempted to defend the pre-war political and diplomatic system, Cecil noted that to him “such proceedings seem to be out of date and to ignore the growing interest of the electorate in the proper conduct of the most important function of government.”⁴⁸ Lloyd George also understood this point of course, and much has been written about, for example, his timing of the General Election of December 1918 and his use of press barons during the remainder of his second administration. But for Lloyd George and for all of the other premiers of the period, the need to take in to account public opinion and to be seen to be responding to it, also had a very clear and obvious practical rationale to it; the desire to secure re-election.

For Cecil the relationship between public opinion and the conduct of diplomacy had three aspects to it. First, a willingness to represent and to consult public opinion was a sign of political and diplomatic openness and transparency and as a check on the excesses of politicians and their advisers. Vitaly important if confidence was to be built in efforts to demonstrate that the international community had relinquished war and that the horrors of the trenches would never be repeated. Secondly, it stemmed from the belief that a foreign policy that resulted in war would require the people of a state potentially to lay down their lives in sacrifice for that cause. As he told Hankey, “...in many cases, particularly those which directly affect peace, the peoples are more and more taking strong views on the questions involved in international conference, and that fact that these views exist is an important feature in producing or preventing agreement.”⁴⁹ The governments of the world owed it to the people they represented to pursue a foreign policy that would avoid war, preferably banning it altogether. It was a humanitarian as well as a practical gesture. Thirdly, for Cecil, public opinion was synonymous with the idea of a public conscience. Public opinion would become a substitute for “military spirit”, although he applauded the patriotic spirit of those willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country, so long as it was a gesture linked to the glorification of war.⁵⁰ That while politicians pursued their own party political agendas; it was through public opinion that the “real” view of British attitudes towards foreign affairs and other matters was revealed.

This opinion was also likely to be consistent with his own broad set of life principles, Christian charity and humanitarianism and moral decency. This included fighting for the oppressed, standing up to bullying tactics and to having the strength of one's convictions. That said, more open diplomacy was not without its difficulties, and of these Cecil was aware. One of the most notable was the slow speed at which it was obliged to work. Full consultation of expert and public opinion after all took time. Cecil himself lamented during the Geneva Disarmament Conference that "...it adds greatly to the difficulty of negotiation if confidential documents shown by one party to the other immediately become the subject of public criticism and comment."⁵¹

Cecil never openly labelled himself an advocate of the new diplomacy, not least because of his personal antipathy towards Lloyd George. Nevertheless, he was quite clear that it was essential that a different means be found to the "secret diplomacy" that had been such an important cause of war in 1914. In 1933, at a time when critics of the League were at their most vocal over its handling of the Manchurian crisis, Cecil defended the new diplomacy in a series of letters to Hankey, who believed that international diplomacy should contain a mixture of "secret" and "new" diplomacy.⁵² For Cecil, secret diplomacy was not only dangerous, it was rooted too much in "the perpetuation of the methods of the Congress of Vienna."⁵³ Although it is important to note that Cecil's objections were not so much at the Congress itself, or indeed, to the century of general peace and stability that it provided Europe, but to the alliance system that it fostered.⁵⁴ The complex web of alliances, designed to create or protect spheres of influence forced Europe into a diplomatically rigid system of power blocs. Consequently, when it became in states' interest to wage war, it resulted in the industrial-scale carnage of the First World War and massive political dislocation that followed it.⁵⁵

