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The Royal Navy and the Strategic Origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935

by

Clare M. Scammell

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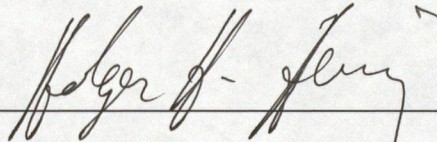
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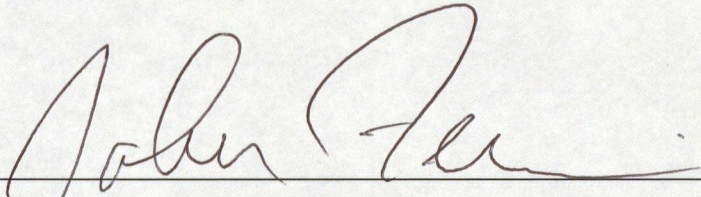
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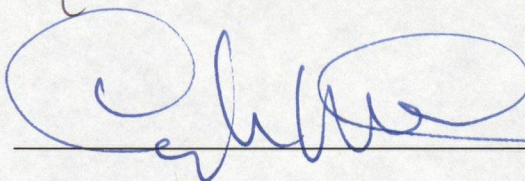
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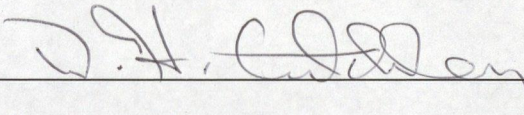
Supervisor, Dr Holger H. Herwig, Department of History



Dr John R. Ferris, Department of History



Dr Douglas M. Peers, Department of History



Dr W. Harriet Critchley, Department of Political Science

22nd May 1996

Date

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 June 1935 the British Government signed a naval accord with Nazi Germany. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement (AGNA) established a ratio of 35:100 between the fleets of Germany and Britain. It also permitted the German Navy to possess forty-five per cent of the total submarine tonnage of the Royal Navy, with a right to theoretical parity if the situation warranted.

The conclusion of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement has been described as 'one of the most startling events of 1935.'¹ Certainly, a catalogue of events earlier that year threatened to preclude *any* agreement being reached between Britain and Germany. In February, an Anglo-French Communiqué stated that no separate agreements on land, air or naval armaments were to be concluded with Germany; only an agreement that dealt with all three areas simultaneously was permissible.² A month later, the British Government published the White Paper on Defence which cited German rearmament as the *raison d'être* for the increase in Britain's armaments.³ The resentment caused by this move in Germany resulted in the postponement of a visit of British Ministers to Berlin. It also spurred Adolf Hitler to announce the existence of a German Air Force, prohibited under the Treaty of Versailles, and to reintroduce conscription, thereby increasing the size of the peacetime army.⁴ Any lingering prospects for an agreement with Germany finally appeared to disappear with the resolutions of Britain, France and Italy at Stresa on 14 April and the League of Nations Council in Geneva on 17 April, condemning German rearmament and unilateral repudiation of the Versailles Treaty.⁵

¹ D.C. Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935: An Interim Judgment', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 28 (June 1956), 155.

² *Documents on British Foreign Policy* [hereafter DBFP], Second Series, vol. XII, No. 400, 482-4.

³ C.P. 38 (35), 'Statement Relating to Defence, issued in connection with the House of Commons Debate on March 11, 1935', 11 March, 1935, CAB 24/253.

⁴ Telegram from von Neurath to the German Embassies, 16 March, 1935, *Documents on German Foreign Policy* [hereafter DGFP], Series C, vol. III, No. 532.

⁵ The Joint Resolution of the Italo-Franco-British Conference at Stresa, 11-14 April, 1935, *Survey of International Affairs*, 1935, vol. I (London: Humphrey Milford, 1936), 159-161; League of Nations Resolution, 17 April, 1935, *ibid.*, 163-165.

Despite these events, Anglo-German naval negotiations were held and an agreement signed. In its final form, the AGNA was no less startling than the circumstances which had preceded it. The agreement marked Britain's de facto recognition of a German Navy that contravened Part V of the Treaty of Versailles and effectively revised - unilaterally, without consultation with the other signatories - the naval clauses of that settlement. The thirty-five per cent ratio conceded to Germany represented a threefold expansion of the German fleet over the naval limitations of Versailles. The AGNA therefore seemed to contradict all of Britain's previous declarations and indicate a change in Britain's approach to Germany. It was little wonder, therefore, that Hitler described 18 June 1935 as 'the happiest day of his life.'⁶

The response to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement from Britain's domestic and foreign critics was far less enthusiastic. Opponents of the AGNA charged that Hitler's word - or for that matter, Britain's - could not be trusted, that what had been sanctioned was in fact a European arms race combined with a slap in the face to France. The diplomatic effect of the agreement therefore outweighed any advantages gained in the naval sphere. Moreover, by breaching both the Stresa and League Resolutions, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement actually represented Britain's moral approval of German rearmament.⁷

Historians have affirmed these criticisms of the AGNA. According to the conventional view, events between 1939 and 1945 demonstrated that Hitler's word could not be trusted, that the AGNA assumed that it could, that the British Government were negligent in signing the Agreement and also guilty of sapping whatever hope for success there might have been in the Stresa Front. One of the first things to note about the historiography of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, however, is the extremely limited nature of its scope and the number of issues which it does not address. As the first armaments agreement which

⁶ Charles Bloch, 'Great Britain, German Rearmament, and the Naval Agreement of 1935', in *European Diplomacy Between Two Wars, 1919-1939* ed. Hans W. Gatzke (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 148.

⁷ For a typical example of the tone of French criticism of the AGNA see André Géraud ("Pertinax"), 'France and the Anglo-German Naval Treaty', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 1 (October 1935), 51-61.

any Power concluded with Nazi Germany, the signature of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement can plausibly be regarded as a pivotal point in the development of both British and German foreign and naval policy in the 1930s. Nonetheless, while this treaty is mentioned in every account of the appeasement era, it has scarcely ever been addressed in detail. Both British and German scholars have tended to overlook, or at least disregard, the naval accord in their analyses of this period. Why this should have been the case is unclear. Certainly, the British Government were reluctant to discuss the Anglo-German Naval Agreement at the Nuremberg trials. It was, after all, an embarrassing episode in British pre-war history, one which was widely regarded as marking the first step in the policy of appeasement, a policy that had patently failed to avert major war. It would seem that many British historians soon afterwards adopted a similar attitude. They may also have felt that they did not *need* to discuss the agreement, preferring to concentrate - in the immediate post-war environment - on some other, more successful aspect of the struggle against Nazi Germany, or more significant element of appeasement. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement, that is, was seen as one among many symptoms of appeasement, one which did not require special treatment.

German historical scholarship is also conspicuous for the absence of any thorough assessments of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. As Keith Bird has observed, 'in spite of the importance of this topic for the navy and Hitler's foreign policy the lack of an extensive monograph of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty is surprising.'⁸ Bird attributes this deficiency to the fact that 'the state of historiography of modern German history in general and naval history is still very much embroiled in the controversy over the 'continuity' of German history and the significance of 'ideological factors'.⁹ In other words, German naval history during this period has been subsumed into the historical controversy over the continuity of German foreign policy from the Second to Third Reich

⁸ Keith W. Bird, *German Naval History. A Guide to the Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 553-554.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

and the tendency to study the Reichsmarine as an institution representative of Nazi society and state. Consequently, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, as an event in itself worthy of examination, has fallen by the wayside in the path of German historical scholarship.¹⁰

As far as Britain's role in the signature of the AGNA is concerned - and the primary concern of this thesis - most studies rely almost exclusively on D.C. Watt's 1956 article on the agreement.¹¹ This is problematic for two reasons. First, as the author acknowledges, this article was only meant to be 'an interim judgment.' It was never intended to be the fountain-head for all subsequent discussions on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, but to be a *temporary* and *provisional* interpretation until such time as others could turn their full attention to the agreement, and challenge, if need be, Watt's interpretation in the light of new evidence. This last point introduces the second, more fundamental, problem in relying on Watt's article for assessments of the AGNA. At the time of writing, Watt - as an editor of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* - had a fair degree of access to the official German record of events, but he did not have access to the relevant British documentary evidence, Foreign Office or Admiralty, then still classified under the Thirty Year Rule, nor to German naval records. Watt himself fully understood the situation: 'a *full analysis* of the motives of the two participants,' he cautioned, 'must wait until the *relevant documents* on both sides have been published.'¹²

Most of the pertinent documents have been available for ten years. Historians have, however, so far failed to reconsider the Agreement using all the material at their disposal. Watt's article remains, for many of them, the key source for their analyses despite its incomplete and now outdated evidence, and its tendency to read a strategic-diplomatic agreement between two states from the perspective of the diplomatic service only. As a

¹⁰ In recent years, this situation has begun to be remedied by the publication of a number of studies on the naval policies of the Third Reich. See Jost Dülffer, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine. Reichspolitik und Flottenbau 1920-1939* (Dusseldorf: Drost Verlag, 1973); idem., 'Das deutsche-englische Flottenabkommen von 18. Juni 1935' in *Marine Rundschau*, LXIX (1972), 641-659; Michael Salewski, 'England, Hitler und die Marine', in *Vom Sinn der Geschichte* ed. O. Franz (Stuttgart: 1976), 163-84.

¹¹ Watt, 'Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935'.

¹² Ibid., 159.

result, works on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement have therefore made some dramatic - and erroneous - assumptions. The AGNA has been variously described, for example, as marking Britain's 'abject surrender' to Germany and 'the consummation of a complete German moral ascendancy over the British';¹³ as a 'landmark on the road to war';¹⁴ and as an agreement concluded in haste, revealing 'an apparently high and naïve level of trust in Hitler.'¹⁵ Such conclusions are typical of the manner in which the Anglo-German Naval Agreement has traditionally been interpreted. By focusing on the after-effects of the AGNA, rather than its origins, and making retroactive Hitler's intentions towards Britain between 1939 and 1945, historians have misconstrued the nature of the agreement. As the documentary evidence on which this thesis is based demonstrates, none of these assumptions can be substantiated, and as a whole, these conclusions are absurd.

Moreover, in analyzing the British motivations behind the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, most studies continue to follow Watt's approach and focus on the political and diplomatic impulses from within the inner circles of the British Government, particularly the Cabinet and Foreign Office. They either ignore, or underestimate, the role of the Admiralty in this process in general and they misunderstand a fundamental dimension of the reason why Britain pursued this agreement. In fact, the Admiralty were instrumental in the signature of the AGNA. They provided the major impetus for and the most sustained influence in the negotiations leading to the agreement. One simply cannot understand the British motivation for concluding the treaty without examining the Admiralty's motivations. A study of its enthusiasm for the naval agreement, moreover, helps one to understand British naval policy between the wars.

¹³ Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (New Jersey: Humanities Press Institute Inc., 1972), 407.

¹⁴ Bloch, 'The Naval Agreement of 1935', 149.

¹⁵ Christopher Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control, 1921-1937* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 179.

Surprisingly, few historians have examined this *naval* aspect of the Agreement, and these have been misconceived.¹⁶ In particular, they have tended to analyze the Admiralty's enthusiasm for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement simply within the context of the development of the German Navy, underestimating the effect that the danger from other naval Powers, in particular Japan and Italy, had on naval views.

In the mid-1930s, the Royal Navy faced more than one 'ultimate potential enemy.'¹⁷ As defenders of the first bulwark of Imperial Defence - seapower - the Admiralty was responsible for maintaining the security of *all* Britain's global interests and possessions, not just the Home Islands. In 1935, however, it was *not* Germany in the North Sea, but the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Far East, that most concerned the Sea Lords. In fact, the Admiralty faced a strategic dilemma. Since 1921, it had tried to maintain a Two-Power Standard - the ability to provide in the Far East a naval force of sufficient strength to secure the Empire against Japanese aggression and, at the same time, to ensure against interference by the strongest naval Power in Europe. By 1935, it could not meet this standard. The Admiralty's fear was that conflict in one sphere of operations would necessarily lead to war in the other. If the naval forces of either Germany or Japan could be limited, however, then the Royal Navy would be able to fulfill a Two-Power Standard.

