The Historical Journal, 53, 4 (2010), pp. 983–1014 © Cambridge University Press 2010
doi:10.1017/S0018246X10000270

SIR HORACE WILSON AND APPEASEMENT*

G. C. PEDEN
University of Stirling

ABSTRACT. *Sir Horace Wilson was Neville Chamberlain's confidential adviser while the latter was prime minister. The article addresses three questions. First, what was Wilson's role in Whitehall in connection with rearmament and foreign policy? Second, did he diminish the influence of the Foreign Office? Third, what contribution does his defence of appeasement make to understanding of a subject that continues to divide historians? The article concludes that Wilson played an important role in enabling Chamberlain to pursue his foreign policy goals. However, when there was outright disagreement between Wilson and the Foreign Office, it was the Foreign Office view that prevailed. Finally, the evidence of Wilson's words and actions, both in 1937–9 and later, broadly supports R. A. C. Parker's post-revisionist interpretation of appeasement, particularly as regards Munich, but Wilson was a good deal firmer in 1939 about Britain's will to fight, if necessary, than his critics then or later allowed.*

No history of British appeasement is complete without some reference to Sir Horace Wilson's role as Neville Chamberlain's confidential adviser, and in particular to Wilson's meetings with Hitler as the prime minister's emissary immediately prior to the Munich conference in September 1938. Yet there has been no serious study of Wilson himself in relation to appeasement since Martin Gilbert published a short article in *History Today* in 1982.[1] To date, archival work on Wilson's career has been confined to his years at the Ministry of Labour and the Board of Trade.[2] This neglect would have surprised Wilson's contemporaries. In the spring of 1939 Wilson was appointed permanent secretary of the Treasury and head of the Civil Service, regarded by one Labour critic as a more powerful position than that held by 'almost anybody since Cardinal Wolsey'.[3] Wilson's rise was remarkable for someone from a modest social background who had entered the Civil Service as a boy clerk and whose university degree was a B.Sc. (Econ) taken by part-time study at the London School of Economics. R. A. Butler, who

Ardvurich, Leny Feus, Callander, FK17 8AS george.peden@stir.ac.uk

* I am grateful to Peter Bell, Gill Bennett, David Dilks, Adrian Phillips, and Zara Steiner for comments on an earlier draft; to Paul Addison for giving me a copy of his notes of a talk with Sir Horace Wilson; and to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and the University of Stirling for funding the research.

[1] M. Gilbert, 'Horace Wilson: man of Munich?' *History Today*, 32/10 (1982), pp. 3–9.

[2] R. Lowe and R. Roberts, 'Sir Horace Wilson, 1900–1935: the making of a mandarin', *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 641–62.

[3] W. J. Brown, *So far …* (London, 1943), p. 220.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as parliamentary under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office knew Wilson well, described him in the summer of 1939 as 'the Burleigh of the present age'.[4] Unlike Burleigh, who was able to win the confidence of two very different Tudor queens, Mary and Elizabeth, Wilson was regarded by Chamberlain's successor, Winston Churchill, as an appeaser who should be excluded from influence on foreign policy. Churchill had no difficulty in accepting the Labour party's demand that Wilson should be removed from 10 Downing Street as a condition of forming a coalition government in May 1940. Indeed, he considered sacking Wilson, but was persuaded by Kingsley Wood, the chancellor of the exchequer, that such an action would be contrary to the convention that ministers, not civil servants, were responsible for policy, and Wilson was allowed to remain at the Treasury until he reached the normal age of retirement in 1942.[5]

According to the left-wing journalists who wrote the polemic, *Guilty men* (1940), Wilson established an ascendancy over Chamberlain that would take its place in history, providing the policy, philosophy, and ideology that dominated the prime minister's mind. What the philosophy or ideology might be was not made explicit, although there was a reference to Wilson's adherence to the doctrines of Dr Frank Buchman, whose followers exchanged religious experiences and sought divine guidance.[6] Since Chamberlain never developed any religious faith, Buchmanism seems an improbable link between the two men. Lord Gladwyn, who as Gladwyn Jebb was a Foreign Office official in the 1930s, thought that the theories shared by Chamberlain and Wilson on how best to deal with dictators originated in the prime minister's mind.[7] In practice it is difficult to be sure whether ideas originate with a minister or a civil servant, since even a memorandum by the civil servant may reflect an earlier conversation with the minister. The difficulty is all the greater when, as Chamberlain's biographer, Robert Self, notes, the minister and civil servant 'enjoyed the sort of unparalleled intimacy only possible among truly kindred spirits'.[8] David Dutton believes that Wilson was little more than a loyal and efficient civil servant carrying out the prime minister's instructions, whereas David Reynolds thinks Wilson's role in the negotiations with Hitler in September 1938 shows that he was more than that.[9] Alastair Parker thought that the fact that Wilson was able to approve Foreign Office instructions to an ambassador without

[4] R. A. Butler papers, RAB F80, fo. 102, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge.

[5] Kingsley Wood to Churchill, 27 July 1941, Sir Winston Churchill papers, CHAR 20/20, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge. Wilson believed that he was unpopular with Labour on account of the role he had played in defeating the General Strike in 1926, his opposition to the repeal of the subsequent Trades Disputes Act, and his friendship with the industrialist Lord Weir who advised the government on rearmament – 'Talk with Horace Wilson', 16 July 1942, Thomas Jones CH class P papers, vol. 3, fo. 68, National Library of Wales.

[6] 'Cato' [Michael Foot, Peter Howard, and Frank Owen], *Guilty men* (London, 1940), pp. 86, 89.

[7] *Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn* (London, 1972), p. 76. As Gladwyn Jebb he was private secretary to Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary.

[8] R. Self, *Neville Chamberlain, a biography* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 446.

[9] D. Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (London, 2001), p. 203; D. Reynolds, *Summits: six meetings that shaped the twentieth century* (London, 2007), p. 417.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

referring them first to Chamberlain suggested that Wilson's influence was greater than he admitted. However, a prime minister would be overwhelmed if his officials did not give him some protection from paperwork. In the case mentioned by Parker, Wilson knew Chamberlain's thinking well enough to be able to expedite matters by anticipating the prime minister's approval, which was given subsequently by telephone.[10] Gladwyn's characterization of Wilson as an *éminence grise*, with that term's overtones of Cardinal Richelieu's control of French foreign policy in the reign of Louis XIII, would only be appropriate if it could be shown that Wilson took policy decisions or that Chamberlain invariably followed his advice.[11]

The evidence of how Wilson operated in Whitehall and his part in developing the policy of appeasement is incomplete. He kept no diary or private notes while he was a civil servant, and wrote no memoirs. However, the files of the Prime Minister's Office provide evidence of the nature of his work there.[12] Some of Wilson's papers relating to Munich were preserved in the Cabinet Office and some in the Treasury.[13] Wilson's correspondence can be found in the papers of other people, and he allowed a number of historians to interview him. It is thus possible to address three questions. First, what was Wilson's role in Whitehall in the years when Chamberlain was prime minister? Second, what part did Wilson play in foreign policy, and in particular, did he diminish the influence of the Foreign Office? Third, what contribution does his defence of appeasement make to an understanding of a subject that continues to divide historians?

I

Historians are not always clear as to Wilson's position in Whitehall in the later 1930s. For example, Gilbert describes him as being 'at the Treasury' when Chamberlain became prime minister on 28 May 1937.[14] However, although Wilson's salary was paid through the Treasury vote, he was not a member of the chancellor of the exchequer's department. Wilson had first made his mark as permanent secretary of the Ministry of Labour in the 1920s. In 1930 he was given the title of chief industrial adviser to HM Government, with an office at the Board of Trade. However, when Stanley Baldwin became prime minister for the third

[10] R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and appeasement* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 258.

[11] Gladwyn, *Memoirs*, p. 76. Historians using the same term include R. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and appeasement* (London, 2000), p. 81; Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, p. 292, and D. R. Thorpe, *Eden* (London, 2004), p. 186.

[12] Prime Minister's Office papers (PREM), series 1, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA).

[13] Lord Bridges's papers contain some of Wilson's papers which were presumably inherited by Bridges when he became permanent secretary of the Treasury and head of the Civil Service in 1945 – see Treasury papers (T), series 273, TNA.

[14] Gilbert, 'Horace Wilson', p. 4. Ian Colvin, *Vansittart in office* (London, 1965), p. 137, also locates Wilson in the Treasury before 1939. J. Charmley, *Chamberlain and the lost peace* (London, 1989), p. 85, gives Wilson's position in 1938 prematurely as 'Head of the Civil Service'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time in 1935, in his 68th year, he felt that he needed more support than that provided by the normal staff in the Prime Minister's Office, and Wilson went to 10 Downing Street as his personal adviser. Wilson retained his title of chief industrial adviser and he expected to return to the Board of Trade when Baldwin retired. In the event, Chamberlain kept him in the same wide-ranging role as he had had with Baldwin, but with an increased emphasis on foreign policy, reflecting the new prime minister's interests.

According to Wilson, he first met Chamberlain in 1923, when the latter was chancellor of the exchequer, and saw him frequently while he was at the Ministry of Health (1924–9) and after he returned to the Treasury in 1931, and also when both men were at the Ottawa Imperial Economic Conference in 1932, when Wilson was the most senior official accompanying the British delegation.[15] It has been suggested that Chamberlain came to rely on Wilson while at the Treasury, but the evidence of the Treasury files leaves no doubt that Chamberlain's principal adviser while he was chancellor was Sir Warren Fisher, permanent secretary of the Treasury and head of the Civil Service from 1919 to 1939. However, although Fisher had been an adviser to a number of prime ministers, his influence rapidly waned once Chamberlain moved to 10 Downing Street.[16]

Accounts of contemporaries leave no doubt of the closeness of Chamberlain and Wilson, but there are differences regarding the nature of the relationship. To Sir John Colville, who became Chamberlain's private secretary in October 1939, Wilson was the prime minister's *alter ego*, in that Chamberlain rarely acted without his advice, and Wilson had come to believe himself as infallible as the prime minister thought him to be. Lord Woolton, who became minister for food five weeks before Chamberlain resigned in May 1940, wrote that Wilson's power was unequalled by any member of the cabinet except the prime minister, who valued Wilson's ability to cope with the perpetual flow of papers, his detailed knowledge of what was happening in Whitehall, and the fact that he was someone with whom Chamberlain could talk and upon whom he could rely. On the other hand, Chamberlain's sister Hilda said that he used Wilson simply as a messenger who knew his mind.[17] By Wilson's own account, he saw all the papers in the Prime Minister's Office and might put a note on some of them, or dictate a note on what he had been told, but he did not exercise power; he was, he said, merely a kind of additional member of the secretarial staff. He thought he was a comfort to Chamberlain, who did not make friends easily, and he acted as a sort of 'chopping block' for the prime minister's ideas.[18] The evidence suggests that Hilda Chamberlain's comment may be accurate as regards Wilson's mission to

[15] Addison's notes of talk with Wilson, 4 Apr. 1967.

[16] Reynolds, *Summits*, p. 46; E. O'Halpin, *Head of the Civil Service* (London, 1989), pp. 63–4, 219–21.

