

Time and the Pattern of History

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Time and the Pattern of History

By FRANCIS NEILSON

AMERICAN STUDENTS who are now engaged upon an investigation of the causes of war will find much to enlighten them in the reviews and controversies that appear from week to week in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Although means of communication have been speeded up and distances shortened by great inventions, in some respects the capitals of Europe are just as far away as they were before the radio was installed. Comparing the information found by the English reader in his journals with that we are accustomed to receive, it is no exaggeration to say our cousins are much better served than we are. But it is only occasionally that a British writer deals with the problems of war in an attempt to take a comprehensive view of the "instrumentalities" of the chancelleries.

Whether or not it be timidity on their part, a fear of exposing the clay feet of their idols, is hard to say. Still, no one seems inclined to come down to brass tacks and deal with the matter impartially. As far as our researches go, the writers who have dealt with the proceedings in the embassies, from the rise of Hitler to the summer of 1938, reveal a lamentable ignorance of the documents, the biographies and the memoirs of the British, French, German and Italian statesmen and soldiers.

"Rumors" in Diplomatic Documents

ONE OF THE MOST DISCOURAGING PROBLEMS encountered by the historian of the contemporary scene is how to deal with the legendary stories woven about persons and events during times of crisis. He may suspect that 95 per cent of the government-controlled propaganda is doctored and contains few facts. He may decide at the time it is broadcasted that the chief politicians know the information is not true. The "reliable informant" who causes a diplomatist to send a hair-raising dispatch to his chief is as necessary for an embassy as a bullet for a gun. The secret information gathered by men, whose names are seldom mentioned, fills the pages of telegrams, letters, and telephonic communications recorded in thick tomes containing documents that passed between the foreign offices of the powers. What ambassadors would do without the rumor-dealers is hard to tell, because most of their waking hours seem to be occupied with listening to yarns that would make Munchausen blush enviously. If anyone

doubt this, all he has to do is to read the latest volume of *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*.¹

It would be something of a task for a patient student to count the rumors described, often in long dispatches, which crowd the pages of this work. All are secret and come from a "reliable source." But when one has expended an hour or so on the business of searching the documents for verification of the information, and finds no record of its having substance, he cannot help thinking his time might have been better spent in chasing a spectral hare with imaginary beagles. Rumors are the *ignis fatuus* of diplomatic nightmares.

Those who are interested in the subject of how wars are made might learn from this volume some of the methods practiced by foreign offices and their ambassadors, which tend to promote conflicts. To read the German dispatches side by side with the British is an onerous task for the most indefatigable research worker. But it is one that should be undertaken for a proper understanding of each crisis, and how the rumors were regarded by the embassies. Moreover, by doing this, the student gains a broader view of the field of diplomatic strategy and not merely a partial glimpse of it.

Britain's Pledge to Poland

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS the historian must deal with is the reason why, in March, 1939, Neville Chamberlain, with the consent of Daladier, gave the pledge of aid to Poland. It is my opinion that it was given to appease the interventionists in Parliament. In reading the debates that took place in the winter and early days of the spring of 1938-39, I can come to no other conclusion than that the recalcitrant interventionists harried Chamberlain and wrecked his policy. To read the protests of Churchill, Duff Cooper, Eden, Attlee, Morrison and Greenwood, as they are found in the debates, is enough to convince me that nothing but a belligerent gesture would satisfy these men.

After Duff Cooper resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty in October, 1938, the tension quickened, and the position of Chamberlain was weakened. After Munich, Mr. Churchill in the debate of October 5, 1938, said to the House: "I will, therefore, begin by saying the most unpopular and most unwelcome thing. I will begin by saying what everybody would like to ignore or forget, but which must nevertheless be stated."

He denounced the action of the Prime Minister and, in doing so, left no doubt in any member's mind as to where he stood in the controversy.

¹ E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, eds., *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, third series, vol. v, London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952.

Many of the articles that have appeared in *Écrits de Paris* since the war terminated reveal an extraordinary protest against British policy, as it developed during the winter of 1938–39. Some of the writers for this magazine of enlightenment have denounced the giving of the pledge to Poland and held up to scorn the men who were responsible for forcing it from Chamberlain. For when it was announced, there was no possible way of getting military support to that unfortunate country in case Germany invaded her, and no one knew that better than the interventionists in the British Parliament. It has been condemned as a disastrous bluff, a shameful trick, and a surrender to malcontents, who could not envisage the near future.