It is this aspect of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement - as a palliative for a broad strategic problem in more than one sphere of operations - that is addressed in this thesis. The nature of the strategic dilemma faced by the Admiralty in 1935 cannot be understood by reference to Nazi Germany alone. Other naval Powers also need to be considered. Neither can the strategic position in which the Royal Navy found itself by 1935 be understood by adopting a restrictive, myopic time frame. Decisions made and policies pursued since the end of the First World War were important contributory factors. An

¹⁶ See for example, Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, vol. II *The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930-1939* (London: Collins, 1976); Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy. British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ This was the phrase used by the Defence Requirements Committee in early 1934 which concluded that Germany was to be regarded as Britain's principal enemy. C.P. 64 (34), 'Imperial Defence Policy: Report of the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee', 28 February, 1934, CAB 16/109.

examination of the Admiralty's role in the conclusion of the AGNA must therefore begin with the immediate post-war years. By adopting this long-term approach and examining Britain's enthusiasm for the treaty from a purely naval standpoint, using all the material that has most recently become available, this thesis provides a valuable counterbalance to the historiography of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

CHAPTER I

BRITISH SEAPOWERS PARAMOUNT, 1921-30

“Parliament, I respectfully suggest, must be more generally watchful over our security, not only when the going is dangerous, but when there seems to be a safe road ahead.”¹

When assessing the strategic origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement (AGNA), the historian could well begin with the origins of the modern Royal Navy (RN): from its bureaucratic origins in the sixteenth century² to its singular domination of the world by the nineteenth century. When one considers that the primary aim of the Admiralty was not merely to establish British supremacy at sea, but, more importantly, to *maintain* that hegemony, such an approach seems even more plausible. The Admiralty's enthusiasm for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935 can therefore be seen as just another attempt in the long chain of naval history to preserve British power at sea.

Such a conclusion would not be wrong *per se* - in signing the AGNA, the Royal Navy was motivated by the desire to preserve its position among the naval powers - but as a *modus operandi*, this long-term approach is both too general and simplistic a starting-point to discuss Admiralty motives in signing this agreement. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement was the product of a unique set of conditions, shaped by the events of the time. It is not sufficient to ascribe it simply to Britain's fear of naval insecurity. To do so would reveal very little about the Admiralty's role in signing the agreement. By definition, therefore, the starting-point for any evaluation of the strategical origins of the AGNA needs to be drawn a little closer to home. Where, then, should one begin?

¹ Lord Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence* vol. II *It Might Happen Again* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1947), xiii.

² This may be dated to 1546 when a Navy Board was established.

Although the approach that stresses longevity in the Admiralty's motivations for concluding the AGNA has largely been discounted for present purposes, its basic premise - concern for the preservation of British sea power - is fundamentally correct. During the inter-war years, Britain found her command of the seas in question as never before.³ Faced with increasing and steady competition from other naval powers, both for control of the seas and in terms of the development of new weapons and technologies, the challenge to the security of her Empire and Home Waters was both quantitative *and* qualitative in character. Furthermore, domestic political considerations were also beginning to effect the Admiralty's ability to execute its defence responsibilities. Not only were political and electoral demands for increased social spending impinging upon the budgets of the Fighting Services, but retrenchment was also the order of the day at the Treasury. Against a backdrop of monetary restraint and defence cuts, the Royal Navy therefore faced additional financial challenges in seeking to fulfill its role as the guardian of the first principle of Imperial Defence, namely, the maintenance of the Empire's sea communications. As G.A.H. Gordon puts it, 'British seapower had never before been disfavoured by so hostile a configuration of influences as that which came to bear after the 'War-to-end-wars.' '⁴

The origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935 can therefore be traced to these changed circumstances and the Admiralty's need to reconcile its naval commitments in both Europe and the Far Eastern Empire; to maintain its naval supremacy and to protect British territories against seaborne invasion. Nevertheless, in spite of this agreement, the Royal Navy's strength had largely dissipated by 1939. Britain's ability to cast her naval power across the globe; her position as having the largest and most modern fleet in the world; the paramountcy of her maritime trade; her immense naval armaments capacity - essentially all the characteristics that defined Great

³ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control, 1921-37* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 5.

⁴ G.A.H. Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement Between the Wars. A Reappraisal of Rearmament* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 69.

Britain's maritime supremacy - had either vanished or were at least greatly reduced by the outbreak of World War II.⁵

Traditional interpretations of the inter-war period date the decline of British seapower to the 1920s.⁶ This argument is predicated on several assumptions: first, that fear of American animosity led Great Britain to gradually reduce its naval strength, culminating in the rise of the United States Navy (USN) as the world's predominant navy;⁷ second, that British politicians, reacting against the aggressive 'realist' attitudes of previous years, *willingly* sacrificed the nation's naval supremacy on the altar of post-war liberalism;⁸ and third, that naval limitation agreements damaged the Royal Navy's ability to defend both the Home Waters and Empire irreparably. Finally, it is assumed that the Admiralty's efforts to meet its strategic responsibilities were hamstrung by the retrenchment policies of the Treasury. These were epitomized by the imposition of the so-called 'Ten Year Rule' by the Cabinet in 1919, which stated that 'there would be no great European war for the next five or ten years',⁹ thus making expensive service policies unnecessary.¹⁰

Recent historical scholarship, however, has called into question such assumptions.¹¹ Britain's decline in power during the 1920s was marginal not fatal; she retained both her

⁵ John R. Ferris, ' "It is our business in the Navy to command the Seas": The Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy, 1919-1929' in *Far-Flung Lines* eds. B.J.C. McKercher & Gregory C. Kennedy (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 125.

⁶ Known broadly as the 'declinist' school of British history, the chief exponents of this view include Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Fontana Press, 1988), *idem.*, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976); Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Eyre, Methuen, 1972); B.B. Schofield, *British Sea Power* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1967). Stephen Roskill's two volume *Naval Policy Between the Wars* vol. I *The Period of Anglo-American Naval Antagonism, 1919-1929* (London: Collins, 1968) and vol. II *The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930-1939* (London: Collins, 1976) remains the prevailing account of British naval history between the wars.

⁷ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 201, 218.

⁸ Bernard Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest and Sea Power During the Pax Britannica* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

⁹ Cabinet meeting, 5 Aug. 1919, Cabinet records [hereafter CAB], 23/15, [P]ublic [R]ecord [O]ffice, London (Unless otherwise stated, all further references are from the PRO).

¹⁰ Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 273-9; Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 21; G.C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979); Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, 215.

¹¹ The proponents of this view, known collectively as the 'London School', include Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, 1919-1926* (London: MacMillan, 1989); *idem.*, 'The Greatest Power on Earth': Great Britain in the 1920s', *International History Review*, XIII, 4 (November 1991), 726-50; *idem.*, 'Treasury Control, The Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919-24', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 4 (1987), 859-883; *idem.*, 'Last Decade of British Maritime

military and economic might in general, and her maritime supremacy in particular. Thus, British naval superiority neither decayed nor passed to the United States in the 1920s. In fact, the Royal Navy's strength immediately after the First World War has been underestimated. As one scholar points out, 'in 1919 Britain possessed the world's greatest fleet and naval armament capacity and the ability to master any threat at sea: so too did it in 1929.'¹² However, before the claims of the 'London School' can be either rejected or substantiated, it is necessary to survey briefly Britain's maritime position in the 1920s.

According to the conventional view, the Washington Conference of 1922 first set the standard for the decline of British seapower, the first occasion that a naval disarmament treaty had been concluded. The course of the negotiations and the treaties that came out of the Conference are well known, and only those provisions which directly affected the position of the Royal Navy need be recounted.¹³ The Five-Power Treaty established ratios in capital ships and aircraft carriers of 5:5:3:1.75:1.75 for the United States, Britain, Japan, France, and Italy, respectively. In addition, a ten-year building holiday in capital ships was to be observed, after which the powers would reduce the number of such vessels to 15, 15 and 10 for Britain, the United States and Japan, with an upper limit of 35,000 tons and 16-inch guns set for the new capital ships. On British insistence, no limits were fixed for other categories of warships, although a maximum displacement of 10,000 tons and 8-inch guns was placed on cruisers.

The guidelines for the future naval strength and policy of the powers were therefore established at Washington in 1922. Accordingly, some historians have interpreted the Treaty as the departure point for Britain's post-war naval decline. Thus, in addition to

Supremacy,'; B.J.C. McKercher, 'Wealth, Power and the New International Order: Britain and the American Challenge in the 1920s', *Diplomatic History*, 12 (1988), 411-441; idem., '“Our Most Dangerous Enemy”: Great Britain Pre-eminent in the 1930's', *International History Review*, XIII, 4 (November 1991), 751-783; Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement*. To this list may be added Orest Babij, 'The Royal Navy and the Defence of the British Empire, 1928-1934', in *Far-Flung Lines*; idem., 'The Second Labour Government and British Maritime Security, 1929-1931', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 6, no. 3. (1995), 645-671.

¹² Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', 125.

¹³ See Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, ch. 8.

establishing the strategical limits for the inter-war navy, it is concluded that the Washington Naval Treaty 'signified British acceptance that she would henceforth share her naval superiority, and that she was prepared to greatly reduce her naval strength.'¹⁴ Even contemporaries, such as Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, First Sea Lord 1933-1938 and a delegate at the conference, believed that the Treaty had commenced a 'long period of naval decay, of scrapping of weapons.'¹⁵ Under the terms of the treaty, Britain *was* required to scrap a large number of its capital ships, but it is often ignored that they were some of the oldest warships of the pre-Jutland fleet, and the abandonment by the Japanese and the United States governments of their construction programmes more than balanced the equation.

Moreover, such claims do not square with the facts. The Washington Treaty inhibited the quality and quantity of Britain's fleet *less* than those of the other powers.¹⁶ In the first place, the Royal Navy had ended the war in a very favourable position vis-à-vis carrier strength, and despite Washington, still had twice as many of these vessels as either the Americans or the Japanese.¹⁷ Furthermore, between 1922 and 1926, Britain laid down and *completed* more warship tonnage than any other power. The Royal Navy was thus engaged in a fairly expensive rearmament programme during this period. Of the £1,010 million spent on the armed forces between 1922 and 1930, the Admiralty received over half.¹⁸ Until 1930, therefore, the Royal Navy was both larger than the United States Navy and equal to the combined strengths of the Japanese and any other single European navy.¹⁹

¹⁴ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 29. See also Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 277.

¹⁵ Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again*, 7.

¹⁶ Ferris, 'Last Decade of Maritime Supremacy', 132.

¹⁷ Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement*, 70. It should be noted, however, that Britain's superiority in aircraft carriers during the early 1920s was temporary. The United States were making great strides in improving the technical efficiency of their carriers at this time, and by 1928 had surpassed the RN in quantitative terms as well.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹ Ferris, 'Great Britain in the 1920s', 738.

This state of affairs, however, would not have been possible without two important prerequisites. The first was the existence of a strong ship-building sector and naval armaments capacity.²⁰ It was not until the late 1920s that industrial decline and fiscal orthodoxy began to have an appreciable effect on Britain's armaments industry.²¹ The second was the considerable support the Admiralty enjoyed from both the government and the public - at least until 1926 - in their pursuit of a naval policy that would safeguard both the security of the Empire and the Royal Navy's maritime supremacy. Though 'liberal' beliefs may have come to affect strategic policy in the interwar years, 'realist' attitudes were also evident. The desire to reduce expenditure in favour of social reform certainly remained on the agenda, but not to the exclusion of Britain's interests overseas. British security at sea, therefore, continued to be a non-negotiable matter of principle.

That Great Britain remained the strongest seapower in the 1920s and maintained her supremacy becomes even more credible when the very nature of seapower is taken into account. As John Ferris has argued, Britain's power in the 1920s should not be measured simply by her ability - or inability - to fight a war in 1939. Indeed, his main point of contention with the 'declinist' school of British history is its tendency to measure Britain's position in the inter-war years by her position in 1940, thus projecting backward into the 1920s and 1930s.²² However, 'British power cannot be computed by a simple numerical comparison between the British navy and the United States navy, or between the industrial production of Great Britain and Germany';²³ maritime supremacy is not always as tangible as the vessels and effectives that sail the seas. A nation's strength depends also on how it is perceived by other powers, on the prestige that is accorded to it. Thus,

If reality governs the course of war, reputation determines that of peace. A weak state which others regard as strong and do not challenge will be strong. A strong

²⁰ Ibid., 737-8.