[17] J. Colville, *The fringes of power: Downing Street diary, 1939–1955* (London, 1985), p. 36; Lord Woolton, *Memoirs* (London, 1959), p. 140; notes on conversation with Hilda Chamberlain, 29 Nov. 1951, Viscount Templewood papers, part XIX, file 5, Cambridge University Library.

[18] Addison's notes of talk with Wilson, 4 Apr. 1967.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Germany in September 1938, but that both she and Wilson understated his role as Chamberlain's adviser.

The papers of the Prime Minister's Office show that Wilson's activities were many and various. In the civil sphere they ranged from commenting on the reorganization of the electricity industry to chairing an interdepartmental committee on the special areas of high unemployment. When Wilson took over as permanent secretary of the Treasury and head of the Civil Service on 20 May 1939 he retained his office and role at 10 Downing Street in addition to his new duties. The headship of the Civil Service involved responsibility for advising the prime minister on all senior appointments, including those in the Foreign Office. As permanent secretary of the Treasury, Wilson was also responsible for advising on economic policy and chaired key interdepartmental committees. The Labour party leader, Clement Attlee, commented that, while Chamberlain was prime minister, Wilson 'had a hand in everything, ran everything'.[19]

Wilson told Paul Addison that he had nothing to do with rearmament, but this claim illustrates the perils of oral history.[20] While it appears to be true that Wilson, as he said, was never in touch with the chiefs of staff of the armed forces, he was much concerned with industrial aspects of rearmament. On 17 October 1935 he was present when Chamberlain assured a delegation from the Federation of British Industries that the government had no wish to impose controls on business and hoped that as far as possible industry would organize itself to prevent competition for skilled labour.[21] When the rearmament programme began in the spring of 1936 Wilson became a member of the Principal Supply Officers Committee, where representatives of the Admiralty, Air Ministry, War Office, Board of Trade, Ministry of Labour, and Treasury met to co-ordinate the services' industrial requirements. He also acted as an intermediary between Chamberlain and both trade unionists and employers regarding ways to expedite production.

Given Chamberlain's belief that defence and foreign policy had to be correlated, since each influenced the other, it was inevitable that Wilson should be drawn into questions of strategy.[22] During 1937 it became increasingly apparent that the rapidly growing rearmament programme was placing a strain on the economy, and Sir Thomas Inskip, the minister for co-ordination of defence, carried out a review of the defence departments' programmes with a view to re-establishing Treasury control of expenditure and allocating priorities. He was advised by a panel of officials, of whom Wilson was one. Wilson shared the Treasury's belief that Britain's economic stability was a deterrent to aggression by the dictator states, but his advice was not wholly helpful to that department's case. The Treasury hoped to restrict the size of the armed forces to what could be paid for out of current revenue once the period covered by the Defence Loans Act of

[19] K. Harris, *Attlee* (London, 1982), p. 180.
[20] Notes of talk with Wilson, 4 Apr. 1967.
[21] R. Shay, *British rearmament in the thirties* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), pp. 95–7.
[22] Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) minutes, 5 July 1937, Cabinet Office papers (CAB) 2/6, TNA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1937 had ended. Wilson questioned the Treasury's estimates of the revenue available to support the armed forces five years hence, and suggested that, if the priority for defence in 1942 required it, economies could be made elsewhere in the chancellor's budget.[23] This advice made it easier for Inskip to recommend in February 1938 that defence expenditure should rise in 1938 and 1939, as far as was possible without imposing controls on industry and labour, with a further review in 1939 in the light of the international situation.[24]

According to Eden's parliamentary private secretary, J. P. L. Thomas, Wilson was quite relaxed on the subject of rearmament about this time because he thought that the appeasement of Germany and Italy was likely to lead to disarmament.[25] Not everyone was relaxed, especially as the RAF was expanding more slowly than the *Luftwaffe*. The Labour party wanted an independent investigation into the Air Ministry, and Wilson saw Attlee on Chamberlain's behalf on 10 February 1938, when he argued that an investigation would hold up the work of the Air Ministry. Attlee initially opted instead to raise questions in parliament.[26] However, on 12 March the cabinet faced two problems: the threat to Czechoslovakia following Hitler's occupation of Austria, which had occurred that day, and how to respond to Churchill's intention to attack the inadequacy of the RAF's expansion programme and to support an Opposition motion for an inquiry into the Air Ministry. The problems were related because, as Inskip remarked two days later, in order to increase aircraft production it would be necessary to approach the trade unions to ask for co-operation in accepting changes in work practices, and he anticipated that they would make conditions: 'for example, they might demand that the government should undertake the use of arms in support of Czechoslovakia, or insist on the question being dealt with by the League of Nations'.[27] Wilson was asked to see Sir Walter Citrine, the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, whom he knew well. On 21 March Wilson was able to report to Chamberlain that Citrine was in favour of the prime minister seeing members of the TUC General Council to educate them in the 'international facts of life', and agreed that ways in which to accelerate rearmament were best left to the employers and unions concerned. This view was endorsed by the General Council after their meeting with Chamberlain and Inskip on 23 March, and, following discussion with Citrine, Wilson briefed Chamberlain before a further meeting on 26 May to allay trade unionists' concerns about the government's foreign policy and the effects of changes in industrial practices on employment once rearmament was complete.[28]

[23] Minutes of meeting of 12 Nov. 1937, CAB 64/30.

[24] 'Defence expenditure in future years: interim report', 15 Dec. 1937, CAB 24/273, and 'Further report', 8 Feb. 1938, CAB 24/274.

[25] Memorandum by J. P. L. Thomas (Viscount Cilcennin), n.d. but prepared for Eden while latter was writing his memoirs, Avon papers, AP 7/24/81, Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

[26] Note by Wilson, 11 Feb. 1938, PREM 1/238, fos. 133–4.

[27] Cabinet conclusions (CC) 12 (38) and 13 (38), 12 and 14 Mar., 1938, CAB 23/92.

[28] PREM 1/251, fos. 20–5, 51–7, 88–9, 91–4, 101–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Some aircraft firms blamed the Air Ministry for delays in production, and in March 1938 Wilson discussed their complaints with Sir Charles Bruce-Gardner, the president of the Society of British Aircraft Constructors, and was persuaded that the chief difficulty arose from the Air Ministry requiring minor changes to be made to aircraft under production. In April he advised Chamberlain that there was mounting criticism of the Air Ministry in parliament and press, and in May the secretary of state for air, Lord Swinton, who could not defend his ministry in the House of Commons, resigned.[29] Meanwhile, the cabinet had authorized the Air Ministry to accept as many aircraft as the aircraft industry could produce, up to a maximum of 12,000 machines over the next two financial years, with a Treasury official sitting on a new Air Council Committee on Supply with full financial authority to approve expenditure on buildings and plant as well as aircraft. As a result, the gap between British and German aircraft production began to close and in September 1939 British output overtook Germany's.[30] Even so, when, after the Munich crisis, the Air Ministry sought approval of a greatly increased expansion programme, Wilson advised that it was very unlikely that Britain could match German production without putting the aircraft industry and its suppliers on a war footing. Any announcement to that effect, he thought, would be taken by the Germans as a sign that the British government had decided to sabotage the Munich declaration, signed by Chamberlain and Hitler, that disagreements between the two countries would be resolved peacefully, and Hitler would denounce the Anglo-German naval treaty of 1935 and also accelerate his own air rearmament.[31] Chamberlain hoped to follow up Munich with an agreement on arms limitation, and the cabinet directed the Air Ministry to give priority to fighter production, while limiting orders for bombers to what was necessary to ensure that factories and labour were not idle.[32]

Following the German occupation of Prague on 15 March 1939, increasing numbers of patriotic Britons came forward to join the Territorial Army (TA). On 28 March Chamberlain was due to speak to the 1922 Committee of the Conservative party in the evening and he wished to say something about reports that volunteers were being turned away because the units in which they wished to enlist were up to establishment. Wilson discussed the matter with the secretary of state for war, Leslie Hore-Belisha, who wished to introduce conscription. Wilson told him that was out of the question, on account of trade union opposition. As an alternative, Hore-Belisha suggested doubling the TA by duplicating every unit. Wilson liked the idea and undertook to explain the position to senior Treasury officials, after which Chamberlain authorized him to discuss the matter with the chancellor of the exchequer, Sir John Simon, with a view to enabling

[29] Wilson to prime minister, 15 Mar. 1938, and note by Wilson for prime minister, n.d. but c. 22 Apr. 1938, PREM 1/236, fos. 211–12 and 126–9.

[30] G. C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 156–8.

[31] Wilson to J. H. E. Woods, principal private secretary to the chancellor of the exchequer, 1 Nov. 1938, PREM 1/236, fos. 72–74.

[32] CC 51 (38) and 53 (38), 31 Oct. and 7 Nov. 1938, CAB 23/96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chamberlain to make an announcement the next day.[33] Senior Treasury officials were dismissive of Hore-Belisha's proposal, pointing out that it was unrelated to any strategic plan, that the immediate military value of the enlarged TA would be nil, and that the effect of the announcement would be likely to make Hitler think that he should strike at once. The Foreign Office, however, supported the measure as a means of impressing Europe with Britain's military determination, and Simon agreed with the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, that this aspect outweighed financial considerations.[34]

Wilson approached foreign policy from the perspective of his wide-ranging role at 10 Downing Street: for him the economy, rearmament, and appeasement were interconnected. For example, in the recession of 1938 he hoped that progress in talks with Germany and Italy would lead to a considerable revival of business confidence, which had been affected by war talk.[35] He also saw the easing of the labour shortage in the recession as a reason why there was no need to introduce controls over industry or labour to expedite rearmament.[36] Wilson was also Chamberlain's confidant in political matters. For example, in April 1939 the prime minister discussed with him the pros and cons of bringing Churchill into the government.[37] Wilson's activities on Chamberlain's behalf included news management: he saw press proprietors to enlist support for appeasement, and warned the BBC to exercise self-censorship.[38] Wilson's relationship with the Foreign Office is part of a broad picture of his role as the person who was called upon to give advice on, and act as the prime minister's agent in, any matter in which Chamberlain was interested.

II

In his memoirs, Eden recalled how in May 1937 Fisher and Wilson had a conversation with his recently appointed parliamentary private secretary, Thomas, during which they criticized Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, for being an alarmist and for hampering all attempts to establish friendly contacts with Germany and Italy. They wanted Thomas to create a better understanding between the Foreign Office and 10 Downing Street by countering Vansittart's influence.[39] Eden failed to mention that he was himself

[33] Memorandum by Wilson, 29 Mar. 1939, PREM 1/296, fos. 32–7; R. J. Minney, *The private papers of Hore-Belisha* (London, 1960), pp. 186–8.

[34] Memorandum by J. A. N. Barlow, 28 Mar. 1939, T 175/104 (part 2); CC 15 (39), 29 Mar. 1939, CAB 23/98.

[35] Wilson to Sir James Grigg, 31 Jan. 1938, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, PJGG 2/23/2(a).

[36] Shay, *British rearmament*, pp. 247–8.