Some Sinister Figures

THERE, ARE, HOWEVER, LURKING in the background certain sinister figures in the foreign offices of European capitals, whose names seldom appear in the documents. Some of them are diplomatists, permanent officials, diplomatic counsellors and military attachés. We now know something of the work that was done by Vansittart when he was at Downing Street. We also know the views of Cesar Campinchi, the French naval minister who was the right-hand man of Daladier in his cabinet. The work of von Ribbentrop has been exposed; and Léon Degrelle, in his astonishing book, *La Cobue de 1940*, presents a portrait of Spaak, the Belgian politician, that is most illuminating.

Then there was Robert Coulondre, the French Ambassador at Berlin, who in the suave tones of an irenic European, gave the impression he was working for a harmonious Utopia when he was maneuvering behind the scenes with stratagems that made war a certainty.

In considering the influence of Vansittart when he was at the Foreign Office, we may be sure that time will reveal the nature of his work. In some respects, he reminds me very much of Eyre Crowe, who was with Sir Arthur Nicolson at the Foreign Office before the First World War. Lord Ponsonby told me that a man of such sinister prejudice should never have been in a position to direct the minds of cabinet ministers on foreign affairs.

Now Vansittart was Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs for the years 1930–38. Afterwards he was Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the Foreign Secretary from 1938–41. For the purpose of estimating his worthiness for such positions it is only necessary to read his two books, *Black Record* and *Lessons of My Life*. How such a man could have been chosen confounds those who know him. Many of the leading English soldiers hold him responsible for bringing the war about.

When the historian, in his search for the causes of wars, delves more deeply than the documents record, he will find there were people behind the scenes in all the foreign offices, both in Europe and here, who fostered the misunderstandings and hate that made peace impossible. It is to be hoped that another Professor H. C. Peterson will investigate this awful morass of intrigue and give us another volume like *Propaganda for War*.

Important Diplomatic Revelations

A BOOK THAT REVEALS the chaotic conditions which prevailed at the Foreign Office in London is *Diplomatic Twilight*, by Sir Walford Selby, who was British Ambassador at Vienna. He was there for some time just before World War II began and was in a somewhat unique position to learn the Nazi intentions concerning the *Anschluss*. This book has caused much controversy in England, for Sir Walford accuses the Foreign Office of ignoring important information he sent; of filing documents without comment; and of using other means than the regular channels of diplomacy for its strategy. Much of the information contained in the book has been known for some years to men of affairs, who have protested against the strange innovations initiated at Downing Street by Vansittart and Halifax. It was unfortunate that Great Britain had two such German-haters in control when some tact and farseeing consideration were essential to prevent what Churchill has called "an unnecessary war."

What disturbs many of the English critics of British policy is the lamentable lack of desire to go deeply into the diplomacy of Great Britain and France since Hitler came to power in 1933. I know of no work that has been published by our historians in the United States nor, indeed, any work by an academic historian in England, which deals with the events recorded by Léon Degrelle in his book, *La Cobue de 1940*. The revelations exposed in his chapter, "La Neutralité Vaincue," are startling, to put it mildly. He tells the story of the visit of Halifax to Hitler at Obersalzberg, on November 19, 1937. They discussed the return of the German colonies to Germany.

Following this interview, Sir Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador at Berlin, was charged with putting an official proposition before Hitler concerning the colonial matter, on March 3, 1938. This was of a confidential character. It was not to be communicated to the French; for stronger reasons the Belgians were not to know of it; nor were the Portuguese or the Italians to be informed. The proposals asked Germany to abandon her claim to her former colonies, and as a compensation for renouncing it, Germany was to be given a zone of influence in Africa.

Here is the text as taken from Degrelle's book:

Cette proposition visait tout crûment à obtenir l'abandon par le Reich de ses revendications sur son empire colonial, dont la Grande-Bretagne s'était adjugé la meilleure part, et à compenser cette renonciation par l'attribution à l'Allemagne d'une zone d'influence sur une "partie de l'Afrique," "un territoire à peu près égal au bassin du Congo," disait la note remise par Sir Neville Henderson. "Dans la région de l'Afrique dont il a été question, il serait procédé à un nouveau partage des colonies. Lors de ce nouveau partage, l'Allemagne ne serait pas oubliée et elle aurait sous sa souveraineté un territoire colonial."

Le compte rendu officiel de cette entrevue établit sans doute possible que l'offre anglaise concernait très exactement le Congo belge et l'Angola. C'est donc aux dépens de la Belgique et du Portugal qu'eût été rétablie l'influence du Reich en Afrique.²

The consequences of this had a far-reaching effect, for when the King of the Belgians, shortly before the war, asked Great Britain and France to guarantee the integrity of Belgium and her colonies, Downing Street balked and reserved a decision, although her ally France had readily given the Belgians a promise to respect their kingdom and its colonies.