²¹ McKercher, 'Our Most Dangerous Enemy', 752.

²² Ferris, 'Great Britain in the 1920s', 729.

²³ Ibid., 730.

state which others regard as weak may, as a direct result, decline in power. Both the perception and the reality may be a source of weakness or of strength....The prestige of a state is not merely a reflection of its power, but an element of it, and derives from many sources, from observation but also from the imagination.²⁴

As Ferris has demonstrated, British prestige in the 1920s was high. Though her economic strength was steadily declining, her influence was rising. It was not until the mid-1930s, with the loss of that reputation, that the reality of Britain's defense position became clear to the powers that had once respected her.

Finally, the Royal Navy's position as the world's dominant maritime power during the 1920s was reinforced by the financial and commercial strength of the British merchant marine.²⁵ By 1930, British merchant tonnage had reached a peak of 20,438,444 tons, compared to an American total of 11,388,000 tons.²⁶ The significance of the British preeminence in merchant marine ability was not lost on the United States Navy, which recognized that the superior size and ability of the merchant marine gave the Royal Navy a considerable advantage in global operations.²⁷

In retrospect, therefore, the claims of the 'London School' seem valid. In contrast to the 'declinist' interpretation, Great Britain did not decline in power during the 1920s. She retained her position as the world's foremost naval and maritime power. Supported by a network of overseas bases, and the largest and most modern fleet in the world, the Royal Navy continued to operate freely on a global scale. The strength of Britain's commercial and industrial sectors also ensured that her pre-war dominance of maritime trade and shipbuilding would remain unhindered until the 1930s. Fear of American antagonism, economic and fiscal restraints, the infusion of 'liberal' attitudes into British political

²⁴ Ibid., 731.

²⁵ Gregory C. Kennedy, 'Great Britain's Maritime Strength and the British Merchant Marine, 1922-1935', *The Mariner's Mirror*, vol. 80, no. 1 (February 1994), 66-76.

²⁶ Ibid., 71. Kennedy's figures for his discussion of the size of the British versus the American merchant fleet are from *Brassey's, 1934*, 'Standing of the World's Merchant Fleets', 105-17 and 'Merchant Shipped with the suction', 335-43. However, these figures do not take into account the fact that much of the American merchant fleet was under Liberian and Panamanian registry. These figures may therefore need qualification.

²⁷ Ibid., 71.

culture, the Washington naval limitation treaty - none of these factors was sufficient, either on its own or in combination, to act as a straitjacket on the Royal Navy.

However, the loss of British maritime supremacy by 1939 still needs to be explained. If the relatively weakened position of Britain's navy at the outbreak of World War II was *not* the result of decisions made or policies pursued during the 1920s, as the conventional view would make believe, then what was it? The remainder of this chapter will argue that it was the outcome of events *after* 1929, and not before, that culminated in the decline of British seapower during the 1940s. It was in the period after 1929-30 that 'Britain turned abruptly from maritime security toward dangerous seas.'²⁸ Specifically, it was the events and decisions of the early 1930s, and *not* the 1920s, that constituted the real challenge to the future maritime strength of the Royal Navy. The 1930 London Naval Treaty (LNT) in particular marks the turning-point in the Admiralty's post-war fortunes. The roots of Britain's loss of maritime supremacy are to be found in the decisions and policies of the early thirties. Furthermore, it is in this context - as an attempt to 'cut the Gordian knot' - that the origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, and the Admiralty's enthusiasm for it, must be viewed.

ii

The 'opening gambits'²⁹ to the 1930 London Naval Conference actually began three years prior to that date, with the convening of the Geneva Naval Limitation Conference, June - August 1927. Called by President Calvin Coolidge of the United States, the conference was both an attempt to break the impasse reached in the discussions of the naval draft at the Preparatory Commission of the World Disarmament Conference and an

²⁸Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', 145.

²⁹ Richard Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament. Naval Rivalry and Arms Control 1922-1933* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 51.

effort to resolve some of the naval questions left unanswered by the Washington Treaty of 1922.

After 1922, the main stumbling block to further naval limitation had been the question of cruisers. Due largely to British intransigence, it had proved impossible at Washington to limit auxiliary vessels, that is, cruisers, destroyers and submarines. As the principal means of protecting Britain's extensive seaborne lines of communication, the Admiralty was generally reluctant to compromise the security of their lifelines and trade routes to and from the Empire by reducing either the quantity or quality of cruisers.³⁰ Following the Conference, the cruiser question became a major point of contention between the United States and Great Britain; a great deal of ill-will and mistrust was generated on both sides of the Atlantic. The roots of such animosity stemmed from the importance that both countries attached to the cruiser in the post-war years.

Following the Washington Conference, with its *de facto* creation of a new Two-Power Standard, British naval policy had effectively been reformulated. The possibility of a war with an extra-European power had now to be entertained.³¹ In particular, the growth of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) after the Great War meant that a deterrent naval presence in the Far East would now have to become a *major* task for the British Fleet.³² As a corollary to this eastern orientation of naval policy, and given the restrictions placed on capital ship construction at the Washington Conference, the cruiser assumed greater importance as a central component, not just of Imperial Defence, but also of the Navy's war plans, primarily as a weapon for blockade.³³ In particular, the smaller class of cruiser - the 6-inch, 6,500 ton vessel - was favoured over the larger cruiser for tactical and strategic reasons. This type of cruiser was much more appropriate

³⁰ Admiralty memorandum on 'United States Proposals for the Reduction of Armaments', 21 November, 1921, Admiralty papers [hereafter ADM] 1/8735/72.

³¹ 'War Memorandum', Plans Division, 20 January, 1920, ADM 116/3124.

³² The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 had, before the Washington Conference, provided a small measure of security against Japanese aggression. The Alliance was not renewed in 1922.

³³ For a discussion of the cruiser's usefulness in war, see Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 11.

for patrolling the narrow sea lanes of the North Sea and Mediterranean and the trade routes of the Far-Eastern Empire.

The cruiser also acquired greater importance for the United States Navy after 1918. One of the primary reasons that America had entered the war was because as a neutral, she had been unable to protect the integrity of her trade from U-boat attack and blockade. After the war, the United States recognized the need to safeguard her trade in a conflict, whether as a non-belligerent or a participant. American navalism and its 'Big Navy' champions in both the Republican and Democratic parties therefore began to advocate the need for 'a navy second to none'; for a navy that would make the United States the dominant sea power. Since capital ships and aircraft carriers had been restricted by the Washington Conference, efforts in naval limitation focused on the cruiser.³⁴ Whereas the RN came to favour by 1926 the construction of 6,500 ton cruisers with 6-inch guns by all powers, the USN preferred a heavier class of cruiser - 10,000 tons with 8-inch guns. Not only would this class afford the USN more mobility in terms of range and speed, but also greater gun power in protecting its isolated bases in the Pacific.

During the later 1920s, the cruiser question therefore introduced the distinct possibility of a naval competition developing between the United States and Britain. The problem faced by both the USN and the RN, however, was the increasing difficulty in securing the naval appropriations necessary to sustain that rivalry. The US Navy Board in particular was confronted with strong opposition from Congress in its attempts to build 'a navy second to none'. Although the Butler Cruiser Bill - providing for eight 10,000 ton, 8-inch cruisers - successfully passed the House in late 1924, its passage had been difficult and secured without appropriations.³⁵ Moreover, congressional resistance remained strong - a large cruiser force was both expensive and, given the continuing efforts to solve the problem of disarmament by the League, considered unnecessary.³⁶

³⁴ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 14-15.

³⁵ Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 18-20.

³⁶ Although the US was not a member of the League, a number of initiatives were undertaken, some with the participation of the US, in an attempt to further the cause of disarmament. In February 1924, for

This difficulty in securing money for naval construction was not peculiar to the USN, however. After 1926, the British Admiralty also found it increasingly difficult to muster support for its naval programmes. As seen above, this had not always been the case. Until the mid-1920s, the RN enjoyed considerable government and public support in the pursuit of its policies. In the long-term, the Admiralty aimed to build a Navy that could bolster Britain's imperial and global power; in the short-term, its aim was to meet the Japanese threat in the East. However, these aims had been advanced by exaggerating the danger of the IJN in the Pacific. As at least one commentator has pointed out, 'the two objectives were linked. The Admiralty did see a Japanese threat, but it also distorted that danger so as to rationalize the greater aim.'³⁷

By 1927, however, 'as the plausibility of this case collapsed, so did that of the policy which it had justified, while the sceptics came to be seen as prophets.'³⁸ The Japanese menace had failed to materialize, and, in the absence of any visible threat, confidence in the Admiralty's arguments collapsed. Neither the Cabinet nor the Treasury would support the programmes that had been directed at Japan; programmes which had, moreover, been escalating rapidly in cost.³⁹ Furthermore, the public's order of financial priorities had changed; social reform and not expansionism in the far reaches of the Empire was the order of the day. With the continuance of Anglo-American tensions, heightened by the controversy over belligerent rights, the Royal Navy was further singled out as a force for

example, a League-sponsored meeting in Rome was held to consider extending the provisions of the Washington Naval Treaty to other states. In October 1924 the Geneva Protocol was signed, establishing a Permanent Court of International Justice for the settlement of disputes. In October 1925 the Locarno Treaties were signed. Finally, in December 1925, the Preparatory Commission for the Disarmament Conference was established.

³⁷ Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', 136.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁹ In 1924-25 the Navy's net estimates totalled £55,800,000. The following year (1925-26) the figure was £60,500,000. Moreover, in 1926 it was estimated that the Admiralty's construction programme for the years 1931-36 would reach a cost of between £80-85,000,000 each year. Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Security', 148; *idem.*, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 216.

recrimination.⁴⁰ Accordingly, after 1926 the Royal Navy's programmes and estimates were steadily reduced.⁴¹

Faced with the difficulty of securing finances for their developmental policies, yet still under mutual pressure to construct cruisers, both the British Admiralty and the United States Navy Board turned towards naval limitation as a means to bring their programmes down to more viable proportions. In the first instance, it was hoped that the Preparatory Commission of the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva might provide a solution. Convened in May 1926, the Commission's mandate was to draft a disarmament convention to prepare for a general disarmament conference in the future.

Progress was slow. The fundamental obstacle to agreement amongst the nineteen nations represented was the difficulty of reconciling the strategic and weapons requirements of maritime powers with land states. The difficulty later experienced in the Disarmament Conference in 1932 in achieving naval limitation whilst simultaneously establishing the requirements of land-based powers was therefore reflective of the impasse experienced by the Preparatory Commission in 1926.⁴²

In February 1927, frustrated by the course of events at Geneva, President Coolidge invited the major naval Powers - Britain, Japan, France, and Italy - to attend separate naval discussions with the US delegation.⁴³ Coolidge had also been under pressure from the 'Big Navy' group in Congress to begin a new programme of cruiser construction, in spite of his policy of limiting naval expenditure. The idea of a special conference to deal with this particular aspect of disarmament was therefore very attractive. Pending the results of the General Disarmament Conference, Coolidge's aim was to extend the

⁴⁰ One of the best discussions of Anglo-American tensions during this period, especially the issue of belligerent versus neutral rights, is McKercher, *The Second Baldwin Government and the United States, 1924-1929. Attitudes and Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴¹ In 1926-27 the Navy's net estimates totalled £58,000,000. By 1932-33, this figure had been reduced to £50,476,000, Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, 586.

⁴² McKercher, 'Of Horns and Teeth: The Preparatory Commission and the World Disarmament Conference, 1926-34', in *Arms Limitation and Disarmament. Restraints on War, 1899-1939* ed. B.J.C. McKercher (Westport and London: Praeger, 1992), 174.

⁴³ CAB 10 (27), 16 February, 1927, CAB 23/54.