A second and by far the most well-known feature of Cecil's advocacy of the new diplomacy was, of course, his enthusiasm for the work of the League of Nations. This provides the most concrete evidence of his belief that if a second global conflict was to be avoided then an alternative method of conducting diplomacy that renounced war, needed to be found. But as what type of entity did Cecil view the League? Historians have offered two alternatives. That it was a nineteenth century construct, brought into being by well-meaning statesmen wishing to break free of the traditions of the secret diplomacy but whose mindset prevented them from doing so effectively, thus condemning the League to a lack of success. Alternatively, there is the view that the League was too radical a diplomatic experiment; that it tried to bring about too dramatic a change to

the conduct of diplomacy at a time of great political instability. Not surprisingly, there is little in Cecil's thinking to corroborate the first point of view, with its emphasis on the misjudgement of the League's architects, but more evidence in support of the second. But even here, the evidence is not overwhelming, suggesting the need to engage in a wider more radical reappraisal of the British League mindset than has hitherto been made. It is important to remember that for Cecil, the League was, in his own words, a great experiment. And consequently, as with all such endeavours, that it should be in a constant process of review and update. Clearly the League failed to prevent the outbreak of a Second World War and a number of smaller conflicts between 1918 and 1939, but as far as Cecil was concerned, it was not usually the mechanism of the League that was at fault, it was because "Britain and France would not discharge the obligations to resist aggression which they had undertaken" under the League Covenant.⁵⁶ In his view, international diplomacy in the French and British capitals was conducted on a selfish basis of national self-interest rather than in the spirit of collective internationalism. Such an approach offered insufficient foundation to create the means of providing an alternative means for the conduct of diplomacy, work needed to be done to change the mindset of those charged with the conduct of diplomacy. On these latter points, Cecil was unclear as to how this transformation could be brought about. Although it was self-evident to him that such a process would take place – even if it took a second world war to force the point home – because eventually it would become obvious to all that resort to war was too costly. It is for this reason that Cecil believed that none of the British prime ministers and foreign secretaries of the interwar period were up to the job – they didn't understand that a form of diplomacy based on national self-interest would inevitably lead to war.⁵⁷ Consider his choice of language when he described Simon as "morally incapable" of pursuing an effective foreign policy and Neville Chamberlain as being "entirely un-teachable!"⁵⁸

For Cecil, a further way of defusing international tension and preventing war was by substituting what he termed "the principle of corporate life" for diplomatic and political international rivalry.⁵⁹ The Protestant work ethic so beloved of Victorian philanthropist, the emphasis in domestic politics and economics on self-improvement and individualism in the last century, the emphasis in science on evolution and a move away from the teachings of the Bible, had all contributed to the "military spirit". Much better, he told his brother in 1921, to move away from all of this through the promotion of what he termed "the better side of Tariff

Reform”, that is through some state regulation of the economy and the guarding of British commercial interests.

There ought to be a move towards “state socialism” and the development of a non-conformist conscience, although it is important to realise that as far as Cecil was concerned, the former was not commensurate with any left wing ideology, but referred to a process by which the government took an active (but not overwhelming) role in promoting the welfare and economic development of society.⁶⁰ Likewise, Cecil’s reference to non-conformity refers not to the disestablished church, but to a willingness to act according to conscience and not be bound by conventional wisdom, be that on political, religious or on social issues. He was clear that any heavy-handed attempt at establishing state control would stifle some of the individuality that he thought essential to encourage. Consequently, the way forward would be “...to take existing units, individuals, classes, nations and try to induce them freely to combine to discourage competition and self-aggrandisement as the dominant motive of civilised life and substitute co-operation and self-sacrifice.”⁶¹ In a letter to his eldest brother in 1941, Cecil expressed interest in the claim made by the left-wing historian and former diplomat, E.H. Carr, in his book *The Twenty Year Crisis*, that “nothing can save the world but communism or Christianity.”⁶² Cecil agreed with Carr’s contention that “no international machinery or national policy can last unless it is founded on an ideal”. However, if it was Carr’s intention to claim that if communism - a “great policy of social justice” - was a necessary precursor to an effective scheme for the preservation of peace, then Cecil believed that the end of the Second World War would simply produce “a new dose of those international platitudes which were rightly reprobated in the early days of the League.” What was essential was a practical policy that was based on a review of the reasons why the League had failed to prevent the Second World War before “the application of the necessary remedy”.⁶³ Thus if Carr was right, then the only alternative would be a return to Christian principles as a foundation for making peace. As it was, of course, post-war Europe, ended up adopting both communism and “Christianity” until 1989, after which the latter, if viewed partly as a synonym for democracy and the democratic powers, prevailed.