All notions so far published about allied diplomatic and military action for several months before the war began, that is to say, after Neville Chamberlain gave the pledge to support Poland, must be ruthlessly revised if the pattern of history is to take an intelligible shape and be understood by the research workers of the future.

We are still in the hands of several men who were in office during the past war, and no matter what their partisans say about them, it is not unfair to remark that they were an incompetent lot of politicians. They went out to "smash" Hitler and ruined their countries. Comparing conditions today with those of the powers in the winter of 1938-39, we may well ask ourselves what we have gained by destroying one dictator and raising another, who has extended his domain as far as Berlin and keeps the whole world in turmoil.

²"This proposal dealt bluntly with procuring the abandonment by the Reich of its claims on its colonial empire, of which Great Britain had been awarded the best part, and to compensate for this renunciation by granting to Germany a zone of influence in a 'part of Africa,' 'a territory nearly equal to the basin of the Congo,' said the note sent by Sir Neville Henderson. 'In the region of Africa about which there has been a question, they will examine a new division of the colonies. At the time of this new division, Germany will not be forgotten and she will have under her sovereignty a colonial territory.'

"The officially-rendered account of this interview established without possible doubt that the English offer concerned very accurately the Belgian Congo and Angola. It is therefore at the expense of Belgium and of Portugal that the influence of the Reich in Africa might be re-established." (My translation. Léon Degrelle, *La Cobue de 1940*, Lausanne, 1950, p. 71.)

False and Misleading Press Releases

WHEN THE PROFESSOR PETERSON of the future undertakes the work of revealing the role played by the press of all countries in fomenting misunderstanding and hate, he will find evidence that the embassies served the journalists false information for their columns. We know to what extent this was carried on in Berlin; but no one has yet dealt with the matter so far as Paris and London are concerned. It will be interesting to learn how the journals of London and Paris, to say nothing of those in this country, received similar hints of what was taking place in rival embassies. Paris newspapers reflected the gossip circulated in London; and vice versa, London reflected the canards manufactured by the Quai d'Orsay.

To what extent were the permanent secretaries involved in this sinister business? I believe when a thorough research is made, it will be found that the press of America and Europe waged a campaign of lies and hate which, by comparison, will dwarf anything that was done before the First World War. Indeed, I feel sure that the revelations contained in Irene Cooper Willis' book, *England's Holy War*, will seem amateurish by comparison.

One striking example of what wild rumor can do will be found in Dispatch No. 20 of *Documents on British Foreign Policy* (Third Series, Vol. IV, 1951, p. 18). In a telegram from Berlin, dated January 26, 1939, Lord Halifax learned that Mr. Conwell-Evans communicated confidentially to Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes that "he has it from Party sources, which have hitherto never failed him, that Herr Hitler intends in the month of March, in the event of Italy not receiving satisfaction from France, to break out westwards and to turn the Maginot Line through the Low Countries and through Switzerland."

No such attempt was made, but eight months later Hitler turned his forces on Poland. Now if such a level-headed person as Conwell-Evans could be hoodwinked in this manner, it is not difficult for any shrewd student of diplomatic methods to imagine how easily men in the chancelleries are made victims of the rumor-spreading warmongers.

The Search Warrant of Time

TIME CARRIES not only an avenging sword but also a search warrant, which entitles historians without prejudice to discover the virtues and defects of public servants and reveal them impartially to posterity. Such a task is one of the most difficult for the historian to undertake, for the public life and action of a servant of the State have, in so many cases, been clouded by the reports of adherents and opponents of his period, that a process of

winnowing the chaff of adulation and censure is necessary before the character examined can be presented in true perspective.

No sensible student imagines for a moment that a government will go to Canossa in sackcloth and ashes and confess its faults. There is no record of a statesman or a diplomatist making a public confession of his political sins. Indeed, the propaganda that has been necessary to enable a government to prosecute its ends precludes the possibility of such an act of retribution. We know this from Thucydides and Polybius, and as for the warring governments of the past two hundred years, each and every one has defended itself by a propaganda that has been shown in most cases to be the veriest nonsense.

Paris has been the nursery of rumors and scares since the days of Delcassé and Poincaré. There, plots incubate and thrive from the weirdest notions reckless gossips can imagine.

So the record of the crimes of the State since the rise of Napoleon—to go no farther back—has been presented by men who have been partisans and whose views have been colored by the propaganda of the time. This unfortunate libel upon Clio's realm prompted Schopenhauer to say: "The Muse of History is as permeated with lies as a street whore with syphilis."