Washington Treaty capital ship ratios to auxiliary vessels, including cruisers, and to conclude an agreement that could then serve as a model for the Disarmament Conference. However, the response to Coolidge's proposal was disappointing - both France and Italy refused to attend. The French claimed that naval affairs could not be considered in isolation from land and air questions, and the Italians cited poor relations with France and demanded that parity with the French Fleet be recognized beforehand.⁴⁴

With the absence of the two major continental powers and Anglo-American tension, the portents for the Conference were not promising. Indeed, the 'Coolidge' Conference, which ran from June to August 1927, ended ultimately in failure. Agreement *was* reached on the limitation of destroyers and submarines,⁴⁵ but the real rock on which the discussions floundered was the cruiser issue. Even before the Conference opened, the potential obstacles to agreement on this question were formidable. In April the British Admiralty had reasserted their 1922 claim to cruiser superiority, based on the Royal Navy's Imperial commitments, and opposed the principle of parity.⁴⁶ The United States Navy Board had retaliated by declaring that 'Equality with Great Britain is the sole basis on which a just treaty limitation can be imposed'.⁴⁷ The principles of the United States and Britain as the Conference began were therefore diametrically opposed.

Nevertheless, it was felt on both sides that agreement was possible. After all, both countries had been working together successfully on the Preparatory Commission.⁴⁸ However, this *general* consensus on requirements for the Disarmament Conference did not extend to cover *particular* requirements, especially in the cruiser class. Due largely to a lack of pre-conference preparation and discussion by the participants, the needs and desires of each power in this category had not been subjected to scrutiny.

⁴⁴ 222nd Mtg., 4 March, 1927, CAB 2/5.

⁴⁵ Displacement for submarines was limited to 1,800 tons; the maximum tonnage for flotilla leaders was set at 1,850 tons and ordinary destroyers at 1,500 tons.

⁴⁶ Plans Division memo, 14 April, 1927, ADM 1/8715.

⁴⁷ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, 502.

⁴⁸ McKercher, *Second Baldwin Government*, 63; Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, 498-9.

As far as the United States was concerned, the primary goal was parity with Great Britain. In this respect, the Navy Board proposed the extension of the Washington ratio in capital ships to three classes: cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. It opposed the building of smaller cruisers - for which it had no need and which it regarded as obsolete for trade protection - and recommended a total cruiser tonnage of 400,000 tons - although it was hoped that a figure of between 250,000 and 300,000 tons could be agreed upon. Finally, the Board proposed changing the age limit of cruisers to twenty years, which would both reduce the number of British cruisers⁴⁹ and compel the replacement of the aging US cruiser fleet.⁵⁰

The British proposals were more comprehensive - both qualitatively and quantitatively - involving the division of cruisers, destroyers and submarines into two classes in each category with a maximum unit tonnage and armament in *each* class and limitation by numbers in each category.⁵¹ A second and smaller class of cruiser was therefore to be introduced, with a maximum displacement of 6,000 tons and 6-inch guns. Furthermore, London advocated applying the 5:5:3 ratio to the larger 10,000 ton, eight-inch cruisers only, and made no mention of the British superiority in smaller cruisers. Indeed, Fleet sizes were to be determined on the basis of absolute not relative needs, and in this respect, the Admiralty argued, Britain needed a minimum of seventy cruisers to meet her Imperial needs; a figure that totaled 500,000 tons, not the 400,000 tons the Americans had anticipated.⁵²

⁴⁹ The oldest British cruiser at this time was only sixteen years old.

⁵⁰ Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 52; Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. I, 499-500; Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 42. A good summary of both American and British proposals can be found in C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), 'London Naval Conference, 1930. Memorandum respecting Proposals to be submitted by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to the Conference', CAB 24/209. Papers prepared for the Conference can be found in 'Reduction and Limitation of Armaments. Geneva Disarmament Conference', Case 10590, ADM 116/2609.

⁵¹ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

⁵² Minutes of the sixth Conference of the British Delegation. Appendix I, 'Statement read to Technical Committee by Admiral Jones', 7 July, 1927, ADM 116/2609. Britain had first established her need for seventy cruisers after the Washington Conference in 1923. See the memo by Pound, 12 June 1923, ADM 1/8072.

Therein lay the fundamental obstacle to agreement, and the cavalier attitude with which both the United States and Great Britain had approached the Conference soon became apparent. The American doctrine of parity was clearly not compatible with the British doctrine of absolute requirements. The American delegates, unable to persuade Congress to build up to that level, yet determined to secure equality, could not accept Britain's cruiser requirements, whilst the British delegates, reserving their right to build as many cruisers as needed, were equally unwilling to discuss total tonnage until their figure of seventy cruisers had been accepted.⁵³ As one scholar has astutely recognized, the main barrier in the way of an Anglo-American agreement was not so much a matter of Britain recognizing the American claim to parity,⁵⁴ 'rather it was whether the level of parity should be at a figure convenient to Great Britain or to the United States.'⁵⁵

Neither the United States nor Great Britain was willing to compromise its principles. The naval advisers for both sides urged strongly against any accommodation of opposing arguments, and negotiations were 'acrid'.⁵⁶ In a Cabinet meeting on 7 July, Churchill even argued

that Great Britain should not be over anxious in regard to a possible breakdown of the Conference at Geneva. To become entangled in an undesirable set of conditions and limitations would be much worse in effect than a breakdown of the Conference.⁵⁷

The Geneva Conference did not, in fact, break down, but it did close without agreement on the cruiser question. The failure to do so initiated a period of naval stalemate between the United States and Great Britain. That deadlock was not to be broken until 1930 at the London Naval Conference. In the meantime, the atmosphere between America and Britain remained acrimonious. In the first instance, the Anglo-

⁵³ C.I.D. 228th Meeting, 7 July, 1927, CAB 2/5.

⁵⁴ Indeed, in July 1927 the British Government had issued a statement recognizing such a demand. Described in C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

⁵⁵ McKercher, *Second Baldwin Government*, 71.

⁵⁶ Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again*, 43.

⁵⁷ C.I.D. 228th Meeting, 7 July, 1927, CAB 2/5.

French Compromise proposal of July 1928, which aimed to further naval limitation and break the cruiser deadlock, was rejected outright by the United States and hailed by the press in that country as 'an ill-concealed attempt to trick the United States.'⁵⁸ Not unexpectedly, the US Government rejected the compromise - which sought only to restrict 10,000 ton cruisers with guns in excess of 6-inches - on the grounds that it would limit the only class of vessel suited to American needs while imposing no restriction on the type most suited to the requirements of others, that is, 6,000 ton cruisers with 6-inch guns.

More significant for the cause of naval limitation, the immediate American response to the Anglo-French Compromise was to pass as quickly as possible the new Naval Bill that had been placed before Congress in March. Fashioned in response to the failure of the Geneva Conference, and spurred by the apparent incredulity of the Anglo-French proposals, the Bill provided for fifteen heavy cruisers at a total cost of \$224 million.⁵⁹ The Bill, which eventually passed the Senate in February 1929, therefore not only killed the Compromise but also threatened to entrench the course of Anglo-American naval rivalry even further.

The eventual thaw in relations between the United States and Great Britain accompanied, and to a considerable degree resulted from, the change in political leadership in both countries during 1929. In March, Herbert Hoover replaced Calvin Coolidge; and in June, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government succeeded Stanley Baldwin's Conservative ministry. Both administrations were keen to introduce a more conciliatory spirit to the negotiations concerning the cruiser issue. Hoover, in marked contrast to his predecessor who, 'ever since the failure of the 1927 Geneva Conference...had displayed considerable bitterness over the naval question',⁶⁰ seemed much more agreeable to resume negotiations, and MacDonald, elected on the

⁵⁸ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), 'London Naval Conference, 1930', CAB 24/209. See, for example, the *New York Times*, 28th August, 1928.

⁵⁹ Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 92.

⁶⁰ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

disarmament card, was especially anxious to seek a naval accord which could act as a stepping-stone to general disarmament later on.

Aside from the difference in temperament and campaign platforms, the two political leaders also had a number of financial and international inducements to resolve the naval issue. In the first instance, both MacDonald and Hoover were anxious to reduce the amount of naval spending in the climacteric year of the Great Depression. Second, Franco-Italian naval rivalry was intensifying, with French plans for a large programme of submarine construction. Finally, in 1929, Germany had laid down the first of a new, superior class of 'pocket battleship' (the *Deutschland* class), thus strengthening fears that a continuance of the deadlock would lead Germany to an imminent rejection of the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles.⁶¹

The year 1929 therefore witnessed renewed Anglo-American efforts to close the chasm that had developed over the cruiser question since the failure of the Geneva Conference. Most significant in this respect were the Hoover-MacDonald talks, held in Washington in October 1929. In April, Hugh Gibson, the American delegate to the Preparatory Commission in Geneva, had introduced the possibility of a new method of naval limitation whereby the American Government

[would] be prepared to give consideration to a method of estimating equivalent naval values which takes account of other factors than displacement tonnage alone. In order to arrive at a basis of comparison in the case of categories in which there are marked variation as to unit characteristics, it might be desirable in arriving at a formula for estimating equivalent tonnage to consider certain factors which produce these variations, such as age, unit displacement, and calibre of guns.⁶²

The so-called 'yardstick' formula, with its promise to estimate relative naval values between different categories of ship, held out for the British Admiralty the prospect of acquiring the numbers of smaller cruisers needed to protect trade and imperial routes. A

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Reproduced in the above.

summary of Admiralty policy produced in May 1929 had reiterated their demand for a minimum total of seventy cruisers to meet Britain's Imperial commitments.⁶³

Furthermore, the possibility of either siphoning off large numbers of outclassed and outdated smaller cruisers or embarking upon an expensive group-building programme, had been predicted sometime in the mid-1930s.⁶⁴ The Admiralty therefore advocated the need for a 'definite and steady programme of new construction'⁶⁵ of 6-inch cruisers to avoid this outcome and offset the building of larger, more expensive, and less tactically suitable cruisers by other powers.

However, during the summer of 1929, the Admiralty's hopes for the success of the 'yardstick' formula faded rapidly. In the first place, MacDonald was determined to keep all subsequent naval negotiations firmly in political, and not naval, hands. Both the American and British political leadership placed the blame for the failure of the Geneva Conference squarely on the shoulders of the naval advisers, whose disagreements over purely technical details had obscured larger and more general aims. At the end of his tenure, President Coolidge had complained to Sir Esme Howard, British Ambassador to Washington, that

[t]he trouble with these discussions for naval disarmament lies really in the fact that they have hitherto been conducted mainly by naval technical experts...They jealously compare and weigh ton against ton and gun against gun...The basis of all their arguments is the possibility of war between us. What we need in these discussions is men who, taking the broader and more statesmanlike view, will start from the point of view that war between us shall not take place.⁶⁶

The possibility that the Admiralty's policies would be undermined by the absence of a supportive naval representative in the discussions was not without substance. Confronted with the combined pressure of the Foreign Office and the Treasury for a speedy

⁶³ 'Summary of Admiralty Policy', Memorandum by D.C.N.S., 31 May, 1929, ADM 167/79.

⁶⁴ 'Notes on the Naval Construction Programme', Plans Division, 20 November 1929, ADM 116/2606.

⁶⁵ Board Minutes, 'New Construction' [n.d.], ADM 167/79.

⁶⁶ Telegram from Howard to Cushendun, no. 2221, 7 November, 1928, ADM 116/2580.

resolution of Anglo-American naval questions on one hand,⁶⁷ and certain American hostility to the old 1927 figure of seventy cruisers on the other, MacDonald had agreed with the suggestion of the Foreign Office that Britain's minimum cruiser requirements be reduced to sixty, including forty-five 6-inch cruisers.⁶⁸ The Admiralty were thus presented with a *fait accompli* by MacDonald and the Foreign Office. Acknowledging that the Royal Navy must agree to *some* form of limitation, they agreed reluctantly to the Prime Minister's demands, on condition that the USN be kept to just eighteen large cruisers.⁶⁹

The main reasoning behind this demand stemmed not from a fear of American ambitions, but from a fear of Japan's future building intentions. At Washington in 1922, the Japanese had claimed a ratio in large cruisers calculated on the strength of the Royal Navy. However, during the summer of 1929 it had come to light that, in any prospective naval conference, the Japanese would not accept less than a seventy per cent ratio in heavy cruisers with the largest number held by any power.⁷⁰ By holding the USN to eighteen 10,000 ton vessels, the Admiralty sought to avoid upsetting the strategically balanced cruiser ratio with the IJN established in 1922, thus killing two birds with one stone.