A further feature of Cecil’s enthusiasm for the new diplomacy was on its emphasis on the use of a more streamlined government infrastructure. During the Lloyd George coalition governments, although he was repelled by the Welshman’s conduct of foreign affairs, he admired the way in which he reduced the size of the Cabinet but increased the frequency of its meetings.⁶⁴ One reason why that streamlining was possible was because

Lloyd George was the head of a coalition government. That type of government had particular appeal to Cecil because, by its very nature, it meant that the party infighting became secondary to meeting the challenges of the national emergency: that it was the issues that drove policy and not dogma. He felt sufficiently strongly about this to make it the subject of the Sidney Ball Lecture *The Machinery of Government* that he delivered in October 1932.⁶⁵ In it, he reflected positively on the effectiveness of the War Cabinet after 1916, although he saw little purpose to its continuation after the Paris Peace Conference. Likewise, a year after the National Government had been formed in 1931, Cecil had urged Hankey to resurrect the administrative structure that had been used by Lloyd George. As things stood, the machinery of government was “waterlogged”, with the consequence that the Prime Minister had insufficient time to work out which were the most pressing issues and have time to respond to them. At the back of his mind was his belief that a premier ought to be able to give priority to foreign affairs at a time of severe international crisis. This he felt that the then Prime Minister, the socialist Ramsay MacDonald, leading a country in the grip of a severe recession, was unlikely to do of his own accord.⁶⁶

Contemplating the diplomatic shape of Europe after the Second World War, Cecil’s instincts were also collectivist. Believing that the war had as many social and economic causes as political and diplomatic, he advocated the creation of some form of European federal unit to minimise differences between states and thus reduce tension between them.⁶⁷ A week before the fall of France in May 1940, Cecil prepared a memorandum on the diplomatic shape of post-war Europe in which he endorsed the Briand Plan as a useful way forward, although he anticipated that any European confederation would be primarily for mutual defence – a forerunner more of NATO than of the European Union. But containing within it the framework for promoting the closer assimilation of interests, especially in commerce at a later date, once collective security had been assured. In which case the confederation would assume the attributes of a state in its own right, with its own parliament, legal system, currency and flag. This organisation would become, in effect, a European League of Nations super state that would work in conjunction with the larger Geneva-based organisation, providing an additional way of monitoring and diffusing tensions between European states. As the origins of both the world wars had lain in Europe, it was logical to assume that it would be from this part of the world that future conflicts were likely to emanate.⁶⁸ The League needed to be reformed first and the body that was to become the United Nations, given proper shape before any other organisation

could be contemplated. Just as Britain had played a leading role in the League and in the new post war version of the League, it was essential that she would do so in a European confederation.⁶⁹

However, on this issue Cecil anticipated problems.⁷⁰ He gave expression to them through a series of rhetorical questions posed in a series of letters to David Davies in September 1939: “Do you really think it conceivable that even this country...would accept a system by which she would be bound to carry out a majority of the European Constitution?”⁷¹ And so again we return to Cecil’s belief that the British government was incapable of setting aside national interests in favour of a more altruistic collectivist approach to diplomatic problem solving. Cecil was thus a type of eurosceptic, although not in the same way as the right wing of the Thatcherite Conservative party were to be half a century later. For the latter group, any excessive British subservience to the European Union was regarded as being undesirable and unnecessary. In Cecil’s case, he simply believed that the British government lacked the will to make a concrete commitment to a Europe-wide organisation dedicated to the pursuit of peace through collective security. However, what Cecil did have in common with later Conservative eurosceptics was that they believed that as much emphasis should be placed on relations with the United States and the maintenance of British colonial interests as on relations with Europe.⁷² By 1941, with the war having taken on a further ideological turn through Hitler’s decision to invade the Soviet Union, Cecil had become convinced that any proposal for a European confederation should come from the United States, and that as a consequence, the emerging organisation would be a “bastion for the protection of peace and democratic ideals”, a conflation of what became NATO and the European Union.⁷³ The development of other areas of potential integration should be reserved until Nazism had been defeated. But until such a time arose, debates should be had about the nature and operation of a European security confederation along with a consideration of the likely role of a resurgent League in post-war diplomacy. To this end, in June 1941, he endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, to agree to a set of meetings at Chatham House under the auspices of the Foreign Office to discuss how the League could be reconfigured.⁷⁴