[37] Chamberlain to Hilda, 15 Apr. 1939, in R. Self, ed., *The Neville Chamberlain diary letters*, IV (Aldershot, 2005), p. 407.

[38] R. Cockett, *Twilight of truth: Chamberlain, appeasement and the manipulation of the press* (London, 1989), pp. 15, 110, and 119.

[39] Earl of Avon, *The Eden memoirs: facing the dictators* (London, 1962), pp. 447–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

anxious to be rid of Vansittart, to whom he had offered the Paris embassy in the autumn of 1936. In the event, Vansittart was replaced by Sir Alec Cadogan on 1 January 1938 and given a new post of chief diplomatic adviser, and largely sidelined from mainstream policy-making. Whereas Cadogan and Wilson were regularly in attendance at meetings of the cabinet's Foreign Policy Committee, Vansittart was usually absent. In his memoirs, Vansittart described Chamberlain as 'spellbound' by Wilson, and said that neither man understood his passionate warnings of the threat posed by the dictator states.[40]

Cadogan's diary shows that he liked but did not quite trust Wilson, and felt that Wilson's interference in Foreign Office affairs wanted watching.[41] There is evidence that Cadogan had reason for being on his guard. The Italian ambassador, Count Grandi, established contact with Wilson through Sir Joseph Ball, the director of the Conservative Research Department. Ball later denied that he or Wilson were used by Chamberlain as agents to go behind the back of the Foreign Office, but Ball's former association with MI5 may have made him economical with the truth.[42] There was also the curious case of the MI5 report in November 1938 that George Steward, the press spokesman at 10 Downing Street, had told the press attaché at the German embassy, Fritz Hesse, on 11 October that the Foreign Office was so anti-German that it should be by-passed in future negotiations between Chamberlain and Germany. Chamberlain denied knowledge of the approach and said that he could not believe Wilson had been behind it – prompting Cadogan to note in his diary 'nor can I, quite'.[43] Oliver Harvey, who was private secretary first to Eden and then to Eden's successor, Halifax, thought that Wilson did not always keep Cadogan in the picture concerning 10 Downing Street's handling of the press.[44] It was Wilson who took the initiative in having the head of the Foreign Office's Press Department, Reginald Leeper, transferred abroad. According to Leeper, who was opposed to the policy of appeasement, he was summoned after Munich by Wilson, who told him that some members of the Foreign Office had said that he (Leeper) was not loyal to the government and that if that was the impression he gave he was not suitable for the work.[45] Cadogan thought that there was some justification for 10 Downing Street's complaints about Leeper's handling of the press.[46]

Wilson corresponded privately with Sir Nevile Henderson, the ambassador in Berlin, and Sir Eric Phipps, the ambassador in Paris. Cadogan felt he had 'to

[40] Lord Vansittart, *The mist procession* (London, 1958), pp. 442–3.

[41] D. Dilks, ed., *Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945* (London, 1971), 5 and 10 Jan. and 3 Mar. 1938, pp. 32, 34, and 57.

[42] I. Macleod, *Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1961), pp. 216–17, 218–19; note of conversation with Sir Joseph Ball, 26 Jan. 1949, Templewood papers, XIX, file 5.

[43] *Documents on German foreign policy 1918–1945*, series D, vol. 4 (*DGFP* D/4), doc. 251; Cadogan diary, 1 Dec. 1938, ACAD 1/7, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

[44] J. Harvey, ed., *Diplomatic diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937–1940* (London, 1970), 10 and 13 Mar. 1939, pp. 260–1.

[45] Earl of Birkenhead, *Halifax* (London, 1965), pp. 424–5.

[46] Cadogan to Halifax, 28 Nov. 1938, Foreign Office papers, series 800, vol. 396 (FO 800/396), TNA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

manoeuvre against' Wilson.[47] Nevertheless, he kept in close touch with him on foreign policy and believed that Wilson took him into his confidence. The two men often met to discuss matters, but did not normally communicate in writing[48] – which makes it difficult for the historian to know whether Wilson kept Cadogan fully informed about initiatives from 10 Downing Street. According to Wilson, everything that he learned and made known to the prime minister was also made known to Cadogan, and it was sheer nonsense to suggest that Number 10 ignored the Foreign Office.[49] Wilson's marginal notes on documents in the Prime Minister's Office files to the effect that Halifax and Cadogan had been informed of their contents support this claim.

Foreign Office officials were naturally critical of Wilson acting independently of, and often, they believed, at variance with, the official machinery of government.[50] Halifax took a different view. His experience was that Wilson was extremely helpful in ensuring that the prime minister and foreign secretary were fully acquainted with each other's thought.[51] Moreover, Wilson did not have a monopoly of advice to the prime minister. During the Czech crisis, for example, Chamberlain regularly consulted an inner cabinet of Halifax, Simon, and Sir Samuel Hoare, the home secretary (both Simon and Hoare being former foreign secretaries), in addition to less frequent meetings of the full cabinet. This inner cabinet had three official advisers: Cadogan, Vansittart, and Wilson.[52] Cadogan's importance, in particular, should not be overlooked: he was close enough to Chamberlain to penetrate the latter's notoriously reserved manner and developed a great respect and affection for the prime minister, even when he did not agree with his policies.[53] Cadogan thought that Wilson was out of his depth in foreign affairs but decided to make the best of him, recognizing that Chamberlain had complete confidence in him.[54] While there was rivalry between the Foreign Office and Wilson, there was also co-operation.

Wilson's initial differences with the Foreign Office concerned Italy rather than Germany. According to Thomas, Wilson believed that it was Chamberlain's mission to break down the hostility of Germany and Italy towards Britain, and that Mussolini was particularly hostile towards Eden, on account of the economic sanctions that had been applied through the League of Nations during the Italo-Abyssinian war.[55] Eden for his part was deeply suspicious of Mussolini's intervention in the Spanish Civil War and his intentions in the Middle East. When in July 1937 the Italian ambassador requested a meeting with Chamberlain, the Foreign Office prepared a brief drawing attention to Italian troop movements

[47] *Cadogan diaries*, 29 June 1939, p. 190.
[48] Cadogan to Martin Gilbert, 4 Feb. 1962, ACAD 4/5.
[49] Wilson, 'Munich 1938', CAB 127/158, p. 16.
[50] Gladwyn, *Memoirs*, p. 76.
[51] Earl of Halifax, *Fulness of days* (London, 1957), p. 231.
[52] Viscount Templewood, *Nine troubled years* (London, 1954), p. 301.
[53] Cadogan to the earl of Birkenhead, 20 Jan. 1965, Cadogan papers, ACAD 4/4.
[54] Note of conversation with Cadogan, 14 Nov. 1951, Templewood papers, XIX, file 5; *Cadogan diaries*, p. 53.
[55] Avon papers, AP 7/24/81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

posing a threat to Egypt. Wilson commented on the brief: 'this is not my idea of a genial conversation – it suggests an undercurrent of annoyance which, even if we feel it, should not be displayed tomorrow'.[56] Chamberlain wrote a personal letter to Mussolini in Grandi's presence on 27 July. According to Thomas, Wilson made sure it was sent without Eden having a chance to comment on it, because Wilson knew that, had the Foreign Office seen the letter first, it would not have been sent.[57] Chamberlain believed that the Foreign Office was inclined to be jealous, and in Eden's case that may well have been true, as he had first put forward to Chamberlain the idea of a personal letter. However, whereas Eden had thought that the letter should be written by him, as foreign secretary, Wilson suggested it be written by the prime minister.[58]

Wilson's papers contain a letter, dated 28 October 1937, from a former permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office, Lord Tyrell, enclosing an anonymous note from someone described as a mutual friend of Tyrell and Leeper. The note alleged that Eden's 'personal prejudices' were an obstacle to good Anglo-Italian relations and suggested that Chamberlain's knowledge of Grandi's willingness to co-operate in creating a better atmosphere provided a chance 'to put Eden "on trial" to clear up the past'. If he could not, the note added, it would be difficult to see how the prime minister could continue to support his foreign secretary.[59] Foreign Office officials were not united on how Italy should be approached: even Leeper was impressed by Wilson's criticism of the Foreign Office's 'negative policy', and, supported by Sir Orme Sargent, urged Eden to recognize Italy's empire in Abyssinia and to enter negotiations without waiting for an agreement over Spain. On the other hand, other officials agreed with Eden that Britain should not appear to be running after Mussolini.[60]

The issue of how to deal with Mussolini had not been resolved when a fresh dispute arose between Chamberlain and Eden over how to respond to a message to the prime minister on 12 January 1938 from President Roosevelt. Roosevelt wanted approval within five days of a plan devised by the American under secretary of state, Sumner Welles, for international agreement on principles to be observed in relations between nations; arms limitation; and equal access to raw materials. The message came at a time when there had been tentative contacts between Washington and London in response to Japanese aggression in the Far East, and, although Cadogan regarded the president's ideas as 'wild', he thought that it was important not to snub him. Consequently, while agreeing with Wilson that Roosevelt's initiative would delay a bilateral approach by Britain to Italy,

[56] Wilson to prime minister, 26 July 1937, PREM 1/276, fo. 346.

[57] Avon papers, AP 7/24/81. Chamberlain's letter is reprinted in *Documents on British foreign policy*, 2nd series, vol. 19 (*DBFP* 2/19), doc. 65. [58] D. Carlton, *Anthony Eden* (London, 1981), pp. 107–8.

[59] Tyrell to Wilson, 28 Oct. 1937, with enclosure dated 27 Oct., T 273/410. Tyrell was permanent under-secretary, 1925–8, and ambassador in Paris, 1928–34.

[60] *Harvey diaries*, 7 Nov. 1937, p. 57. Sargent was the assistant under-secretary of state who supervised the work of the Foreign Office's department dealing with Gemany.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and that the president should be asked to hold his hand, Cadogan included in a draft reply a sentence to the effect that, if Roosevelt wished to go ahead, Britain would support him. However, he was unable to persuade Chamberlain and Wilson to agree to include this sentence, and Chamberlain did not consult with Eden, who was in France, before sending a polite reply asking Roosevelt to defer his plan for a while.[61] Eden told Chamberlain on 16 January that he resented the lack of consultation and the next day Wilson called on the foreign secretary. He warned Eden that the prime minister was much disturbed by their difference of opinion, and asked for a more understanding attitude on Eden's part towards the dictators. According to Eden, writing twenty-five years after the event, the conversation ended with him telling Wilson that if ever he (Eden) became prime minister and wished advice on an industrial problem, he would send for Wilson, but that Wilson did not understand foreign affairs.[62] On 19 January Wilson admitted to Thomas that there was a fundamental difference between Chamberlain and Eden in their outlook on foreign policy and seemed prepared for a break.[63] However, on the following day, after Eden had argued his case through four meetings of the Foreign Policy Committee, Chamberlain gave way and agreed to the despatch of a telegram asking Roosevelt to go ahead with his plan after all.[64] By then the president was less certain that he wished to proceed, perhaps because his own secretary of state, Cordell Hull, had always thought that the plan was 'illogical and impossible', and it was at first postponed and then dropped.[65] It is worth noting, however, that it had been the Foreign Office's advice, and not Wilson's, that had prevailed.