However, the United States was not quite so accommodating of MacDonald's proposals as were the Admiralty. Rather than accept the British compromise - which was by comparison not an unreasonable reduction - the American government rejected the sixty cruiser figure as still too high and reasserted its demand for twenty-three heavy cruisers.⁷¹

⁶⁷ A4323/30/45, Craigie minute, 1 July, 1929, Foreign Office records [hereafter FO] 371/13521

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ 'Note by the First Sea Lord', 5 July, 1929, PRO 30/69/267.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Memorandum by First Lord for the Prime Minister, 20 August, 1929. In June 1929 the RN had fifteen 10,000 ton cruisers built or building, and another three authorized under the 1928/9 construction programmes.

⁷¹ Ibid., Letter from Dawes to MacDonald, 1 August, 1929.

Privately, the American negotiators entertained the belief that MacDonald had been 'won over' by the Admiralty in his claim for sixty cruisers, and several historians have subsequently endorsed this view. Richard Fanning, for example, has recently argued that as a minority government, MacDonald could not afford to antagonize the Admiralty, and was 'unable to veer from the Admiralty position'.⁷² Others, however, take a different view, maintaining that whilst MacDonald was prepared to listen to the Admiralty's arguments, he did so only as long as they accepted *his* policy. John Ferris, for example, argues that although the sixty cruiser figure was reasonable, maintaining a margin of security for Great Britain, MacDonald's inclination was more towards the American disposition than that of his Admirals:

He saw no dangers at sea, he was not impressed by Madden's technical arguments and he did want an arms treaty. That could not be done on Britain's terms of 1927. It might be possible on American terms. So over coming months, MacDonald adopted them: he cut the number of cruisers which Britain would keep in service to 50 and he accepted wholesale American views on "capital ships".⁷³

MacDonald was not under the control of the Board of the Admiralty - clearly it was *they* who were forced to capitulate to his policies; but neither was he wholly insensitive to the Admiralty's arguments on the need for a minimum level of security - a limit beyond which he was not prepared to go. His response to the Anglo-American negotiations of July to October 1929 therefore lies somewhere between these two extremes. Although MacDonald did choose to negotiate the new terms of naval limitation on the basis of American demands - by reducing still further the minimum cruiser requirement to fifty⁷⁴ - this was acceded to only upon the Admiralty's stipulation that the number of United States heavy cruisers be held at eighteen, that a steady replacement programme of three cruisers per annum be implemented, totaling fourteen new 6-inch cruisers over the next

⁷² Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 100, 131. See also Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. II, 42.

⁷³ Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Security', 152.

⁷⁴ Minute by Craigie, 3 August, 1929; Memo by FSL, 6 August, 1929, PRO 30/69/267.

four years, and finally an aggregate tonnage for the Royal Navy of 339,000 tons.⁷⁵ Although not always a supporter of Admiralty policies, MacDonald was at times a sympathetic ally.

MacDonald's subsequent talks with Hoover in Washington during October were described as 'friendly but critical'.⁷⁶ None of the outstanding issues between the United States and Great Britain were settled. As a multilateral issue, the resolution of the cruiser question would have to await the outcome of the London Naval Conference, and discussion of the issue of "freedom of the seas" was postponed indefinitely. Nevertheless, the foundations for future agreement were uncovered on a number of points. First, the displacement of new battleships was to be reduced from 35,000 to 25,000 tons, gun calibres decreased from sixteen to twelve inches, and service life prolonged from twenty to twenty-six years. This would meet the Admiralty view that there should be no reduction in the number of capital ships.⁷⁷ Second, 150,000 tons was agreed upon as a total tonnage for destroyers, and in submarines, the United States was willing to reduce to the British level of 50,000 tons.

The negotiations that took place between June and October 1929, as an endeavour to eliminate all points that seemed likely to divide America and Britain at the London Naval Conference, were largely successful - at least from a political-diplomatic viewpoint. 'Many obstacles had [been] surmounted and more than one difficult corner turned',⁷⁸ and the way had been cleared for the establishment of more amenable Anglo-American relations at the London Naval Conference.

However, from a naval point of view in general, and from the crow's nest at Admiralty House in particular, the outcome was less satisfying and more portentous. The Royal Navy had been forced to accept a reduction from seventy to fifty cruisers as the minimum

⁷⁵ 'Plans Division Memorandum' for the Prime Minister', 9 September, 1929, PRO 30/69/267.

⁷⁶ Details of the MacDonald-Hoover talks are in C.P. 312 (29)(n.d.), 'Memorandum respecting the Conversations between the Prime Minister and President Hoover at Washington (October 4 to 10, 1929)', CAB 24/207.

⁷⁷ Plans Division Memo, 27 September, 1929, ADM 116/3372.

⁷⁸ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

requirement for Empire security. Moreover, this decrease had not been accompanied - in the Sea Lord's view - by a concomitant reduction in the threat to Britain's interests overseas, especially in the Far East. In calculating the seventy cruiser figure, the Admiralty had been looking ahead.⁷⁹ Unlike the politicians and civil advisers who increasingly took control of the naval limitation negotiations after 1927, 'the Admiralty did not believe that threat was absent just because it was invisible.'⁸⁰ Indeed, as the new decade approached, that threat was becoming increasingly visible to the Sea Lords. The Imperial Japanese Navy had recently begun to assert its claims for a larger fleet; one that was in the future to be measured by the size and power of the USN and not the RN. During the Washington conversations, the Admiralty's strategic safety net for this eventuality - the demand that the United States Navy be held at just eighteen large cruisers - had broken loose. Once the British insistence on 339,000 tons of cruisers and a replacement programme of fourteen ships became known, the USN Board reneged on their original 'yardstick' proposal. So long as the British insisted on a cruiser tonnage of 339,000 and a replacement programme of fourteen ships, the USN could not be reduced to eighteen heavy cruisers. With the 'yardstick' arrangement between the United States and Britain thus undefined, the outcome of the London Naval Conference was by no means secure.

iii

The London Naval Conference opened at the beginning of April 1930 with all five principal naval powers - Great Britain, the United States, Japan, France, and Italy - present. Despite the preliminary negotiations held in the run-up to the Conference,⁸¹ and

⁷⁹ Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again*, 62.

⁸⁰ Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Security', 153.

⁸¹ During November and December 1929 MacDonald held a series of informal, bilateral conversations in London with representatives from the Japanese, Italian and French governments to discuss 'a variety of points connected with the naval negotiations', C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

the Hoover-MacDonald talks held earlier in October 1929, the presence together of these five maritime nations did not imply that a broad consensus on the terms of new naval limitation had been reached. The careful preparations for the Naval Conference had not removed all the chords of dissension between the five powers:

the areas of disagreement were varied and the nature of the naval balance with its complex interrelationships was such that bilateral talks could not hope to settle those questions which were multilateral.⁸²

In the first instance, final agreement had yet to be reached between the United States and Great Britain on the cruiser issue. Many questions thrown out by the Washington conversations had been left in the air pending the outcome of the London Naval Conference. However, before such *external* issues could be broached, *internal* wrangling, between the Admiralty on the one side, and the Treasury on the other, over the policy to be pursued at the Conference had to be resolved.

In formulating their proposals for the Conference, the Cabinet were presented with papers by both the Admiralty and Chiefs of Staff (COS). The Admiralty was particularly keen to be heard. MacDonald and Hoover were still eager to keep the naval negotiations out of naval and service hands. Without a naval representative to support their views at the Conference, the Admiralty therefore sought to make the most of the time in the intervening months between Washington and London to negotiate a strong naval policy with the Cabinet.⁸³ As the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral William W. Fisher, advised, 'the really essential thing seems to me to be the correct appreciation of the issues by our Delegates'.⁸⁴

The Admiralty's concerns for the 'correct appreciation' of the issues - at least as they saw them - were not without foundation. The Board had already faced fierce criticism of

⁸² Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 86.

⁸³ 'London Naval Conference, 1930' (Adm. case 2782) suggests the desirability of holding informal meetings with Foreign Office representatives to discuss Admiralty views. See the minutes by Fisher, 1 January, 1930, and Madden, 2 January, 1930, ADM 116/2717.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, minute by Fisher, 1 January 1930.

their proposals from the Chancellor, Philip Snowden, who argued that whilst 'Foreign Offices want *agreement*; Navy Boards want *limitation*; only Treasuries want *reduction*, and they are given little chance to be heard.'⁸⁵ In particular, the Chancellor complained that the Admiralty's proposals for the future size of the Fleet meant an inevitable increase in the Navy Estimates over the next five years. To achieve the desired reduction in the cost of the Navy, he argued, it was necessary 'to aim at a *permanent reduction in the size of the Fleet below the standard figures assumed by the Admiralty*' (italics in original). To this end, Snowden suggested that the figures of fifty cruisers and 339,000 tons should be regarded, not as the *minimum* to be maintained by a steady replacement programme, but as the *maximum* and that Britain should aim to reduce her actual strength substantially below those figures in time. The basis of the Admiralty's building plan - to spread the burden of construction evenly over a number of years - would, if the sequel to the Washington Conference of 1922 was remembered, be counterproductive, 'the moral [being] that programme begets programme and competition breeds competition, with no advantage to either side in the end'.

Furthermore, the Chancellor argued, the Admiralty's programme is only a 'paper reduction' since seventy cruisers was never an accepted programme, and fifty cruisers actually represented an *increase* over present strength. The memorandum enunciated certain principles that should be adopted by the British representatives at the London Naval Conference, including the '*immediate and substantial reduction*' in the number and size of all classes of ships, accompanied by a reduction in the naval budgets of the Powers; postponing the ultimate size of all fleets until a further Conference in 1936; and restricting new building for a 'short period' whilst simultaneously scrapping a number of ships in all classes each year. Finally, the Chancellor recommended 'that the future of the

⁸⁵ C.P. 12 (30), 'Note by Chancellor of the Exchequer' and 'Memorandum by the Treasury on Financial Aspects of the Naval Conference', 16 December 1929, CAB 24/209. The next two paragraphs are based on this document.

capital ship be reserved for further consideration in 1936, and that, in the meanwhile, the lives of existing ships shall be prolonged and no new ships laid down.’

Under Treasury proposals, it was argued, the normal cost of replacement up to 1936 would be less than half of the Admiralty’s programme,⁸⁶ and the new construction Vote, estimated under the Admiralty programme to reach £10 millions by 1932, need not exceed £4.5 millions. To facilitate these reductions at the earliest possible date, it was further proposed that there should be a complete naval holiday in 1930 and that cruiser replacement should not commence until 1932. Although the Treasury recognized that their proposals involved ‘a certain risk since we shall be left, during the years following 1936, with a higher proportion of old war-time cruisers than other nations, whose fleets will be mainly of post-war construction’, they concluded their attack on Admiralty policy by presenting the Cabinet with a choice between ‘two grave and apparently inescapable alternatives’. Either accept such a risk as the first step towards real disarmament, or ‘abandon all hope’ of securing any reduction in Navy and Defence Estimates for the next six years. For a Government elected on a disarmament mandate and flailing in the midst of the greatest financial crisis the world economy had known, the choice was a stark one indeed.

Clearly piqued by what they saw as the Treasury’s encroachment into their field, the Admiralty’s response was to deliver a sharp, acerbic riposte of the Chancellor’s memorandum.⁸⁷ In support of their claims that the Admiralty’s, and not the Treasury’s,

⁸⁶ Figures based on a comparison of Treasury and Admiralty replacement programmes up to 1936, C.P. 12 (30)(n.d.) CAB 24/209:

Treasury proposals:		Admiralty programme:	
1.5 cruisers (4,000 or 4,500 tons)	£1,500,000	3 large cruisers	£4,800,000
6 Destroyers (1,375 tons)	2,100,000	9 Destroyers	3,000,000
3 Submarines ‘S’ (642 tons)	630,000	2 large, 4 small subs	1,840,000
Miscellaneous (average)	250,000	Miscellaneous (average)	350,000
	<hr/> 4,480,000		<hr/> 9,990,000

⁸⁷ C.P. 13 (30), ‘Financial Aspects of the Naval Conference. Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty’, 20 December, 1929, CAB 24/209. The next two paragraphs are based on this document.

proposals should be used at the London Naval Conference, the First Lord of the Admiralty (FLA), A.V. Alexander, both restated the Admiralty's views on the security requirements of the Empire, and condemned systematically the Chancellor's proposals which lay 'outside the province of the Treasury' and rejected the figures accepted as a basis for the conversations in Washington.