In addition to high political and diplomatic issues, a significant aspect of the League’s work during the interwar period concerned the plight of refugees and other displaced groups. During the late 1930s and throughout the Second World War, he received hundreds of letters from individuals and organisations representing a plethora of interest groups –

everything from the Society for Free Albanians to organisations concerned with the hazard to public health caused by the effects of bombing on London's water supply. However, it is striking that Cecil was comparatively disinterested in these and in other humanitarian issues. There were only one or two exceptions. In September 1937, he visited the battlefields of Abyssinia on behalf of the League to assess the long-term effect of Italian nerve gas during the war two years earlier.⁷⁵ While he sat on the executive council of the League's High Commission for Refugees, his attitude towards one of the most significant issues of the period, the Nazi treatment of European Jewry, was frequently detached. In 1942, when the first indications of the horrors of the Holocaust were beginning to emerge in western Europe, and despite being conventionally pro-Zionist, Cecil wrote: "Everyone must sympathise mostly deeply with them; but they really are not acting fairly in trying to ignore the limits put on the number of immigrants into Palestine so long as that limit exists; and I think that there is very strong grounds for suspecting that a section of them quite deliberately tried to use the misfortunes of their unhappy co-religionists to break up the present arrangement in the hope of getting something better when that has been broken up."⁷⁶ At the same time, he shared the view of many that those guilty of war crimes, especially those perpetrated against Europe's Jews, should be prosecuted after the war.⁷⁷ Most requests for his personal intervention or endorsement were politely declined. The horrors of the Second World War and the decade that preceded it did not fire Cecil's humanitarian soul and conscience in the same way that the first war had done. This was partly because of advancing years. He celebrated his eightieth birthday in 1944 and was by then firmly of the view that the time had come to make way for the next generation in all things, including the work of the League.

In concluding this mind map of the man who was raised to the peerage in 1923 in recognition of his services to international affairs, it is important not to overstate his claim to being a maverick – either as a politician or as an internationalist. His views were similar to many of his generation - the debate about what Liberalism and Conservatism meant in the first half of the twentieth century; the revulsion at the carnage of the First World War and the desire to ensure that such an event never happened again. While the connection between Christian teaching and political and social responsibility were always very clear to Cecil, and indeed his family had a reputation for being particularly pious and sanctimonious in this respect, the Cecils were in fact part of a wider late Victorian aristocratic tradition of *noblesse oblige*. So then, what is uniquely important about Cecil's career as an internationalist, or, indeed

about Cecil the man? Through him we have the opportunity to study for an unbroken period of almost half a century, during an era of enormous political and diplomatic change, a set of largely consistent ideas about how international relations could and should be conducted. There are few of whom this was true. While Cecil never aspired to be Foreign Secretary, he did hold Cabinet rank on two occasions, he was the long-time head of the British delegation to the League of Nations and as such had direct access to those with greatest control over British foreign policy in Whitehall. That said, during this period, foreign secretaries and premiers with an interest in foreign affairs were seldom able to make their mark for more than five years before they or the party they served lost office. The Foreign Office veered unsteadily from a pro-French, to a pro-German, to a pro-French and American bias. Britain's status as a world power also profoundly changed. In Geneva, Cecil also brought this consistency of outlook to dealings with some of the most important and influential European statesmen and diplomats of the period. For this, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1937 and numerous other international accolades. Cecil's unconventional approach towards party allegiance also poses questions about the extent to which British party political agendas were helpful in addressing the enormous political, social, economic and diplomatic consequences of the global conflicts that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. The best description of his approach is the one he gave himself – an “independent Conservative”.⁷⁸