When historians of academic rank brief themselves to state the case of their governments, the reader who desires to know what really took place should fortify himself at once with a healthy skepticism. For he, too, has been a victim of propaganda during the struggle, and he should be able to detect to what extent the writer of the work he is reading has been affected by the slogans of the crisis. Yet, it must be conceded that the millions hug their delusions and question the loyalty of those who would disturb them. The mass learns nothing from past experience and, although Clio is not always the creature depicted by Schopenhauer, succeeding generations have other things to distress the mind besides records of what took place in their grandsires' days.

Only a small number of curious students are interested in history which refutes the findings of the writers who have swayed public opinion during and soon after a war. Of what use to European and American people were the findings of the writers who, after the First World War, exposed the mockery of the propaganda of the belligerent States and revealed the tricks by which the people had been urged to fight for ideals their statesmen must have known were beyond the power of governments to initiate? Yet, time's pattern of history indicates clearly that there is a sameness of propaganda and subterfuge of ideal in all wars since Napoleon left Toulon.

Fox's Denunciation in 1796

MAY WE NOT LEARN, when we search the records of the past, something to our advantage from the denunciation of Charles Fox's motion on the conduct of the war with France, delivered in the House of Commons on May 10, 1796? Before I set out this picture of the condition of Europe over 150 years ago, it would be well to let the mind linger for a moment upon what is taking place as a result of the recent war in countries that are now dependent upon our largesse. Fox, in winding up his speech which took nearly four hours to deliver, said:

We have, Sir, completely failed in all the objects for which the war was commenced. Holland is lost, the King of France exiled, and the aggrandisement and power of the French republic is more alarming than ever. Of our allies, the King of Prussia, who was the first to treat with the French, has sustained the least injury; the King of Spain has been forced to make peace in order to save his dominions; and the King of Sardinia is now in the same predicament, compelled, for his own safety, to accept such terms as the directory may choose to grant. The fate of this monarch, whose good faith was so loudly extolled in a late debate, who was termed the very pattern of fidelity, most forcibly and unequivocally demonstrates that in proportion as every ally of this country, in the present contest, has been a pattern of fidelity, he has also been an example of misfortune. The Empress of Russia has indeed suffered nothing. It is impossible not to see that her only object in the alliance was to plunder Poland, in which she has been collaterally supported by England. This is a mortal blow to another professed object of the war, the balance of power. Will any man believe that the avowed object of the partition, the destruction of Jacobinism in Poland, was the real cause of dividing that unfortunate country? And will any man contend that England and France united might not have prevented that transaction, and by that means preserved the balance of power in Europe? But Poland was abandoned to its fate, suffered to be sacrificed, annihilated, destroyed, for the sake of those absurd and vicious principles which govern the policy of ministers, and which have involved us in the present war. These principles must now be deserted. If the country is to be saved, we must retrace our steps; that is the only course which presents any hope of an effectual cure for the evil. All other remedies are mere palliatives, which must rather prove mischievous than useful. What I recommend, therefore, is a complete change of system.³

I presume there was not a statesman in Europe who dreamed for a moment in the winter of 1938-39 that it was worth while considering the history of Russia and Poland during the Napoleonic period. Had Chamberlain or Hitler, Daladier or Beck taken the trouble to read the debates that took place in the Commons in the days of Pitt and Fox, they might

³ Charles James Fox, *Speeches During the French Revolutionary War Period*, London, J. M. Dent, pp. 354-5.

have learned a lesson to be considered with grave caution. Unfortunately for all the powers, in the spring of 1939, there was not a Fox in any legislature in Europe. Suppose somebody had risen in the House of Commons in April of that year, and had drawn the attention of the House to a postcard circulated in Poland, which pictured an extension of Polish territory as far west as the eastern suburbs of Berlin and Dresden and which included the Czech country. The British pledge to Poland, given in March, was held responsible for this imperialistic design of the Polish chauvinists.

Suppose it had been possible for a Fox to rise in the French Chamber of Deputies and show the map published by the Posen newspaper, *Dziennik Poznanski*, which not only took in all Germany and a great part of Austria, but went as far west as the Weser, impinging on the eastern frontiers of Holland, Belgium, and France. What would have happened when the members of the legislatures realized the effect that the pledge to Poland had had upon the bellicose Poles? He would be a sanguine person who would think the governments of France and England would withdraw the pledge and consider neutrality the best policy for all. Had anyone predicted in the parliaments of London and Paris that the pledge might mean the absorption of Poland and the Baltic States by Russia and that the Soviet Government would reach as far west in Europe as Berlin, his statement would have been received with jeers.

Had any courageous person suggested that it would be necessary, when the war was over, to organize armies of the Western States, including that part of Germany not occupied by Russia, to stop the aggression of the Soviet republics, he would have been looked upon as a madman.