As far as security and reduction were concerned, the difference between the two Departments, the Admiralty note argued, was 'that while the Admiralty are desirous of reducing expenditure on armaments to the minimum compatible with security, the Treasury desire reduction for the sake of reduction, quite regardless of the effect on security'. Scant regard had been paid to Britain's global commitments, the preparedness of other powers, or political conditions generally; the Treasury's suggestions on the number of ships needed were therefore 'useless'.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Chancellor's claim that only the Treasury wanted reduction, Alexander argued that the Admiralty's proposals *were* made with a view to reducing the naval burden. The fundamental difference between the Treasury and Admiralty views on this point however, was that whilst the Treasury sought to reduce Britain's naval *estimates* regardless of the strength of other powers, the Admiralty sought the reduction of naval *armaments* by all powers, which, if reduced substantially, would free up more of the funds required to meet Britain's global commitments as represented by the seventy cruiser figure. Finally, it was argued that:

[t]he proposals of the Treasury, if carried out, would undermine the naval position of the British Empire, and would make it impossible for the Admiralty to be responsible to His Majesty's Government for the security of the sea communications or of the defence of our Dominions and Colonies against overseas attack.

The FLA's defence of the Admiralty's position was followed by a long exposition on the 'Basis of British Naval Strategy' by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Charles Madden, which included a detailed outline - and justification - not only of the principles forming

the basis of the system of Imperial Defence, but also of the technical naval views on the proposals for the London Naval Conference.⁸⁸ In capital ships, fifteen 25,000 ton, 12-inch gun ships was the bare minimum needed 'to protect our interests in the Far East while retaining in European waters a force sufficient to stabilize the position in Europe'. A naval holiday until 1936 was also opposed from 'the production point of view'. In the cruiser class, the number of heavy 8-inch vessels was to be restricted.

As far as the total number of cruisers needed for defensive requirements was concerned, the Admiralty did not recede from the view that seventy was 'the minimum needed for defending the vital sea communications in all parts of the world'. However, fifty cruisers had been accepted, for 'a strictly limited period' and only under certain clearly defined conditions: first, that limitations of projected building programmes are made by other powers, and second, that 'in our number there is a proper proportion of new construction suitable for extended operations'. Since the majority of British cruisers in 1930 were built during the war specifically for North Sea duties, and thirty-four were due to become obsolete within the next ten years, a yearly building programme of three per annum was needed to make provision for fifty cruisers by 1936. The total tonnage of these fifty would be 339,000 tons. The Americans' proposed 'yardstick' ratio - that the United States Navy would come down to eighteen large cruisers if Britain came down from 339,000 to 325,000 tons - was therefore rejected as too low and resulting in an inferior class of 6-inch cruisers to those being built by other powers. Moreover, such a figure 'would give combat superiority, not parity, to the USN, in view of the heavier units throughout their cruiser force and of geographical circumstances which enable them to concentrate their forces whilst necessitating dispersion on our part.'

In the destroyer category, sixteen flotillas - or 144 vessels - totaling 200,000 tons, were needed which could be reduced if submarine tonnage was also reduced

⁸⁸ LNC(E)10, Memorandum by Madden, 'Basis of British Naval Strategy', 14 January, 1930, ADM 116/2746.

considerably. If submarines could not be abolished, strengths should be based on the Washington Treaty ratios.

The policy of the British Government regarding naval reductions at the forthcoming Naval Conference was finally approved by the Cabinet on 14 January 1930.⁸⁹ In general, the Admiralty's view prevailed, although there were a number of significant deviations from their proposals. First, it was stated that as 'the Battleship is essentially and solely a ship of war, and as political security is strengthened, it must stand to disappear.' Furthermore, all replacements were to be postponed until the next Conference in 1936. Second, the Cabinet affirmed the belief - advanced by the Treasury and Foreign Office - that in cruisers 'the number of 50 is *amply adequate* to meet...requirements'.⁹⁰ The question remained, however, for how long and under what circumstances the fifty cruiser fleet would continue to be 'adequate.'⁹¹

The first of the Cabinet's statements in particular greatly alarmed the Admiralty - the second, at least, had been anticipated. In a memo to the Prime Minister, Madden expressed his concern 'that His Majesty's Government should proclaim their disbelief in the necessity for a type of warship which is recognized by *informed professional opinion* to be the corner-stone of naval strength.'⁹² MacDonald's response - clearly an attempt to assuage the Sea Lords - merely stated that:

although here and there we have modified your advice, I think, on the whole, that harmony between the Government and the Admiralty has characterized in the most wonderful way, all that is being done.'⁹³

Such platitudes did little to appease the Sea Lords, and merely reflected the nature of the Cabinet's conclusions on the Naval Conference, which had been formed in opposition

⁸⁹ CAB 1(30), 14 January, 1930, CAB 23/63.

⁹⁰ Ibid., (italics supplied).

⁹¹ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 92.

⁹² LNC(E)12, 'Position of HMG at the London Naval Conference', Madden memo to Prime Minister, 7 February, 1930 (italics supplied), ADM 116/2746.

⁹³ Ibid., PM to Madden, 11 February, 1930.

to the Admiralty's advice and were confined merely to broad issues; the details were to be left to the delegation to deal with in light of circumstances as they developed.

However, as the discussions since the summer of 1929 had revealed, there were several obstacles which the Conference delegates would have to overcome and which the Admiralty - deliberately removed from the negotiating table - would have to exert all their influence and pressure to ensure a favourable outcome.

The first potential obstacle to agreement was the enduring cruiser issue between the United States and Britain, and the as yet undefined 'yardstick' formula. The issue revolved around what level parity was to be set. The United States Navy Board was now demanding twenty-one 8-inch cruisers - a figure regarded by the Admiralty as 'unacceptable as a basis of a parity agreement with the United States for it would give the United States a comfortable fighting superiority.'⁹⁴ The real crux of the matter, however, was not American, but Japanese superiority in heavy cruisers. Japan had advanced her claim to seventy per cent of the USN 8-inch cruiser tonnage, which, if the United States retained twenty-one, would result in Japan acquiring sixteen 8-inch ships as against the projected fifteen for the British Empire and twelve for the IJN. 'From every point of view', Britain had 'an interest in inducing the United States Government to come down to eighteen 8-inch-gun cruisers.'⁹⁵

The 12:15:18 ratio was unlikely, however, so long as the RN insisted on a total tonnage of 339,000. Reducing the size of the replacement cruisers had already been discounted for strategical reasons; the only alternative to this compromise was to concede to the Americans a tonnage increase in their smaller 6-inch cruisers. The final agreement on cruisers thus preserved the desired 12:15:18 ratio between Japan, Great Britain, and the United States; the Sea Lords therefore managed to safeguard their demands for a total tonnage of 339,000, together with their replacement programme of fourteen 6,500 ton

⁹⁴ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), 'London Naval Conference, 1930. Memorandum respecting Proposals to be submitted by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to the Conference', CAB 24/209.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

cruisers. However, this had been achieved only at the expense of increasing the USN's aggregate cruiser tonnage from 315,000 tons to 323,500 tons, and accepting an inferiority in the 8-inch type.⁹⁶ Parity was also achieved in destroyers and submarines, and in capital ships - set at fifteen - although a building holiday until the end of 1936 was instituted.

The pre-conference negotiations had also revealed a division between the three principal naval powers over the Japanese claim to a seventy per cent ratio of heavy cruiser tonnage and other auxiliary vessels. However, as far as the Admiralty were concerned, such a demand could not be granted without (a) increasing Japan's existing naval strength relative to Britain and the United States, and (b) upsetting the proposed agreement with the United States.⁹⁷ Since Japanese interests did not warrant such a ratio, the Admiralty concluded, Japan should therefore be kept at sixty per cent if possible.⁹⁸ The Americans concurred, yet the Japanese held out for an improvement in the Washington Treaty ratio from 10:10:6 to 10:10:7. Their intransigence was to prove successful - at least in the short-term. A compromise formula was agreed upon by all parties whereby Japan accepted a seventy per cent ratio with the USN in 6-inch cruisers and sixty per cent in 8-inch cruisers, but only until 1936. The IJN also received seventy per cent in destroyers and parity in submarines with both the British and American Fleets.⁹⁹

The final - and most difficult - hurdle the participants faced was that of resolving the Franco-Italian parity dispute. The issue threatened not only to lead to an escalation in French and Italian building programmes, but also to undermine the basis of the fragile Anglo-American agreement. The essential problem was the French refusal to accept Italian parity in auxiliary craft, whilst the Italians maintained that on no account would they enter into any agreement which gave them less than parity with France.

⁹⁶ The final text of the London Naval Treaty can be found in FO. 93/123, 'Naval Limitation', 22 April, 1930, and 'International Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armament, April 22, 1930', Cmd. 3556, (London: HMSO, 1930).

⁹⁷ C.P. 5 (30)(n.d.), CAB 24/209.

⁹⁸ Plans Division Memo on the Japanese ratio question (n.d., n.a.), ADM 116/3372.

⁹⁹ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 96.

Compounding the situation for the British Admiralty was the alarming rate of French naval construction - projected to reach 725,000 tons by 1936.¹⁰⁰ With the Two-Power Standard as policy, uncontrolled building competition between France and Italy introduced the prospect of increased British naval construction as well. Moreover, it threatened to destabilise the agreement reached with the Americans on cruisers. Conversations between the Italian and French Governments prior to the Conference had failed to alleviate the discord; discussions during the Conference achieved even less. The French restated their demands for a disparity of 240,000 tons between the Italian and French navies, whilst all that Italy would undertake was a promise not to build *beyond* equality with the French fleet.¹⁰¹ With no sign of rapprochement, and the departure of the French Prime Minister for Paris at the end of March, the most the remaining participants at the London Naval Conference could hope for was a Three-Power Treaty. Further attempts to resolve the Franco-Italian dispute and secure their adherence to the London Naval Treaty would have to await the conclusion of the Conference.

The Treaty was signed on 22 April 1930, and consisted of five parts, with all participants signing four. In addition to the restrictions on capital ship construction, submarine and auxiliary vessels were also limited. It had proved impossible to persuade France or Japan to agree to the abolition of submarines, and Britain, the United States and Japan had therefore agreed upon parity amongst themselves, at a level of 52,700 tons each. The Three-Power Treaty also included an 'escalator clause', authorizing a signatory to exceed their allotted tonnage if national security was threatened by the naval construction of neighbouring countries. Finally, it was stipulated that the Treaty was to remain in effect until December 1936.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰² 'International Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armament', Cmd. 3556.

Traditional interpretations of the London Naval Treaty view the agreement as detrimental to British naval supremacy. By limiting the Royal Navy both in terms of quantity and quality, British naval power, it is argued, was relinquished to the United States Navy.¹⁰³ However, recent historiography on the subject has demonstrated that, on paper at least, the repercussions of the London Naval Conference of 1930 were not as serious as traditional interpretations assume. Far from constraining and jeopardizing her status as a global power, Great Britain preserved her maritime position vis-à-vis the United States and Japan under the treaty and remained the strongest seapower.¹⁰⁴ The future, as seen through the eyes of the Sea Lords in 1930, was therefore not as bleak as some commentators have supposed. Indeed, it has even been argued that 'the London Naval Conference was more important for political and diplomatic reasons than it was for naval limitation',¹⁰⁵ marking as it did a rapprochement in Anglo-American relations.

However, such views have concentrated attention on the *short-term* effects the London Naval Treaty had for the signatories, at the expense of the *long-term* impact the conference had for the Royal Navy. More seriously, they fail to distinguish between long- and short-term implications at all. In this respect, it is important to remember that whilst the Royal Navy was naturally concerned with short-term naval issues, such as individual and total class tonnages to be negotiated in a treaty, it was also an institution whose own definition of its role in Imperial Defence - the maintenance of the sea communications of the Empire - and its ability to fulfill the Two-Power Standard established at Washington in 1922 depended on long-term strategic planning and forecasting. Unlike the politician, whose vision tended to range only a short distance towards existing and tangible threats -

¹⁰³ Corelli Barnett and Paul Kennedy are the most recent and well-known propagators of this view.