Notes

¹ See, for example, A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics 1903-1913* (Oxford, 1979); N. Blewett, 'Free Fooders, Bafourites, Wholehoggers, Factionalism within the Unionist Party 1906-1910' *Historical Journal*, xi, I (1968), pp. 95-124.

² Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *All the Way* (London, 1949), pp. 16-7.

³ Quoted in K. Rose, *The Later Cecil*s (London, 1975), p. 127; Cecil, *All the Way*, p. 13.

⁴ Cecil, *All the Way*, pp. 24-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cecil to Salisbury, 18 May 1921, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood Papers, British Library Additional Manuscripts (hereinafter referred to as BL Add Mss) 51085.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ R. Warman, 'The Erosion of Foreign Office Influence in the Making of Foreign Policy, 1916-1918', *Historical Journal*, 15, (1), 1972; A. Sharp, 'The Foreign Office in Eclipse, 1919-1922', *History*, 61, (2), 1976; G. Johnson, 'Curzon, Lloyd

George and the Control of British Foreign Policy, 1919-1922: A Reassessment', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 11, 3 (2000), pp. 49-71..

¹¹ Cecil to Salisbury, 18 May 1921, BL Add Mss 51085.

¹² Cecil, *All the Way*, p. 74.

¹³ Cecil to Salisbury, 18 May 1921, BL Add Mss 51085.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See most histories of the League, for example, F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (Oxford, 1969); F.S. Northedge, *A History of the League of Nations* (Leicester, 1989). See also Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford, 2005), p. 353.

¹⁶ Open letter from Viscount Cecil of Chelwood to Lord Stamfordham, 28 Oct. 1935, BL Add Mss 51139.

¹⁷ Undated Note by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood on World Settlement after the War, BL Add Mss 51084.

¹⁸ Cecil to Sykes, 7 Sept. 1918, BL Add Mss 51094.

¹⁹ Cecil to Churchill, 26 Jul. 1927, BL Add Mss 51073.

²⁰ Cecil to Reading, 1 Sept. 1931, BL Add Mss 51082.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cecil to Eden, 11 Nov. 1935, BL Add Mss 51083.

²³ Cecil to Eden, 6 Mar. 1935, BL Add Mss 51083.

²⁴ Cecil to Simon, 29 Jan. 1935, BL Add Mss 51082.

²⁵ Notes by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, 7 Sept. 1926, BL Add Mss 51079.

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

²⁷ Cecil to Dixon, c. Feb. 1923, BL Add Mss 51092.

²⁸ Cecil to Reading, 1 Sept. 1931, BL Add Mss 51082.

²⁹ Cecil to Dixon, 18 Jan. 1923, BL Add Mss 51092.

³⁰ Cecil to Salisbury, 31 July 1927, BL Add Mss 51086.

³¹ Cecil to Grey, 1 Aug. 1928, BL Add Mss 51073.

³² Cecil to Smuts, 7 Nov. 1938, BL Add Mss 51076.

³³ Cecil to Noel Buxton, 7 May 1941, BL Add Mss 51113.

³⁴ Cecil to Hankey, 14 Jan. 1925, BL Add Mss 51087.

³⁵ Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, *The Great Experiment* (London, 1941), p. 59.

³⁶ Cecil to Hankey, 14 Jan. 1925, BL Add Mss 51087.

³⁷ Cecil to Victor Wellesley, 10 Aug. 1934, BL Add Mss 51083.