The Need for Historical Thoroughness

HOW STRANGE IT IS that our professional historians in their works seldom refer to the chaos that has been created by the policies of the so-called democracies. I have reviewed probably ten or a dozen of their books since the close of the war, and there is scarcely one that I can remember, which dares to begin at the beginning, say from the time that Hitler took power in Germany and Roosevelt became President of the United States. One and all take the datum line of the absorption of Czechoslovakia and the Austrian *Anschluss*. Are they afraid the thoughtless will denounce them as defenders of Hitler? Do they feel that their positions may be jeopardized if they write history, all the history that may be learned not only from all the documents that exist, but from other sources whose authenticity can be tested and which deal with the problems the officials of the chancelleries knew little or nothing about?

I have not seen in any history that has been published so far by the professionals an intelligent review of *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-39*, Third Series, Volume V. Probably the reason why this has not been done is that the French documents were destroyed (Mr. Churchill himself witnessed the fire in the garden of the Quai d'Orsay), and no one has thought it worth while to compare the British documents with those of the German Foreign Office. These latter were published in a large volume and issued in New York in 1940. Of course, I know that it is a grievous political sin to place the slightest reliance upon anything German since the Kaiser discharged Bismarck; and to have the audacity to quote even a British dispatch in German documents, referring to a speech of Chamberlain in Parliament during the time of Hitler, is a historical crime.

Now for any man who wishes to learn how the condition that exists in Europe has been brought about, it is necessary for him to muster in his soul the courage of a David meeting a Goliath, who is clad in the almost invulnerable armor of the propaganda of the State. It took me at least three months to check the *Documents on British Foreign Policy* in Vol. III issued by His Majesty's Stationery Office. Perhaps this is underestimating the length of time I devoted to the task.

As I glance now at the markings in this volume and remember the notes I took, I realize the stupendous job the professional historian will have to undertake when he sets to work to make intelligible to the man of the future the meanderings of the shortsighted statesmen and the stupidities of the diplomatists. I could quote dispatch after dispatch from the British documents, which are unbelievably childish. For example, the rumor of a German descent upon Poland and the Low Countries was spread from Paris and London to Washington, and it was used by Roosevelt to give support to the statements he made in his speech to Congress in January 4, 1939.

Dispatch No. 57, in the British Documents, is from the British Minister at the Hague, to Viscount Halifax. It is dated January 30, 1939 and refers to the rumor about the invasion of Holland. It states that the "Dutch Military Attaché in Paris has been informed by French Deuxième Bureau that they had tracked down current rumors to a German Marxist group in London, who were deliberately disseminating them with the object of creating a western bloc against Germany."⁴

This is only one of the many examples that harassed the bewildered minds of the diplomatists.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, vol. iv, pp. 52-3.

The part played by Josef Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, is clearly revealed in these enormous volumes of documents. And when his *pour-parlers* with British officials are checked against those he had with the Germans, he is revealed as a trickster who laid the trap for his own destruction. Small wonder that we learn from the documents no one trusted him, and yet they did everything to give him the opportunity to cause the downfall of his State.

To many of us who remember the indefatigable work done by the Union of Democratic Control during and after the First World War, time has seemed to move slowly since the peace of Potsdam, when Russia took root in Berlin. But it has moved, and perhaps the reason for its halting progress is that the events of the war have been more far-reaching and more complicated than were those of the War of 1914–18. This means that the job of the unprejudiced student increases in its intricacy and gravity. Still, those of us who have this crucial matter at heart will plod on as long as we have the strength to give to the work.

Port Washington, New York

The Gains in Owner-Operated Farms

IN THE UNITED STATES today, 75 per cent of the 5.4 million farms are now owner-operated. Gains since 1930 in the percentage of owner-operated farms, according to an analysis by the Department of Agriculture of statistics collected in the 1950 Census of Agriculture, wiped out a fifty-year decline in the proportion of farms owned by those who work them.

If the downward trend in this percentage from 1880 to 1930 had continued, it is estimated, there would now be only about 55 per cent of the farms in the owner-operated category. Happily, the trend was dramatically reversed. The percentage of farms operated by tenants declined from 42 per cent in 1930 to 27 per cent in 1940 and to about 25 per cent in 1952.

Farm ownership by farm operators has tended to decline in depression and to rise in prosperity. The sharp uptrend since 1932 is associated with the recovery programs of the Nineteen Thirties and with the growth of mechanization and of technological advance in agriculture practice. The improved farm income made possible the adoption of practices which led to higher farm productivity, the gains of which accrued to the operators. The net result was that there was more private ownership and less absentee ownership.