Disagreement on how to achieve an Anglo-Italian rapprochement continued. On 17 February Wilson was called to the House of Commons about 11 p.m. to find the prime minister dejected about a letter from Eden expressing doubt about whether anything could be done to improve relations with Mussolini. The next morning Wilson made suggestions to Chamberlain for a compromise with Eden, but Chamberlain had decided to insist on the immediate opening of conversations with Italy. A meeting between Chamberlain, Eden, and Grandi on 18 February, and weekend meetings of the cabinet on the 19th and 20th, confirmed the gulf between prime minister and foreign secretary, and Eden resigned. Wilson later wrote that Eden seemed to agree with Chamberlain about the objectives of foreign policy, but did not want to do much to secure them.

[61] *Cadogan diaries*, 12 and 13 Jan. 1938, p. 36; *DBFP* 2/19, doc. 430. For context and consequences of this aspect of differences between Chamberlain and Eden see G. Bennett, 'The Roosevelt peace plan of January 1938', *FCO Historical Branch Occasional Papers*, no. 1 (Nov. 1987), pp. 27–38.

[62] Avon, *Facing the dictators*, pp. 553–6.

[63] Avon papers, AP 7/24/81; *Harvey diaries*, 20 Jan. 1938, p. 75.

[64] *DBFP* 2/19, doc. 455.

[65] *Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (London, 1948), 1, p. 547.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Wilson's eyes, Eden's 'vacillation' made a break inevitable; as he told Chamberlain's widow, 'I always shared Neville's opinion about his deficiencies'.[66]

III

Wilson's influence on foreign policy was reflected in the way in which he acted as an unofficial channel through which Chamberlain's ideas reached Germany. On 10 March 1938, two days before Hitler ordered his troops into Austria, Wilson told Theodor Kordt, the counsellor at the German embassy in London, that the prime minister had been pleased to learn that, in conversation with Lord Lothian, Hitler had compared England and Germany to two pillars upon which the European social order could rest. Wilson thought that an arch of co-operation should be erected on these two pillars, and he hoped that Germany would succeed in her aims in regard to Czechoslovakia and Austria as much as possible without the use of force.[67] Wilson took his cue from Chamberlain's belief that Hitler intended to absorb only German-speaking areas into the Reich, while reducing the rump of Czechoslovakia to dependent neutrality; that Britain was in no position to make war on Germany, and that the diplomatic problem was to find a peaceful solution which would absolve France of her treaty obligation to come to the Czechs' assistance.[68] In a conversation in June with an official of the German Ministry of Economics, Helmut Wohlthat, Wilson gave the impression that the British government was prepared to recognize Germany's predominant economic position in central Europe and to accept the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany, if Hitler would state what the limits to the territorial expansion of Germany would be.[69] On 23 August Wilson told Kordt that, if there was a possibility of a peaceful solution, the British government would be prepared to enter serious negotiations on Czechoslovakia as a beginning to further talks on the whole field of Anglo-German relations. He added that Bolshevism would be the only gainer from war.[70]

On 31 August Halifax sent Wilson a letter from Churchill which advocated a joint declaration by Britain, France, and Russia of their interest in a peaceful solution, with a statement that a German invasion of Czechoslovakia 'would raise capital issues for all three powers'. Wilson advised Chamberlain that the inclusion of Russia would infuriate Hitler, robbing the declaration of any value it might have as a means of persuasion. He questioned whether Britain, France, or Russia were in a position to make a threat, and warned that a commitment to taking action would very likely result in Britain attacking Germany for all practical

[66] Wilson, 'Munich 1938', CAB 127/158; Wilson to Anne Chamberlain, 5 Apr. 1944, Neville Chamberlain papers, NC 11/1/616, Special Collections, University of Birmingham.
[67] *DGFP* D/1, doc. 148.
[68] Foreign Policy Committee minutes, FP (36) 26, 18 Mar. 1938, CAB 27/623.
[69] *DGFP* D/2, doc. 279.
[70] Ibid., doc. 382.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

purposes single-handed.[71] Wilson was concerned with what he called the 'frigidity' of Foreign Office officials towards Germany.[72] On 1 September he discussed with Vansittart, Sir Lancelot Oliphant, the deputy under-secretary of state, and Sargent a draft for a speech that Halifax wanted to make on Czechoslovakia. In Wilson's view the draft, containing passages such as the British people 'might be swept to stern action' and 'we need not fear war', amounted to a threat to Germany, such as he believed the Foreign Office had wanted to make since March, but which a meeting of ministers had rejected only two days before. Halifax agreed to omit the offending paragraphs.[73]

Five days later Kordt came again to 10 Downing Street, this time in secret as a delegate of a German military and political group who wished to prevent war. Kordt had already, on 23 August, told Wilson that the British government must speak and act clearly. Now he warned him that Hitler was planning to invade Czechoslovakia on 19 or 20 September on the assumption that France would not fulfil her treaty obligation. Kordt urged Wilson that Chamberlain should broadcast to the German nation an unequivocal statement of Britain's determination to help the Czechs resist an attack, claiming that a diplomatic defeat for Hitler was a prerequisite for German army leaders to act against the Nazi regime. Wilson was sufficiently impressed by what Kordt had to say to ask him to come again the next day to repeat it to Halifax and Cadogan. Cadogan thought that a broadcast such as Kordt advocated would be fatal to the chances of a peaceful settlement.[74] Halifax agreed; instead, Foreign Office officials discussed with Wilson the idea that the ambassador in Berlin, Henderson, should convey a private warning that Britain could not stand by if France were involved in hostilities and in danger of being defeated. Wilson's view was that speeches already made by ministers would have made Hitler aware that that was the position, and that he might resent anything Henderson said as a threat.[75]

Meanwhile in late August Chamberlain and Wilson had devised a plan, Plan Z, whereby the prime minister would be prepared to fly to Germany to meet Hitler. On 30 August Chamberlain explained the plan to Henderson, so that he could assist in its execution, but the only ministers who knew about it at that stage were Halifax and Simon. According to Wilson, its success would depend on it being a complete surprise, and it was vital that there should be no leakage.[76] Cadogan and Vansittart were only told on 8 September. Vansittart compared the plan with the Emperor Henry IV's humiliation before the pope at Canossa, and

[71] Churchill to Halifax and Wilson to prime minister, both 31 Aug. 1938, PREM 1/265, fos. 117–22.

[72] Wilson to prime minister, 12 July 1938, PREM 1/330, fo. 63.

[73] Wilson to prime minister, 1 Sept. 1938, and MSS message for Sir H. Wilson, PREM 1/265, fos. 89–94; meeting of ministers, 30 Aug. 1938, CAB 23/94.

[74] *Cadogan diaries*, 6 and 7 Sept. 1936, pp. 94–5; P. Hoffmann, *The history of the German resistance, 1933–1945* (London, 1977), pp. 66–7.

[75] Wilson to Chamberlain, 5 Sept. 1938, PREM 1/265, fos. 61–6.

[76] Note by Wilson, 30 Aug. 1938, PREM 1/266A, fo. 363; Chamberlain to Ida, 3 Sept. 1938, *Chamberlain diary letters*, p. 342.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wanted a warning sent to Hitler before he made a speech at Nuremberg on the 12th. Cadogan disagreed with Vansittart on both points.[77] Nevertheless, on the 9th, on Halifax's insistence, a note of warning to Hitler was sent to Henderson to deliver. On receiving the note on the 10th Henderson immediately wrote to Wilson that Hitler was on the borderline of madness and that the warning would push him over the edge and drive him to greater violence or menaces. Henderson said he had conveyed the substance of the note in conversations with the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and other leading Nazis, and ministers decided he need not convey it to Hitler, a decision with which Cadogan agreed.[78] Hitler's speech on the 12th did not entirely close the door to a peaceful settlement and late in the evening of the 13th the four ministers agreed that Plan Z should be put into operation.

As early as 10 September Wilson had been sending Cadogan 'some first thoughts' on points that the prime minister might raise with Hitler. The first was that the Czech government (pressed by the British 'independent' mediator, Lord Runciman) had gone far enough to meet the Sudeten-Germans' claims to provide a hopeful basis for negotiations, and there was no case for the use of force. The second was that the purpose of Chamberlain's foreign policy was to bring about such an improvement in the European situation as to remove the raison d'être of Czechoslovakia's treaties with France and Russia. In this connection Wilson suggested that the prime minister should say that he fully appreciated Hitler's view that Germany and Britain formed two pillars supporting orderly civilization against Bolshevism, and that nothing should be done to weaken resistance to this threat. The third point was that Germany was a natural trading partner for the countries of south-east Europe and, provided that Germany pursued an 'open door' policy whereby Britain had access to these markets, and Germany did not interfere politically or militarily in these countries, Britain would be ready to make available credit to facilitate an increase in international trade.[79] Wilson accompanied Chamberlain to Berchtesgaden on 15 September but the Foreign Office was represented only by William Strang, the head of its Central Department, which dealt with Germany, and Henderson. In conversation with Hitler, Chamberlain went further than Wilson's brief on the Sudeten-Germans' claims by 'personally' recognizing the principle of detachment from Czechoslovakia, subject to approval by his cabinet colleagues. On Wilson's second point, Chamberlain did ask Hitler if German concerns about Czechoslovakia would be removed by the ending the Czechs' alliance with Russia. The conversation did not reach Wilson's third point on trade.[80]

On the 16th, Wilson had separate conversations with Germans who were at Berchtesgaden: Herbert von Dirksen, the ambassador to Britain; Ernst von

[77] *Cadogan diaries*, 8 Sept. 1938, pp. 95–6.

[78] *DBFP* 3/2, doc. 815, and appendix I, pp. 649–50; note of meeting, 10 Sept. 1938, PREM 1/266A, fos. 339–40; *Cadogan diaries*, 10 Sept. 1938, p. 96.

[79] PREM 1/266A, fos. 344–8.

[80] *DGFP* D/2, doc. 487; CC 39(38), 17 Sept. 1938, CAB 23/95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Weizsäcker, state secretary of the German Foreign Ministry; Walter Hewel, chief of Ribbentrop's personal staff; and Paul Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter. All four spoke of the favourable impression that Chamberlain had made on Hitler. Only Ribbentrop himself, with whom Wilson had lunch, failed to praise the prime minister, an omission Wilson put down to Ribbentrop's ungenerous character. Chamberlain was much taken by Wilson's report of the conversations, keeping a personal copy and repeating in a letter to his sisters Hewel's words that Hitler had said that he had had a conversation with a *man*.[81] In short, Wilson's gullibility enabled the Germans to play upon Chamberlain's vanity. In contrast, when Hewel made similar remarks to Ivone Kirkpatrick, first secretary of the British embassy in Berlin, on 24 September, Kirkpatrick knew they were 'bunkum' and said so to Hewel.[82] Unfortunately no one seems to have said as much to Chamberlain and, at Munich, the prime minister retained the illusion that he had established a relationship of mutual confidence and trust with Hitler.