³⁸ Cecil, *All the Way*, p. 205.

³⁹ Cecil to Austen Chamberlain, 7 Sept. 1925, BL Add Mss 51078.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Cecil to MacDonald, 18 Aug. 1930, BL Add Mss 51081.

⁴² Cecil to Halifax, 30 Dec. 1937, BL Add Mss 51084.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Cecil to Eden, 17 Mar. 1939, BL Add Mss 51083.

⁴⁵ Cecil to Halifax, 27 Sept. 1938, BL Add Mss 51084.

⁴⁶ Steiner, *The Lights that Failed*, p. 612.

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- ⁴⁷ For example, K.O. Morgan: *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979), 140-3.
- ⁴⁸ Cecil to Hankey, 28 Oct. 1933, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁴⁹ Cecil to Hankey, 3 Nov.1933, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵⁰ Cecil to Hankey, 24 Aug.1925, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵¹ Cecil to Boncour, 21 Mar.1927, BL Add Mss 51099.
- ⁵² Hankey to Cecil, 27 Oct.1933, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵³ Cecil to Hankey, 28 Oct.1933, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵⁴ See also Cecil to Lord Stamfordham, 28 Oct.1935, BL Add Mss 51139.
- ⁵⁵ Cecil to Hankey, 28 Oct.1933, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵⁶ Cecil to David Davies, 8 Sept.1941, BL Add Mss 51138.
- ⁵⁷ Cecil to Margot Asquith, 1 Feb.1944, BL Add Mss 51073.
- ⁵⁸ Cecil to Irwin, 27 Mar.1933, BL Add Mss 51084; Cecil to Bobbety Cecil, 27 Sept. 1938, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁵⁹ Cecil to Salisbury, 18 May 1921, BL Add Mss 51085.
- ⁶⁰ That said, Cecil did predict that in the near future, business would have to choose between 'state control' and 'state ownership', Cecil to Thomas Lamont, 31 Jan.1938, BL Add Mss 51144.
- ⁶¹ Cecil to Salisbury, 18 May 1921, BL Add Mss 51085.
- ⁶² Cecil to Salisbury, 25 Aug. 1941, BL Add Mss 51086.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ See *inter alia*, E.Goldstein, *Winning the Peace. British Diplomatic Strategy, Peace Planning, and the Paris Peace Conference, 1916-1920* (Oxford, 1991).
- ⁶⁵ See also Hankey to Cecil, 5 Oct.1932, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁶⁶ Cecil to Hankey, 15 Apr. 1932, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁶⁷ Cecil to Salisbury, 25 Aug.1941, BL Add Mss 51086.
- ⁶⁸ Memorandum by Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, c. 4 May 1940, BL Add Mss 51139.
- ⁶⁹ Cecil to David Davies, 13 Sept.1939, BL Add Mss 51138.
- ⁷⁰ Cecil to Smuts, 24 Jul. 1940, BL Add Mss 51076.
- ⁷¹ Cecil to David Davies, 20 Sept.1939, BL Add Mss 51138.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Cecil to David Davies, 8 Sept.1941, BL Add Mss 51138.
- ⁷⁴ Cecil to Eden, 16 Jun. 1941, BL Add Mss 51083. The London International Assembly, the League of Nations in all but name, met on average once a month from Sept.1941onwards and was one of the first international organisations to consider the punishment of war criminals.
- ⁷⁵ Cecil to Neville Chamberlain, 4 Sept.1937, BL Add Mss 51087.
- ⁷⁶ Cecil to David Davies, 2 Apr. 1942, BL Add Mss 51138.
- ⁷⁷ Cecil to Lytton, 24 Apr. 1941, BL Add Mss 51139.
- ⁷⁸ Cited in M. Ceadel, 'Cecil, Edgar Algernon Robert Gascoyne- [Lord Robert Cecil], Viscount Cecil of Chelwood (1864-1958)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).