¹⁰⁴ Gregory C. Kennedy, 'The 1930 London Naval Conference and Anglo-American Maritime Strength, 1927-1930', in *Arms Limitation and Disarmament*, 149-171; Babij, 'Second Labour Government and British Maritime Security'.

¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, 'The 1930 London Naval Conference', 160.

such as the next election - the Sea Lords at the Admiralty were always looking ahead to potential and intangible dangers. This was to be a reoccurring theme in British policy during the early 1930s.

Furthermore, the new historiography has tended to take a rather one-sided view of the naval disarmament/rearmament equation as represented by the London Naval Treaty. Whilst the limited effect the treaty had for naval *disarmament* has been emphasized,¹⁰⁶ the effect it had for naval *rearmament* is less frequently stated. Although the Royal Navy remained the world's most powerful navy *immediately* after the London Naval Conference, a 'strategic gamble' had been taken in 1930;¹⁰⁷ a gamble whose outcome depended on a number of variables that could not and would not be known until well after the ratification of the Treaty. As long as the provisions of the Treaty were honoured by all signatories; as long as a steady replacement programme was agreed to by the British Government; and as long as the international situation in which the treaty had been signed did not deteriorate - the position of the Royal Navy *was* promising.

This was the essence of the strategic gamble undertaken by the MacDonald Government: unless Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's strategic gamble 'came through', the situation for the Royal Navy was more bleak and the prospect of increased naval rearmament by all powers greater. The very nature of this 'game of risk' therefore implied an examination of the long- and short-term ramifications of the London Naval Treaty be undertaken by the decision-makers. Yet the fact remains that only its short-term effects received the due care and attention that should also have been reserved for the long-term implications. This tendency is reflected in the recent historiography of this period. However, if one is to accurately assess either the strategic origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, or the London Naval Treaty itself, then its long-term implications are as important, if not more so, than the short-term considerations. Indeed, given the potential consequences of the London Naval Treaty for the Admiralty's

¹⁰⁶ Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 129.

¹⁰⁷ Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', 155.

traditionally long-term goals and policies, the International Treaty for the Limitation and Reduction of Naval Armament signed in 1930 would have important repercussions for the Admiralty's efforts in the mid-1930s to encourage British naval rearmament whilst simultaneously seeking to limit German naval construction.

Contemporary naval opinion was certainly aware of the Treaty's potential for the Admiralty's long-term policies. Winston Churchill vocalized such views in the Commons when he attacked the Treaty for its apparent 'promotion' of British inferiority- given the limited number of cruisers with which Britain now had to protect its global interests.¹⁰⁸ Admiralty opinion was no less forgiving, and it was to remain a thorn in the sides of the Sea Lords for many years to come. Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, writing in 1947, described the London Naval Treaty as having placed Britain's naval position in jeopardy, 'the Empire was at its most dangerous point for 150 years; it was a capitulation by the Admiralty to political *force majeure*.'¹⁰⁹

The Treaty was subjected to a rigorous post-mortem by the Chiefs of Staff in their Annual Review for 1930.¹¹⁰ Their report highlighted one of the principal failings of the London Naval Conference: that whilst the risk of military operations in Europe had been reduced, this had not been accompanied by a concomitant reduction in the threat to Britain's Far Eastern interests. The Treaty had introduced no new factor tending to diminish the strategic importance of the Far East. If anything, the Conference had been instrumental in shifting 'the centre of gravity of the defence problems of this country towards the East.' Moreover, 'considerable effort' would be needed 'to maintain the minimum standard of naval strength contemplated in the Washington Treaty of 1922, namely, equality with the naval strength of any foreign Power.' Certainly the Treaty *had* made rearmament slower and more difficult at a time when the need for greater naval security, especially in the Far East, was increasing. In 1930 the Admiralty did not face

¹⁰⁸ Fanning, *Peace and Disarmament*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again*, 44.

¹¹⁰ C.P. 327(30), 'Committee of Imperial Defence. A Review of Imperial Defence, 1930, by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', 29 July, 1930, CAB 24/215.

any *immediate* defence problems. However, with the limitation of cruisers and other auxiliary vessels, together with the moratorium on the construction of capital ships until 1936, the outlook for Britain's defensive abilities in the mid-1930s was less reassuring. Even before the final outcome of the Conference was known, Madden had issued a prophetic warning of the dangers that lay ahead:

In short the last ten years have been marked by a determination on the part of other Powers to build up a modern fleet of the types to meet their special requirements, whilst our programmes have perforce had to be restricted, in spite of the fact that what other Powers build becomes a potential danger to ourselves unless countered by similar craft.¹¹¹

Clearly, there was a dichotomy of interests at work; a division of aims that was inherently contradictory:

On the one hand we have the principle foreign naval powers spending as much as we are on building, and building the largest and most powerful types of auxiliary vessels. On the other hand we are talking of the Pact of Paris, Disarmament and lasting peace....At the present rate the outcome of naval disarmament will be to reduce us step by step to the level of the others, and if we refuse to face the necessity of future construction, we shall finally be inferior.¹¹²

Once again, the Sea Lords were presented with the dilemma of reconciling the Cabinet's short-term policies with the Admiralty's long-term goals:

We are endeavouring to balance good intentions here against naval expansions abroad. Unfortunately the good intentions have nothing behind them. The Board of Admiralty cannot rely entirely on good intentions; they have to face facts.¹¹³

The Board's solution, in accepting the necessity for some form of naval limitation at the Conference, was to stipulate that the tonnage provision of the London Naval Treaty, limiting the number of cruisers to fifty 'has been accepted under *existing international*

¹¹¹ 'Naval Construction Programme. Note by the First Sea Lord', 11 November, 1929, CAB 27/407.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

conditions for the strictly limited period of the Treaty...provided that *adequate limitations are made in the projected building programmes of the other Powers*, and provided that included in the above number is a *proper proportion of new construction*.'¹¹⁴ In practice, therefore, the London Naval Treaty of 1930 could only be allowed to govern the strength of the British fleet under three clearly defined conditions. First, that the international political conditions in which the treaty had been signed did not change; second, that Franco-Italian adherence to the terms of the treaty be secured; and third, that a steady programme of replacement be commenced. Unless these three conditions could be fulfilled, the prospects for the London Naval Treaty in general, and the defensive position of the Royal Navy during the mid-1930's in particular, were not promising. Should any of the invisible threats of the early 1930s - Japan in the Far East, Germany in Europe - suddenly become visible, then Britain's ability to ensure the security of the Two-Power Standard - the ability to dispatch to the Far East a force capable of meeting the Japanese fleet, whilst retaining in Home Waters a force sufficient to meet any European navy - might be jeopardized. Britain's strength in capital ships had been weakened by the London Naval Treaty, as had her strength in cruisers. In the months following the Conference, the conditions placed upon the signature of the Treaty by the Sea Lords - the Admiralty's 'rear-guard action' - would become critical in this 'strategic gamble'. The subsequent failure of this gamble would make the London Naval Conference an important factor in the origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935.

¹¹⁴ C.P. 327(30), 'Review of Imperial Defence, 1930, by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', 29 July, 1930, CAB 24/215.

CHAPTER II

BRITISH SEAPOWERS UNDER THREAT, 1930-1934

*"England's voice in the Councils of the World does not now carry the same weight that it used to, because England the Peacemaker has disarmed to such an extent that she can no longer support her Policy by a show of force."*¹

The Royal Navy therefore entered the 1930s with its maritime supremacy in the balance; its position as the world's foremost navy, though by no means lost, was certainly in question. In many respects, the London Naval Treaty *had* been a success for the British Admiralty. As the recent historiography on this subject makes clear, Britain's negotiators managed to preserve for Great Britain a navy that truly was - to use the American epithet - 'second to none'.² What is equally clear, however, is that such views are necessarily myopic, concentrating on the short-term effects of the Treaty at the expense of its long-term ramifications for the RN. As an examination of the events following the London Conference makes plain, the favourable situation in which the Admiralty found itself at the end of April 1930 pertained only to the *immediate* post-Treaty environment. A large percentage of the capital ship fleet was ageing rapidly, and with a building holiday in effect until December 1936, there was no prospect of replacement until at least 1937. The fifty cruiser total was also regarded by the Sea Lords as well below the minimum needed to defend the sea communications of the Empire. Admittedly, the fourteen 6,500 ton replacement cruisers allowed under the LNT enabled the Royal Navy to acquire approximately sixty-four cruisers, built or building, by the end of 1935. Nevertheless, this was qualified by the fact that the total tonnage allowed under the treaty would also leave the RN with a higher proportion of old war-time cruisers after 1936 than the other

¹ Minute by Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Frederic C. Dreyer, 16 December, 1932, ADM 116/3116.

² See chapter I, 36-40 for the final terms of the treaty and the arguments of recent writers on the subject.

signatories, whose fleets would be principally of post-war construction of new larger types of cruisers. Moreover, the First Sea Lord warned the Government that faced with threats in both the Far East and Home Waters, there would not be enough ships for Britain to take the initiative.³ The advantageous position that had been negotiated for the Royal Navy was therefore not only precarious and temporary, but also relative to the outcome of events that could not yet be known.

The nature of the risk being taken at London was not lost on the Admiralty. More than the politicians, they were acutely aware of the fragility of the London Naval Treaty. The conditions the Admiralty imposed upon their acceptance of the Treaty reflected their unease for the future; an anxiety which was founded on an awareness of the often temporary nature of international treaties. When assessing the cumulative significance of the London Naval Treaty for Anglo-German Naval Agreement five years later, it is to these conditions - and the events that transpired as a result of them - that attention must be turned.

In the immediate aftermath of the Conference, the most pressing of the three conditions imposed upon the acceptance of the LNT was 'that adequate limitations of projected building programmes are made by other Powers.'⁴ With American and Japanese construction programmes limited by the Treaty, the task facing the Admiralty was to secure Franco-Italian adherence to the Three-Power agreement; a feat which had proved impossible in London.⁵ The Sea Lords feared that failure to resolve the dispute would undermine the carefully negotiated cruiser balance between Britain and the United States. Moreover, unless French naval construction could be limited, Britain's Two-Power Standard policy might force her to increase naval building as well. The London Naval Treaty, therefore, could only represent stability for the Royal Navy if France and

³ Lambert, 'Strategic Origins of the Battle of the Atlantic', 96.

⁴ LNC (E) 10, Memo by Madden, 'Basis of British Naval Strategy', 14 January, 1930, ADM 116/2746.

⁵ See chapter I, 37-8.

Italy entered; with both outside its terms, there was the greater probability of Britain having to invoke Article 21 of the Treaty.⁶

The fundamental obstacle to Franco-Italian agreement at the Conference had been France's refusal to accept Italian claims to parity. Difficulties over the question of Franco-Italian parity had been anticipated well before the Conference, yet the Admiralty were apparently confident of both a successful resolution to the parity question and capping French naval construction - if not at London, then certainly in negotiations afterwards.⁷ However, the issue proved no easier to solve after the Conference. Indeed, with the breakup of the five principal naval powers, it was clear that any opportunity for a French compromise had been allowed to pass. Despite protracted negotiations with both sides throughout 1930 and 1931, the French remained firm: however large the British Fleet might be, they argued, it would not alter their views on their own naval strength. France could not allow her navy to fall below the safety limit,⁸ and although Italian parity with France was theoretical, it could be made a reality.⁹ Moreover, far from reducing naval construction, French programmes planned an expansion of the Fleet, especially submarines,¹⁰ this despite Britain's protestations that she was already considerably over-insured against Germany and Italy.¹¹

Unable to find a basis for reconciliation or agreement, Franco-Italian adherence to the terms of the London Naval Treaty was not secured. More significantly for the future of the LNT, however, Britain had failed to limit French naval construction. This was

⁶ Notes of a conversation between the First Lord of the Admiralty, the First Sea Lord and Robert Craigie, 11 May, 1931, ADM 116/3624. Article 21 of the LNT - the so-called 'escalator clause' - allowed building by a signatory if naval construction by non signatories jeopardized their security.