Chamberlain met his inner cabinet of Halifax, Hoare, and Simon in the evening of the 16th, with Cadogan, Vansittart and Wilson present. Runciman joined them to report that it had not been possible to find a solution to the Sudeten problem that would satisfy Germany. The next day the full cabinet accepted the principle of self-determination for the Sudeten-Germans as a basis for negotiations, although concern was expressed that it might lead to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.[83] While ministers were meeting, Wilson had what seems to have been a full and frank discussion with Fisher, who believed that Chamberlain had 'sold the fort' at Berchtesgaden. The permanent secretary of the Treasury warned that, by appearing to surrender to force and agreeing to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, Britain was in danger of being seen by world opinion as Germany's partner in crime. Any plebiscite, he urged, must be a real one, preceded by German demobilization, supervised by an international police force, and taken only after the inhabitants of the areas concerned had had time in which to cool down. Wilson agreed that a plebiscite must be conducted in a proper manner and that it would be desirable if the Americans could be persuaded to contribute to the supervisory police force. However, he noted, perhaps with some exasperation: 'I still do not get from anyone any clear advice as to what we should do in present circumstances as the alternative to agreeing to the application of the principle of self-determination.'[84] In the event, when French ministers visited London on 18 September, Edouard Daladier, the premier, objected to a plebiscite, on the grounds that the Germans might exploit

[81] 'The prime minister's visit to Germany', notes by Wilson, 16 Sept. 1938, Neville Chamberlain papers NC 8/26/2; *Chamberlain diary letters*, 19 Sept. 1938, p. 348.

[82] I. Kirkpatrick, *The inner circle* (London, 1959), pp. 121–2.

[83] CC 39 (38), 17 Sept. 1938, CAB 23/95.

[84] Fisher to Wilson, 17 Sept. 1938, LSE\Coll Misc 461, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics; Wilson to prime minister, 17 Sept. 1938, and Wilson to Fisher (not sent), 18 Sept. 1938, T 273/405. For Fisher's attitude to Germany see G. C. Peden, 'Sir Warren Fisher and British rearmament against Germany', *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979), pp. 29–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the principle of self-determination elsewhere, including Alsace, and from Wilson's notes it appears to have been in deference to the French that the alternative was adopted of transferring areas with a majority of Sudeten-German inhabitants without plebiscite.[85]

After two days of intense Anglo-French pressure, the Czech government agreed to an Anglo-French plan for the transfer of territory in an orderly way, and Chamberlain, accompanied by Wilson, Strang, and Sir William Malkin of the Foreign Office's legal department, flew back to Germany, where he met Hitler at Godesberg on 22 September. Henderson and Kirkpatrick from the Berlin embassy completed the British team. Hitler rejected Chamberlain's proposals and, on the 23rd, handed the prime minister a memorandum setting out Germany's terms for the military occupation of the Sudetenland on 1 October.[86] Chamberlain faced the choice of rejecting Hitler's demands and threatening war if Czechoslovakia were invaded, or trying to persuade his cabinet colleagues and the French and Czech governments to accept Hitler's demands. He probably did not need Wilson's advice to choose the latter course: as he told the cabinet on the 24th, he believed Hitler was telling the truth when he said that he aimed at the racial unity of Germany and not the domination of Europe.[87] Halifax took a different view. Unlike the prime minister, he believed that Hitler did aim at supremacy in Europe. In this, the foreign secretary seems to have been influenced by a Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) report, dated 18 September, which listed German objectives as including the reduction of the countries of central and south-eastern Europe, and later Belgium, Holland, the Baltic States, and Scandinavia to vassal status, and the break up of the Soviet Union into autonomous states, some of which would also be German vassals. Even so, the SIS report saw no alternative to a peaceful transfer of the Sudeten-German areas to forestall the inevitable. At first Halifax agreed, but, following a discussion with Cadogan late on the 24th, he told the cabinet on the 25th that his position was changing. He now felt that the Godesberg terms involved a difference in principle from the Anglo-French plan and said that if the Czechs rejected them, and if France went to war in fulfilment of her treaty obligations, Britain should join in too. The cabinet agreed that the Czechs should not be pressed to accept the Godesberg terms.[88]

By the time the cabinet resumed its discussion at 11·30 p.m. on the 25th, Chamberlain had learned that the Czech government had decided to reject the terms, and he had met Daladier and the French foreign secretary, Georges Bonnet, who had been evasive as to what action France would take in the event of a German invasion of the Sudetenland. Chamberlain was able to secure cabinet

[85] *DBFP* 3/2, doc. 928, p. 381, and doc. 937, p. 405; Wilson to prime minister, 18 Sept. 1938, PREM 1/266A, fo. 272.

[86] *DBFP* 3/2, docs. 1033, 1068, and 1073.

[87] CC 42 (38), 24 Sept. 1938, CAB 23/95.

[88] 'What should we do', 18 Sept. 1938, FO 371/21659; *Cadogan diaries*, 25 Sept. 1938, p. 105; CC 43(38), CAB 23/95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

support for his proposal that Wilson should take a letter from him to Berlin, asking Hitler to make concessions to enable an orderly transfer of territory to take place. If Hitler refused to respond to this appeal, Wilson was authorized to give him a personal message from the prime minister to the effect that if France went to war, it seemed certain that Britain would be drawn in.[89] Meanwhile Henderson had phoned Weizsäcker earlier in the evening to tell him to disregard any British statements not coming from Chamberlain himself, adding that Chamberlain's position was difficult and British policy should not be upset by false moves.[90] Parker believed that this phone call must have been inspired by Wilson, in an attempt to nullify the Foreign Office and unreliable ministers, including Halifax.[91] The prime minister and foreign secretary certainly placed very different emphases on conciliation and coercion. The cabinet minutes make clear that Chamberlain did not want his appeal to Hitler to be accompanied by anything that looked like a threat, but on the 26th Halifax, without consulting the prime minister, agreed to issue a statement drafted by Leeper to the effect that the German claim to the transfer of the Sudeten-German areas had already been conceded, but if Czechoslovakia were attacked, France was bound to come to her assistance, 'and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France'.[92]

Accompanied by Henderson and Kirkpatrick, Wilson read Chamberlain's letter to Hitler on the 26th while the führer was in a state of excitement prior to making a speech later in the evening. After the second paragraph, which said that the Czechs rejected the Godesberg terms, had been translated, Hitler rose to leave the room, and it was only with difficulty that Wilson persuaded him to hear out Chamberlain's proposal for direct negotiations between the Germans and Czechs, facilitated, if both sides wished, by a British representative. Hitler made clear that there could be no question of negotiations with the Czechs to modify the Godesberg terms, only discussions on how to implement them, and demanded acceptance by the Czechs within two days. Wilson judged the moment was not right to deliver the oral warning he had been told to give and asked for a further meeting the next day.[93] In a telegram to Chamberlain on the 26th, Wilson said that, unless Hitler left a loophole in his speech, 'I presume we should deliver message in suitable terms and come away.'[94] In the event, Hitler's speech was not as violent as expected: although he committed himself to 1 October for the date for the military occupation of the Sudetenland, he also offered to guarantee what was left of Czechoslovakia once the claims of the Poles and Hungarians to its territory had been satisfied. Wilson advised Chamberlain that it was 'very doubtful whether it is either necessary or wise' to deliver the warning. However, Chamberlain replied that the message must be delivered 'in view of what we have said to the French', but it 'should be given more in sorrow than in anger'.[95]

[89] CC 44 (38), CAB 23/95.
[90] *DGFP*, D/2, doc. 610.
[91] Parker, *Chamberlain and appeasement*, p. 174.
[92] *DBFP* 3/2, p. 550n.
[93] Ibid., docs. 1097, 1118.
[94] Ibid., doc. 1116.
[95] Message from Wilson, 26 Sept. 1938, PREM 1/266A, fos. 76–7; *DBFP* 3/2, doc. 1121.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wilson was faithful to his role as his political master's voice when he met Hitler on the 27th, even trying to speak in what he said was the tone which Chamberlain would have used had he been present. Echoing his brief for the prime minister prior to the talks at Berchtesgaden, Wilson prefaced Chamberlain's message by referring to the advantages of an Anglo-German economic agreement and to Hitler's description of Britain and Germany as bulwarks against the forces of destruction, particularly from the east. He also drew attention to the particular form of words that Chamberlain used: if in fulfilment of treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia French forces 'became actively engaged in hostilities against Germany', the British government would feel obliged to support France. When Hitler said that this meant that if France attacked Germany Britain would too, Wilson replied that it was not known how the French intended to carry out their treaty obligation, and that a way to avoid war must be found. Hitler said the only way was for the Czechs to give way and, according to the German account, Wilson told him he would 'try to make those Czechos sensible'.[96]

On his return to London later on the 27th Wilson reported first to the inner cabinet and then to the full cabinet. He said it was clear that Hitler was convinced that the Czech premier, Eduard Beneš was 'a twister' who would continue to prevaricate; the Germans had tapped phone messages from Jan Masaryk, the Czech minister in London, to Beneš urging him not to cede territory since 'they had got France and Great Britain exactly where they wanted'. Wilson advised that, assuming the Czech government would find Hitler's terms too humiliating to accept, the only way for it to prevent the country being overrun would be for it to withdraw its troops and allow the Germans to occupy the Sudetenland without loss of life. A plebiscite could then be carried out by an international commission. The Czechs would have the assurance of Hitler's public declaration that the Sudetenland represented his last territorial aim in Europe, and a Franco-British guarantee (to which the cabinet had agreed on the 19th) of their independence; the alternative was that the Germans would occupy a much more extensive area than the Sudetenland. He had drafted a telegram along these lines to be sent to Prague. Chamberlain said he did not propose that the Czech government should be advised to take this course, but merely that the suggestion should be put to them. Halifax commented that the suggestion amounted to complete capitulation and the cabinet agreed that the telegram should not be sent.[97]

Wilson has been much criticized for his handling of the warning to Hitler. Duff Cooper, the first lord of the Admiralty, thought it had been delivered with so many additional clauses that it lost its force. There is evidence for this point of view: as Reynolds notes, Hitler ordered the units that would spearhead the invasion of Czechoslovakia to move to their assembly areas shortly after Wilson's second interview with him. Keith Robbins thinks that Wilson was intellectually

[96] *DGFP*, D/2, doc. 634. According to Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The appeasers* (London, 1963), p. 167, Wilson said the word he used was *Tschechen*, the German for Czechs.
[97] CC 46 (38), 27 Sept. 1938; *Cadogan diaries*, 27 Sept. 1938, p. 107.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

defeated by Hitler, who made it seem absurd that the question of peace or war should be left to the Czechs, or that Britain should attack Germany because of a disagreement over the manner in which the Sudetenland should be transferred. Niall Ferguson describes Wilson as a 'feeble emissary' who could not cope with Hitler's histrionics.[98] On the other hand, Strang thought that, from a professional point of view, no serious fault could be found in Wilson as a negotiator, although he was not qualified to advise on foreign policy.[99] Scott Newton suggests that Chamberlain and Wilson can be seen as pursuing an essentially Cobdenite project of improving Anglo-German relations by holding out the prospect of economic agreement to the advantage of both countries once the Sudeten-German question was resolved.[100] From this point of view, Wilson's diplomacy was effective in letting the Germans know precisely what Chamberlain's views – as opposed to those of the cabinet or Foreign Office – were. Hitler responded to the warning by sending a letter in the evening of the 27th offering to guarantee what would be left of Czechoslovakia after the transfer of territory.[101]

The next morning, following the announcement of the mobilization of the British fleet, Wilson saw Ribbentrop's representative in London, Hesse, and told him that, while the British government was willing to agree to the substance of the Godesberg terms, it was impossible for any democratic government to advise the Czechs to accept the demand for military occupation. If the Germans were to give way on the form of the transfer, the British government would be prepared to press acceptance on the French and Czechs, but if Hitler could not be dissuaded, Britain would declare war, as public opinion was convinced that the principles of democratic freedom were at stake. The report of this conversation left London at 10·40 a.m., three hours and twenty minutes before the time that Hitler had set for Czech acceptance of the Godesberg terms.[102] This further warning by Wilson seems to have had some effect. At 11·30 the Foreign Office sent a message from the prime minister to Berlin saying he was willing to come to Germany at once to discuss arrangements for the transfer of the Sudentenland with Hitler and representatives of the Czech and, if Hitler agreed, the French and Italian governments. That afternoon Chamberlain was able to tell the House of Commons that he had accepted Hitler's invitation to him, Daladier, and Mussolini (but not the Czechs) to a conference at Munich the next day.

At the Munich conference Wilson was again Chamberlain's principal adviser, Strang, Malkin, and Henderson being the most senior Foreign Office representatives. However, although diplomacy was in the prime minister's hands, he had to win modifications in the Godesberg terms to make them acceptable to the cabinet. Consequently on the flight home on 30 September, Wilson asked

[98] Duff Cooper, *Old men forget* (London, 1954), p. 239; Reynolds, *Summits*, p. 78; K. Robbins, *Munich 1938* (London, 1968), p. 301; N. Ferguson, *The war of the world* (London, 2006), pp. 358–9.
[99] Lord Strang, *Home and abroad* (London, 1956), pp. 126–7.
[100] S. Newton, *Profits of peace* (Oxford, 1996), p. 85.
[101] *DBFP* 3/2, doc. 1144; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: nemesis* (London, 2000), p. 118.
[102] *DGFP*, D/2, doc. 657.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Strang to draw up a list of the ways in which the Munich agreement was an improvement, from the Czech point of view, from the Godesberg terms. Strang recalled that the list was longer than might have been expected, but that in substance the changes proved to be worthless. The main difference was that the transfer of territory would take place over ten days rather than on 1 October.[103]

Wilson's contemporary defence of Munich can be found in the notes he prepared for the speech Chamberlain was due to make on 3 October in the House of Commons. Wilson's detestation of war went beyond the common fear of air attack. He remarked that critics who said Chamberlain should have stood up to Hitler hardly ever employed phrases which recognized that their alternative might involve 'mutilation and murder and indescribable suffering to millions of people … in many countries, including, it may be, our own'. Yet, he added, 'unless the calculation is that a bold declaration would be a successful bluff, the alternative policy *must* mean either that if the bluff was called we should at once be involved in war, or else that we should have to … withdraw our bold words with the maximum of ignominy'. Regarding claims that matters would have turned out better if Hitler had been warned earlier that an invasion of Czechoslovakia would bring Britain as well as France into war, Wilson said it was clear from the conversations at Berchtesgaden that Hitler knew the risk and was prepared to go ahead (a statement that begs the question of why it had been necessary for Wilson to deliver a warning to Hitler on 27 September).[104] In the event, Chamberlain chose not to use any of Wilson's material. Simon, however, did follow some of Wilson's notes when speaking in parliament on 5 October regarding grounds for hope. First, Hitler had made concessions although it was (Wilson believed) very difficult for the head of a totalitarian state to do so. Second, Hitler now realized that the German people had no enthusiasm for war, and 'even in Germany public opinion can influence policy in times of real emergency'. Third, the prime minister was popular in Germany as a peacemaker and had made contact with the führer as no democratic statesman had previously done. Fourth, the British people had been roused as never before to the danger of war, and no policy, however conciliatory, could succeed unless it was supported, in the last resort, by a brave and determined people with adequate means to enforce it.[105]

IV

In the aftermath of Munich there was considerable discussion in Whitehall about the future direction of British policy. As noted above (p. 989) Wilson wrote on 1 November that putting the aircraft industry on a war footing would be contrary to the Munich declaration that Anglo-German disagreements would be settled

[103] Strang, *Home and abroad*, p. 148. For differences between Godesberg memorandum and Munich agreement see Chamberlain's speech on 3 Oct. 1938, 339 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, 5th ser., 1937–8, cols. 42–45.

[104] Notes signed and amended by Wilson, n.d., T 273/407.

[105] The relevant passage of Simon's speech is at 339 HC Deb, 5th ser, cols. 347–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

peacefully. MI5's contribution to the debate was a report on 7 November that implicitly criticized Chamberlain's failure to respond to intelligence about the extent and Machiavellian nature of Hitler's plans, and which stated that Munich had convinced the German leader that Britain was decadent and lacked the will and power to defend its empire. To ensure that Chamberlain took notice of the report, MI5 included examples of Hitler's insulting references to him.[106] Chamberlain nevertheless clung to his hopes that Hitler would give a sign that he was prepared to contribute to the 'general pacification of the world'.[107]

Wilson tried to sustain the policy of appeasement despite growing Anglo-German antagonism. Public horror at the violence of *Kristallnacht*, when Jewish property was attacked by organized Nazi mobs in November 1938, increased the difficulties associated with proposals for the restoration of German colonies, which Chamberlain had contemplated since 1936 as part of a full, final, and comprehensive settlement with Germany. The possibility of retrocession aroused opposition in ex-German colonies and the colonial secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, who was due to make a statement in parliament on 7 December, asked the prime minister for guidance. Wilson and Cadogan worked on the Colonial Office's draft statement and agreed that, while nothing could be done about the colonial question at present on account of recent events in Germany – Wilson commented that 'these ought not to be mentioned' – the wording of the statement should avoid any finality, advice with which Chamberlain concurred.[108]

By late January 1939, the Foreign Policy Committee, with Wilson present, was concerned about intelligence reports of possible hostile action by Germany against Britain, and Halifax commented that the recent dismissal of Hjalmar Schacht as president of the Reichsbank supported the theory that Germany's economic and financial condition was becoming desperate and forcing Hitler towards mad adventures.[109] Nevertheless, Wilson, writing to Phipps in Paris, remarked on 2 February that the consistency and persistence of the prime minister's policy were steadily enhancing Britain's position. Wilson had sent an advance copy of a 'firm, matter-of-fact' speech by Chamberlain to Hitler and believed that it had encouraged restraint by Hitler in his speech on 30 January. Like Chamberlain, Wilson believed that, while there should be no relaxation in rearmament, appeasement was best served by keeping the political temperature low.[110]

Wilson held to this view of how to handle the dictators even after the German occupation of Prague on 15 March. On 19 March, when drafting an appeal to Mussolini to use his influence to restrain Hitler, Cadogan wanted to include a

[106] C. Andrew, *The defence of the realm: the authorized history of MI5* (London, 2009), pp. 203–6.

[107] Chamberlain wondered whether Hitler's New Year speech containing these words was such a sign, but was advised by Cadogan that it was not – note by Strang, 5 Jan. 1939, FO 371/22988, fo. 39.

[108] PREM 1/247, fos. 2–7.

[109] FP (36) 35, 23 Jan. 1939, CAB 27/624.

[110] Sir Eric Phipps papers, PHPP 3/5, fo. 47, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

warning about Mussolini's recent threats against France, but Wilson thought this would destroy the hoped-for good effects of the letter, and that the subject of Franco-Italian relations was better left to Lord Perth, the ambassador in Rome. Chamberlain agreed that the warning would be 'out of place', and the final draft contained only a hint of a warning.[111] Cadogan had the better understanding of the fascist mentality: Count Ciano, the Italian foreign minister, noted on 23 March that Chamberlain's letter was 'another proof of the inertia of the democracies'.[112]

Chamberlain himself told the cabinet on 18 March that he had come to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to negotiate with Hitler on the old basis, since no reliance could be placed on any of his assurances.[113] By the next day, he had come up with the idea of a declaration by the British, French, Polish, and Russian governments that they would consult together in the event of any threat to the independence or security of any European state, but Poland refused to alienate Germany by publicly associating with Russia.[114] An alternative way of maintaining Polish independence had not been found when Ian Colvin, the Berlin correspondent of the *News Chronicle*, arrived in London claiming Germany would attack Poland very soon unless it was clear Britain would go to war. Halifax took him to see Chamberlain on 29 March and the prime minister agreed to the idea of an immediate declaration of support for Poland.[115] Wilson pointed out to the Foreign Policy Committee the next day that inquiries by the War Office indicated little, if any, sign of the concentration of German troops against the Polish frontier, and Chamberlain agreed that this information did not support the theory that Germany was contemplating a *coup de main*.[116] Nevertheless, the prime minister was persuaded by Halifax to announce a guarantee of Polish independence on 31 March. Chamberlain believed he had retained room for manoeuvre, in that Britain was committed to defend the independence rather than the boundaries of Poland, but Wilson thought that the commitment was a mistake and thus found himself for the first time in serious disagreement with the prime minister. Wilson recognized that some 'firming-up' of policy was inevitable after Prague, but he shared Henderson's fears that Polish intransigence would drag Britain into war over Danzig.[117]

Nevertheless, Wilson was too good a civil servant to allow disagreement to alter his relations with the prime minister. Chamberlain turned to Wilson in May when pressed by parliamentary critics, the Foreign Office, and the majority of the cabinet to agree to negotiations for a three-power alliance with France and

[111] Cadogan to Wilson, 19 Mar. 1939, and Wilson to prime minister, PREM 1/327, fos. 30–8; *Cadogan diaries*, 20 Mar. 1939, p. 162.

[112] M. Muggeridge, ed., *Ciano's diary, 1939–1943* (London, 1947), p. 54.

[113] CC 12 (39), CAB 23/98.

[114] *Chamberlain diary letters*, 19 and 26 Mar. 1939, pp. 394 and 396.

[115] Colvin, *Vansittart*, pp. 303–10.

[116] FP (36) 39, 30 Mar. 1939, CAB 27/624.

[117] *Chamberlain diary letters*, n.d., p. 401; Wilson to Henderson, 12 May 1939, PREM 1/331A, fo. 75; Gilbert, 'Horace Wilson', pp. 8–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Russia. By Chamberlain's account, during their discussion, an idea emerged whereby an alliance could be avoided. The three powers would declare their intentions in certain circumstances to fulfil their obligations under article 16 of the covenant of the League of Nations, which included military as well as economic sanctions against an aggressor. Chamberlain believed that article 16 would at some future date be amended or repealed, giving Britain a chance to revise her relations with Russia.[118] Donald Watt attributes the idea to Wilson and describes it as a 'poisonously stupid and criminally asinine piece of ingenuity', but also notes that Foreign Office officials do not seem to have understood its implications when they prepared a draft for the British ambassador in Moscow to present to the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov.[119] Responsibility for the proposal would seem to be shared by the Foreign Office. Moreover, Molotov's objection to it was based not on the reference to article 16 but to British unwillingness to impose guarantees on the Baltic States against their will.[120] On 7 June Cadogan and Wilson drafted a statement for the prime minister which made clear that Britain and France were ready to give Russia full military support without delay if she were attacked by a European power.[121] There is no evidence in relation to negotiations for a three-power alliance that Wilson diminished the influence of the Foreign Office, most of whose senior officials had doubts about Russia's military capability and her intentions towards her neighbours.[122]

On the other hand, it has been argued that Wilson's informal contacts with Germany in the last months of peace undermined the efforts of those in the Foreign Office who were opposed to appeasement and wanted Hitler to be in no doubt that Britain would fight if Poland were invaded.[123] Wilson met Wohlthat, the German trade commissioner, on 6 June and 18 July; Herbert von Dirksen, the ambassador, on 3 August; and Hesse, on 20 August. Harvey and Jebb, who were respectively private secretaries to Halifax and Cadogan, recorded that the Foreign Office learned of the Wilson–Wohlthat talks in July only when rumours of a peace offer to Germany appeared in the press.[124] However, it is less than certain that Halifax and Cadogan were kept in ignorance, since Harvey and Jebb were not present when the permanent under-secretary had his frequent but unrecorded meetings with Wilson. Nor did Halifax and Cadogan always see fit to let the rest of the Foreign Office know what they knew. For example, Lord Kemsley, the newspaper proprietor had a conversation with Wilson before making a private visit to Germany. Cadogan knew about the visit but other officials were kept in the dark to prevent the Foreign Office Press Department leaking the story to the

[118] *Chamberlain diary letters*, 28 May 1939, p. 418.
[119] D. C. Watt, *How war came* (London, 1989), p. 247.
[120] *DBFP* 3/5, docs. 665, 670.
[121] *Cadogan diaries*, p. 186.
[122] See K. Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the collapse of the Versailles order, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 278–9, 282–3, 284–5, 315–16.
[123] Parker, *Chamberlain and appeasement*, pp. 263–5; Watt, *How war came*, pp. 406–7.
[124] *Harvey diaries*, 23 July 1939, p. 303; Gladwyn, *Memoirs*, p. 93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

press.[125] The case for Wilson diminishing the Foreign Office's influence cannot be securely based on lack of official communication between 10 Downing Street and the Foreign Office.

An alternative approach would be to show that the message that Wilson was communicating to the Germans was at odds with that which the Foreign Office wished to convey. There are problems with the evidence as to what was said in Wilson's conversations with Wohlthat and von Dirksen. Wohlthat was an official in the German ministry of economics, which was headed by Hermann Göring, who did not want war with Britain. Wohlthat therefore misrepresented what was said in his conversations with Wilson in order to persuade Hitler of the case for peace. Von Dirksen similarly attributed views to Wilson that were really his own.[126] According to Wilson, he told Wohlthat at their meeting on 6 June that Germany was disturbing the peace of Europe. At their meeting on 18 July, according to Wohlthat, Wilson gave him a memorandum proposing an Anglo-German non-aggression pact, recognition of the two countries' respective economic interests, and a reopening of the colonial question. Wilson's notes, however, record only that he gave Wohlthat a copy of *The Times* of 30 June containing a speech by Halifax which repeated the prime minister's view that there was an opportunity for Anglo-German co-operation once Germany ceased to disturb the peace of Europe. On the other hand, Wohlthat's report that Wilson had suggested that an Anglo-German declaration renouncing forcible aggression would make Britain's guarantees to Poland and Rumania superfluous is supported by Wilson's account of a later conversation with von Dirksen (see below). Even so, Wilson was not unduly pacific. He ended the conversation on 18 July with a warning: when Wohlthat said that the führer did not wish to become involved in war, Wilson replied that he was not surprised, since Hitler could not have overlooked the tremendous increases that Britain had made in its defensive and offensive preparations, especially the air force, and was unlikely to take the risk of becoming involved in a quarrel. Wohlthat's report noted that Wilson had said that there should be no false impression as to British determination to fight if necessary.[127]

The nature of Wilson's contacts with Wohlthat was widely misunderstood as a result of a one-hour conversation on 20 July between Wohlthat and Robert Hudson, the junior minister at the Department of Overseas Trade, who put forward ideas about Anglo-German economic co-operation. Hudson mentioned the conversation to journalists, and Chamberlain was far from pleased to read newspaper reports that Germany was being offered a British loan to enable Germany to halt rearmament and convert its industry to a sound commercial basis. Whatever Hudson may have said to have started such a rumour, Wohlthat's version of Wilson's ideas states only that 'it would be possible within the framework of German-British co-operation to finance the reorganisation of British and German industry' to avoid unemployment arising from the

[125] Watt, *How war came*, p. 406.
[126] Ibid., pp. 395–400, 402–3.
[127] *DGFP*, D/6, doc. 716; *DBFP* 3/6, doc. 354.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

changeover from production of armaments to civil goods. According to Wilson, the only loan he had talked about with Wohlthat was the one which the Czech government had raised in London after Munich and which had been among the Czech assets frozen by the Treasury after the German occupation of Prague. Wilson would seem to have been non-committal about the loan since Wohlthat did not refer to it in his account of the conversation.[128]

The next German to call on Wilson was von Dirksen, who claimed that Wohlthat's report on his conversations in London had aroused considerable interest in Berlin, but went on to say that Britain's continuing policy of encirclement, as shown by her talks with Poland and Russia, created a lack of confidence. Wilson replied that all British commitments were entirely defensive and once the German government made clear that there would be no further aggression 'the policy of guarantees to potential victims *ipso facto* became inoperative'. Wilson also pointed out that it was impossible for the British government to enter general discussions on Anglo-German relations until public opinion felt circumstances had changed. He suggested that Hitler should reduce the military threat to Poland, exercise patience over Danzig, set up some form of autonomy for Bohemia and Moravia, and announce he was ready to give a lead in Europe designed to substitute harmony and security for the present state of friction and apprehension. Wilson added that it was useless to follow up Wohlthat's ideas for economic co-operation if German troops were marching up and down the Polish frontier. Wilson showed his note on the conversation to Chamberlain and Halifax, who took the view that the approach represented by Wohlthat and von Dirksen should be kept alive, if the Germans wished, by discussing with them an agenda for talks on a general settlement.[129] Ribbentrop, however, did not wish to pursue an initiative that had originated with Göring. On 20 August Hesse told Wilson that the reports by Wohlthat and von Dirksen had made a favourable impression in Berlin, but dismissed Wohlthat as an economist who was out of his depth in political diplomacy. Hesse delivered orally a message from Ribbentrop which made three points: first, the Danzig question should be left to the Germans and Poles to settle; second, once that was done, Hitler would be prepared to offer Britain an alliance; third, refusal of this offer would mean a fight to the finish between the two countries. Wilson simply noted what Hesse had to say and passed on the message to Chamberlain, Halifax, and Cadogan.[130]

On 22 August, the cabinet agreed that the news that Germany and Russia were about to sign a non-aggression pact would not change British policy towards Poland, and a personal letter from Chamberlain to that effect was dispatched to Hitler. Hitler's response was along the same lines as Ribbentrop's message to Wilson. On 26 August Wilson and Butler produced a draft reply to Hitler which

[128] *Chamberlain diary letters*, 23 July 1939, p. 430–1; *DGFP*, D/6, doc. 716, p. 982; *Harvey diaries*, 23 July 1939, p. 303.
[129] *DBFP* 3/6, doc. 533, and Wilson's note, 4 Aug. 1939, PREM 1/330, fo. 1.
[130] Note by Wilson, 20 Aug. 1939, PREM 1/331A, fos. 152–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was criticized in cabinet as being 'somewhat too deferential' and was replaced by a firmer one by Cadogan.[131] Harvey thought that Wilson and Butler were 'working like beavers' for another 'Munich' at which the Poles could be sold out.[132] However, even Cadogan shared Wilson's hopes for a compromise over Danzig.[133] Wilson believed in late August that Hitler would not move at once and was encouraged by intelligence reports of German generals asking whether the Axis with Italy had broken up (following Italian pressure on Hitler to accept direct negotiations with the Poles) and of people in Germany having no illusion that a war would be short.[134] He showed no weakness when Göring's intermediary, the Swedish businessman Birger Dahlerus, phoned him from the British embassy in Berlin on 31 August with German terms for a friendly settlement with Britain: a German voice could be heard repeating Dahlerus's words, and when Dahlerus said that the Poles were obstructing everything, Wilson put down the receiver.[135] Wilson's final contact with the Germans came in the evening of 2 September, the day after the invasion of Poland began, and after Chamberlain had stated in parliament that if Germany withdrew her forces the way would be open for a German–Polish settlement and an international guarantee. Hesse phoned Wilson with an invitation from Ribbentrop to come to Germany to discuss the whole position. Wilson was not tempted to repeat his experience in September 1938: he simply referred to the prime minister's statement and said that Britain could not agree to any conversations until the status quo had been restored.[136]

There is little evidence that Wilson undermined the efforts of the Foreign Office in 1939. He was a channel through which informal contact could be made between Chamberlain and Germany, and was seen as such by the Germans. On the other hand, Wilson was always careful not to commit the prime minister to any initiative. There was certainly a difference of style between Wilson's approach to diplomacy and Cadogan's (and even more so Vansittart's): Wilson's faith that dictators would respond well to genial approaches from Britain was unfounded, and Cadogan had consistently to make any draft by Wilson firmer. However, there was nothing in what Wilson said to the Germans in 1939 to encourage Hitler to believe that Britain would not fight if he invaded Poland.

V

After Chamberlain died in November 1940, Wilson made it his business to defend his late political master's reputation. In October 1941, while still permanent

[131] CC 43(39), 26 Aug. 1939, CAB 23/100. The drafting by Wilson and Butler is in PREM 1/331A, fos. 449–67. Cadogan's draft is in *DBFP*, 3/7, doc. 426.

[132] *Harvey diaries*, 27 Aug. 1939, p. 307.

[133] See *Cadogan diaries*, 24 and 28 Aug. 1939, pp. 200 and 203.

[134] Hoare's MSS notes on crisis, 28 and 29 Aug. 1939, Templewood papers, x, file 5.

[135] Watt, *How war came*, pp. 525–6.

[136] Note by Wilson, 2 Sept. 1939, *DBFP*, 3/9, appendix iv, p. 539. Chamberlain's statement is at 351 HC Deb, 5th ser., 2 Sept. 1939, cols. 280–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

secretary of the Treasury, and therefore with access to official papers, he produced a sixty-page memorandum on Munich, which was clearly intended as a note for the record.[137] He was also active in 1941 in helping the Chamberlain family to recruit a biographer, making inquiries into G. M. Young's 'outlook', and deciding that he was unsuitable, before recommending Keith Feiling, whom he found 'most sympathetic'.[138] Feiling insisted on being free to write the truth as he saw it, and in his book he dismissed Wilson's advice to the prime minister on foreign policy as 'amateur'. Even so, a comparison of his *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1946) and Young's distinctly unsympathetic biography of Baldwin, which appeared in 1952, suggests that the Chamberlain family had been well advised by Wilson. Feiling refused to be influenced by hindsight and produced what was for long the standard defence of Chamberlain as a man of integrity who was aware that on his decision rested the fate of a generation and of the British empire.[139]

Meanwhile Lord Maugham, who had been lord chancellor in Chamberlain's government, published *The truth about the Munich crisis* (1944), and Wilson arranged for copies to be sent to people whom he hoped would be 'wiser' as a result of reading it.[140] The historiographical tide was flowing against appeasement, however, and never stronger than in 1948, when the first volume of Churchill's *History of the Second World War* appeared, with its claim that British foreign policy had been weakened by the National Government's failure to take his advice to accelerate rearmament and to form a grand alliance with Russia.[141] Wilson helped Hoare with a review of the book, suggesting that Churchill glossed over the effects on British policy of the military, economic, and political weakness of France.[142] Wilson was determined not to publish anything himself, but he gave Hoare notes on the case to be made for appeasement when the latter was writing his book, *Nine troubled years*.[143] Subsequently Wilson answered inquiries from other writers on the period, including Sir Evelyn Wrench, who was writing a biography of Geoffrey Dawson, the editor of *The Times* who was associated with appeasement, and Ian Colvin, who was using Vansittart's papers to claim that Chamberlain had ignored warnings about where his foreign policy would lead.[144] Wilson's willingness to engage with Chamberlain's critics was shown by the way that he spoke at length with two young historians, Martin Gilbert

[137] CAB 127/158.

[138] Wilson to Anne Chamberlain, 21 May, 11 June, and 27 July 1941, NC 11/15/124–6.

[139] K. Feiling, *The life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), p. 327; G. M. Young, *Stanley Baldwin* (London, 1952).

[140] Wilson to Anne Chamberlain, 22 Mar. 1944, NC 11/1/615.

[141] Winston S. Churchill: *The Second World War*, I (London, 1948), pp. 205–7, 262–6, 293, 325–8.

[142] Wilson to Hoare, 26 Sept. 1948, Templewood papers, XVII, file 1. Hoare's review is in the *Listener*, vol. 40, 7 Oct. 1948, p. 533.

[143] Wilson to Hoare, 13 Oct. 1946, Templewood papers XVII, file 8a; notes from conversation with Wilson, 27 May 1948, ibid., XIX, file 5.

[144] Wilson to Sir Evelyn Wrench, 10 June 1953, Geoffrey Dawson papers, vol. 93, fos. 197–8, Bodleian Library, Oxford; Colvin, *Vansittart*, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Richard Gott, while they were working on their book, *The appeasers* (1963), and he subsequently corresponded with Gilbert, providing much of the material for the latter's *History Today* article. Gilbert and Gott restated the 'Guilty Men' thesis, but by the time Paul Addison interviewed him in 1967 Wilson believed with some reason that opinion was changing in the light of historical research.[145]

Following the release of government records under the thirty-year rule introduced by the 1968 Public Records Act, revisionist historians showed that Chamberlain had been constrained by domestic political, economic, and military factors as well as diplomatic circumstances. However, Parker made a powerful post-revisionist case in 1993 when he argued that, while Chamberlain's options were restricted by circumstances, he chose appeasement whenever he had a choice.[146] Wilson's defence of Chamberlain was necessarily directed against the 'Guilty Men' view of appeasement, and did not directly address the post-revisionist interpretation. Like revisionist historians, Wilson pointed out that Chamberlain had to take account of domestic political and economic factors as well as international circumstances.[147] According to Wilson, Chamberlain's goals were first, the maintenance of peace and second, rearmament to ensure that Britain would be treated with respect by other countries. Chamberlain believed that the first goal required a more active policy of appeasement than had been pursued down to 1937, but he was also aware that Britain had started late in the armaments race and wished to gain time to be ready for war if it came. Wilson thought that all political parties must accept some of the blame for defence deficiencies, but he attributed the late start to the Labour and Liberal opposition's pacifism. Chamberlain inherited from Baldwin a commitment not to introduce conscription and felt that it would be possible to depart from this pledge only when events brought home the peril faced by the nation, as was the case by April 1939 when conscription was introduced for the first time in peace. Almost as an afterthought Wilson remarked that 'perhaps the Conservative Party ought to have embarked upon a crusade after 1935 to convince the country that the danger demanded immediate rearmament', but added that 'openly throwing over the League of Nations' would have been 'received very unfavourably by large sections of public opinion', including the Labour movement. He thought that Churchill's proposal in 1936 that industry should be put on a war footing would have encountered many practical difficulties and that its efficacy in increasing production of munitions was 'a matter

[145] For shift in academic opinion about this time see D. C. Watt, 'Appeasement: the rise of a revisionist school?', *Political Quarterly*, 36 (1965), pp. 191–213.

[146] Parker, *Chamberlain and appeasement*. The clearest statement of the revisionist case is D. Dilks, '"We must hope for the best and prepare for the worst." The prime minister, the cabinet and Hitler's Germany, 1937–1939', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 73 (1987), pp. 309–52.

[147] What follows is based mainly on Wilson's memorandum 'Munich 1938', Oct. 1941, CAB 127/158, and Hoare's notes from conversations with Wilson, 5 Mar. 1947 and 27 May 1948, Templewood papers, XIX, file 5, and correspondence with Wilson, March–July 1952, ibid., XIX, file 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of speculation'. In contrast, Wilson's Treasury colleague, Sir Frederick Phillips, thought in 1940, with the benefit of hindsight, that failure to put industry on a war basis in 1936 had been an error, large rearmament orders producing nothing for a year or more on account of bottlenecks.[148] Wilson did admit that steps should have been taken before 1938 to prepare the way for changes in industrial practices to allow unskilled men to do skilled men's work, but he doubted whether the trade unions would have been receptive to the idea. The attitude of the key Amalgamated Engineering Union down to the summer of 1939 to attempts to economize on the use of skilled labour suggests that in this respect Wilson was correct.[149]

In his analysis of the international situation Wilson highlighted the isolation of America, the weakness of France, and the determination of Russia to be *tertius gaudens* (that is the third party who would take what advantage it could from disputes between other powers). Wilson believed that Chamberlain was right to suspect that Russia wanted war between Britain and Germany as the only bulwarks against Communism, and that nothing that happened in 1939–40 suggested otherwise. Regarding Munich's critics, he pointed out that Churchill had the freedom of not being in office, and not therefore having to attempt to implement his ideas for an alliance with Russia. Wilson confessed to not being able to understand Vansittart who, while permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office, had tried to keep Italy friendly and had believed that it was worth trying to appease Germany. However, Vansittart had also urged acceleration of rearmament in 1936, on the grounds that the only argument that Germany believed in was force.[150]

Regarding Munich, Wilson was certain that any help given by France to Czechoslovakia would have been half-hearted, a view that receives support from France's inaction while Poland was overrun in 1939. Wilson noted that, in 1938, Chamberlain faced the prospect of war with Germany, Italy, and Japan, knowing that Britain's air defences and civil defence preparations were incomplete. Wilson recalled telling Baldwin after Munich how unsatisfactory it was to have to put up with what had happened, but that any time after spring 1939 Britain would be able to say 'no' to Germany, and that in September 1939 Chamberlain did say 'no'. Wilson never claimed, however, as two American political scientists have done recently, that appeasement was a strategy to buy time for rearmament.[151] As he told Gilbert, the aim of appeasement was not just to postpone war; rather it was an attempt to avoid war altogether by seeking agreement with all European

[148] Phillips to Wilson, 20 June 1940, T 177/56.

[149] R. A. C. Parker, 'British rearmament, 1936–1939: Treasury, trade unions and skilled labour', *English Historical Review*, 96 (1981), pp. 306–43.

[150] Wilson appeared to be referring to the views expressed by Vansittart, in 'The world situation and British rearmament', Dec. 1936, *DBFP* 2/17, appendix II.

[151] N. M. Ripsman and J. S. Levy, 'Wishful thinking or buying time? The logic of British appeasement in the 1930s', *International Security*, 33 (2008), pp. 148–81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

powers, including Germany.[152] But, Wilson argued, Chamberlain was not naïve at Munich: there was nothing unreasonable in uniting all Germans in one country, although Hitler's methods were obnoxious, and it was not until later that Hitler tried to dominate the world. Wilson said that Chamberlain was aware that his policy might fail, but if it did the British people and the world would know that Germany was responsible for the war. Wilson recorded that two days before he died Chamberlain still thought that there had been no alternative. Wilson likewise never changed his mind. As two Treasury officials who knew him well told the author, so great was his confidence in his own intellectual processes he could not conceive that he could have been wrong on any issue, even Munich.[153]

VI

To conclude, Wilson was much more than an obedient civil servant carrying out the prime minister's instructions. On the other hand, even Foreign Office critics did not think he went beyond the bounds of what was proper for a civil servant, although they thought he should have realized that he was being asked by the prime minister to do things which were outside his competence.[154] Regarding Wilson's influence on foreign policy, when there was outright disagreement between him and the Foreign Office, as with his advice to the cabinet in September 1938 that the Czechs should accept the Godesberg terms, or the guarantee to Poland in March 1939, it was the Foreign Office that prevailed. The image of Wilson as an *éminence grise* determining foreign policy is very much overdrawn. Indeed, there is much to be said for David Dilks's view that in all probability British foreign policy would have been essentially the same if Wilson had never set foot in Downing Street.[155] However, this is not the same as saying that Wilson was of no importance. His role as Chamberlain's confidant sustained the prime minister. Wilson's execution of his political master's wishes enabled Chamberlain to have greater control of foreign policy than would otherwise have been the case. Even so, Chamberlain did not have a free hand; although he was adept at managing his cabinet, he could not override it.

This study of Wilson's role has sought to dispel some long-established myths. However, both Wilson's advice to Chamberlain and his unrepentant defence of appeasement after the latter's death broadly confirm Parker's post-revisionist interpretation of appeasement. Even had Britain been better prepared for war in 1938, Wilson would not have favoured combining with France and, especially, Russia to prevent Hitler incorporating German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia into the Reich. On the other hand, in June 1939 Wilson finally accepted the need

[152] Gilbert, 'Horace Wilson', p. 6.

[153] Conversation with Sir Thomas and Lady Padmore, 15 Mar. 1975. My notes have been deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[154] Gladwyn, *Memoirs*, p. 76; Strang, *Home and abroad*, pp. 126–7.

[155] D. N. Dilks, 'The British Foreign Office between the wars', in *Opinion publique et politique extérieure, 1915–1940*, Collection de l'École Française de Rome, 54/2 (Rome, 1984), pp. 165–86, at p. 183.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for a Russian alliance. He persisted in hoping that the dictator powers could be won over by the prospect of economic collaboration, but in his informal contacts with Germans in the summer of 1939 he was a good deal firmer regarding Britain's will to fight if necessary than his critics then and later allowed. In all these respects he faithfully reflected, and no doubt reinforced, Chamberlain's views.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000270 Published online by Cambridge University Press