⁷ Admiralty notes on 'Possible Problems During the London Naval Conference', 10 October, 1929, ADM 116/3372.

⁸ Admiralty comments on French building programmes, minute by Director of Plans, Roger Bellairs, 7 March, 1930, ADM 116/3372.

⁹ Report from Campbell to Foreign Office on the present position of the Franco-Italian conversations, 28 August, 1930, ADM 116/3372.

¹⁰ Between the LNC and February 1931, the French increased their submarine tonnage figure from 77,600 tons to 83, 137 tons, ADM 116/3624.

¹¹ C.P. 96 (31), 'Military Appreciation of the Situation in Europe, March 1931', memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 31 March, 1931, C.P. 213 (31), 24 September, 1931.

imperative if the building programmes of the signatories were not to be dislocated. In fact, the French attitude in the negotiations had:

largely resulted in upsetting what was done in London. Firstly with regard to submarines, France's insistence on a very high figure for these vessels has upset the balance in the destroyer category--although we have agreed not to operate the escalator clause until after the 1932 Disarmament Conference, it seems certain that we shall have to do so then. Then with regard to cruisers, France's attitude has made it practically certain that we shall have to go up in this category at any rate in 1935.¹²

The real effect of the failure to bring agreement between France and Italy was therefore to be felt in the construction programmes of *other* Powers, including Britain. It was in this respect - the need to limit the strength of the French Fleet because of its effect on the size of neighbouring navies - that the failure to secure Franco-Italian agreement would be significant for the Royal Navy.

The 'real tussle', it was felt, would come at the World Disarmament Conference at Geneva in 1932, where it was hoped the London Naval Treaty could finally be extended to France and Italy.¹³ With naval questions largely relegated to the sidelines in the search for a general armaments settlement, however, this opportunity for reconciliation did not present itself - the fear that efforts to obtain agreement between France and Italy could ultimately be 'a waste of time' was realized,¹⁴ and the prospects of a European naval race heightened.

Indeed, the entire Disarmament Conference proved to be a 'waste of time'. Despite six years of planning, and the production of a draft treaty to be completed at the Conference, delegates were unable to simply 'fill in the blanks'.¹⁵ The fundamental obstacle was the changing international situation. An unstable world environment,

¹² Admiral Sir Frederick Field, 'Notes between the First Lord, First Sea Lord and Craigie', 11 May, 1931, ADM 116/3624.

¹³ Minute by Bellairs, 27 August, 1930, ADM 116/3372.

¹⁴ Minute by Field, 19 January, 1932, ADM 116/2946.

¹⁵ McKercher, 'The Preparatory Commission and the World Disarmament Conference', 183. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this article.

stemming especially from Japanese aggression in the Far East and the impact of the Great Depression, made the maintenance of national security and the defence of national interests - as opposed to international considerations - crucial to the major Powers. 'The favourable diplomatic and military circumstances that had led to the formation of the Preparatory Commission in late 1925 - the emergence of relative political stability in the Far East and Europe thanks to the Washington and Locarno treaties - were crumbling by early 1932.'¹⁶

The portents for the Conference were not good, and neither American nor British efforts could save the Conference from extinction. After a year of floundering, a downcast Foreign Secretary summed up the proceedings: 'There have been occasional spurts of energy and long periods of lethargy: in spite of all our efforts, there is next to nothing done which justifies hope of a successful conclusion.'¹⁷

Nor did reviewing the world situation provide consolation for John Simon. 'The state of the world has gone from bad to worse', he wrote. Though no wars had yet broken out in Europe, with the advent of Hitler in Germany 'sabre-rattling as a habit [was] increasing... . Unless there is a change of method and a new impetus the Conference is doomed.' However, the difficulties of so many countries dealing simultaneously with the issues of land, air, and sea armaments proved too much. The Conference to all intents and purposes ended with the withdrawal of both Germany and Japan during 1933.

The deteriorating international climate caused anxiety not only to British diplomats concerned with the World Disarmament Conference but also the Admiralty. Their anxiety, however, was less with the failure to conclude a *new* disarmament agreement, than with fears that such events would compromise the *old* limitation agreements already entered. More fundamentally, the Admiralty feared that should the Washington or London naval treaties fall by the wayside, the Royal Navy which they had produced would find it difficult to withstand threats. In fact, this fear had been the motivating factor

¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷ C.P. 52 (33), 'Crisis in Europe', memo by John Simon, 28 February, 1932, CAB 24/239.

behind the Admiralty's second condition in agreeing to fifty cruisers at the London Naval Conference, namely, that it be accepted only 'under existing international conditions.'¹⁸ Under any other conditions, the terms of the LNT could not provide the Royal Navy with the defensive flexibility required to deal with emergency situations. The Admiralty's forecast for the stability of the international status quo was not promising, and as far as they were concerned, the Treaty was only admissible so long as the international political conditions in it had been signed did not change.

It soon became painfully clear, however, that international political conditions *had* changed. What the Admiralty feared and predicted would happen became a reality. September 1931 saw the beginnings of a crisis in the Far East, when the Japanese occupied the northern Chinese province of Manchuria.¹⁹ The 'Manchurian Incident' was followed in February 1932 by an attack on the Chinese city of Shanghai and there were rumours of a Japanese plan to attack the unfinished naval base at Singapore.²⁰ The situation was especially alarming to the Admiralty, whose entire defensive position in the Far East rested on the maintenance of the Singapore base as a place to which the Main Fleet could be transferred during hostilities.²¹ Japanese aggression against China had made it clear that neither the strategy to develop the Singapore base as a *place d'armes*, nor the agreements made at Washington and London had reduced the Far Eastern threat to Britain's interests. Moreover, the incidents at Manchuria and Shanghai made it plain that the Royal Navy was too weak strategically to oppose Japan in the Far East and even its ability to hold Singapore was in doubt.

¹⁸ C.P. 327 (30), 'Review of Imperial Defence, 1930, by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', 29 July, 1930, CAB 24/215.

¹⁹ For the origins of the Japanese army's move into Manchuria, see W.G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

²⁰ Watt, *Personalities and Policies. Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 84.

²¹ The decision to develop the Singapore base along these lines was taken at the 1923 Imperial Conference. See W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

Assessments of the situation in the Far East by both the Admiralty and the Chiefs of Staff confirmed the seriousness of the Royal Navy's position. Revisions made to the Admiralty's 1931 War Memorandum (Eastern) in the light of Japanese transgressions in China warned:

The incidents in Manchuria and at Shanghai in 1931-2 indicate that Japan will not shrink from the use of force should peaceful methods of overcoming [either the hostility of the Chinese or the competition of other powers to Japanese expansion in China] prove ineffective or unduly slow...the possibility of a reversion at a favourable moment to a policy of conquest and a recrudescence of the war spirit cannot be over looked.²²

The report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on the Eastern situation was even less equivocal. Reviewing the present state of Britain's defences in the Far East, they concluded that 'Singapore, Hong Kong and Trincomali could not, in their present condition, be expected to hold out in the event of hostilities suddenly occurring with Japan'.²³ The naval base at Singapore was the pivot of the naval strategical position in the Far East, and its security was of 'supreme importance' in a war with Japan. However, the existing naval, military and air defences at Singapore were 'totally inadequate for meeting a serious attack either by bombardment, air attack or landing.' Reiterating the conclusion reached in the Annual Review for 1932, the Chiefs of Staff assigned responsibility for this state of affairs to the continuance of the so-called 'Ten Year Rule'; an assumption formulated after 1919 that there would be no major war for ten years that 'ran contrary to the lessons of history' and had produced in the Far East 'a situation in which we cannot count on our being able to bring our sea-power to bear in time to avert the direst consequences in the event of an aggression by Japan.'

This view of the effect of the Ten Year Rule on British security between 1919 and 1932 needs to be qualified. As one scholar has demonstrated, the rule had little effect in

²² War Memorandum (Eastern), originally dated July 1931, ADM 116/3118.

²³ C.I.D. 1084-B, 'The Situation in the Far East', Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, 3 March, 1932, CAB 24/229. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this document.

itself on British defence policy during this period.²⁴ Its importance as a determining factor in British strategic policy was more implied than real; more important in theory than in practice. Historians have tended to assume that the policies of the Services were dominated by the Treasury because of the existence of the Ten Year Rule. However, 'until 1925 the Treasury did not dominate strategic policy or all the services. It gained control over all their estimates only by 1926 and over their policies by 1928.'²⁵ As a result, the influence of the Ten Year Rule was more the *product* of strategic decisions than their cause. Thus, historians 'have confused the result of a process for its cause.'²⁶ In many respects, this error in interpretation was also made by the Service Chiefs during the interwar period. The rule did not, to any significant degree, affect their service policies. Neither did its eventual revocation. Ending the Ten Year Rule gained the Services nothing directly. Indirectly, however, it was a clear warning to the Cabinet that Britain's defence policy might have to change in the near future.

Despite the Treasury's fundamentally correct defence of the rule as 'no more than a working hypothesis' and warning that 'financial and economic risks are by far the most serious and urgent that the country has to face',²⁷ the various reports by the Admiralty and Chiefs of Staff on the Far East were serious enough to force Government action on two levels. First, the Government authorized the recommencement of work on the Singapore base, suspended for five years by their predecessors in 1930.²⁸ Secondly, with the assumption of 'no major war for ten years' challenged by Japanese aggression in the Far East, the ten year rule was rescinded.²⁹ By 1932, therefore, it had become obvious that the London Naval Treaty was only relevant to the time in which it had been signed.

²⁴ Ferris, 'Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies'; idem., *Men, Money and Diplomacy*.

²⁵ Ibid., *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 4.

²⁶ Ibid., 'British Service Policies', 861.

²⁷ C.I.D. 1087-B, 'Note by the Treasury on the Annual Review for 1932 by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee (1082-B)', 11 March, 1932, CAB 24/229.

²⁸ C.P. 344 (30), 'The Singapore Base. Report by the Committee of the Fighting Services', 14 October, 1930, CAB 24/215; CAB 50 (32), Cabinet Meeting, 11 October, 1932, CAB 23/72.

²⁹ No actual decision was made to abolish the rule - rather it was simply allowed to lapse after 1932 and only officially cancelled in November 1933 with the establishment of the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC).

As the international environment changed, its inability to guarantee Britain's long-term security compelled the Government to work around its terms and substitute them with other measures to reinforce the safety of British interests.

With the apparent 'weapon for the Chancellor of the Exchequer' thus removed,³⁰ and work begun again on the Singapore base, 1932 appeared to mark a fresh start for the Admiralty and their strategic policies. Although less confident than before, they could now attempt to bolster security in the Far Eastern reaches of the Empire *and* work towards the attainment of the Two-Power Standard in European and Home Waters. Before this was possible, however, the third and final condition imposed upon the acceptance of the London Naval Treaty needed to be fulfilled; that 'provided...in our number there is a proper proportion of new construction.'³¹ The decision to proceed with the Singapore base was inconsequential without a fleet available to go there. Otherwise it would be, in the words of Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 'like a sentry box without a sentry.'³² The Sea Lords had agreed to a reduced number of cruisers only so long as a *steady* programme of replacement was begun. This was the most important of the Admiralty's three conditions if the effect of an ageing, semi-obsolete fleet in need of expensive block reconstruction by the end of 1936 was to be mitigated. It was a condition made all the more important by the fact that other signatories were allowed to build new post-war vessels under the Treaty.

However, if at last it seemed that the constraints on the Admiralty's freedom to formulate a long-ranging policy had been lifted with the lapse of the ten year rule, the fiscal restraints on their ability to satisfy strategical requirements of the Navy had not. As one historian has observed, 'none of the post-war antipathies to armaments had diminished in the least.'³³ Even if the Admiralty denied that financial and economic risks

³⁰ Chatfield, *It Might Happen Again*, 10.

³¹ LNC (E) 10, 'Basis of British Naval Strategy', memorandum by Charles Madden, 14 January, 1930, ADM 116/2746.

³² Quoted in Roskill, *The Strategy of Sea Power. Its Development and Application* (London: Collins, 1962), 146.

³³ Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars*, 106.

were greater than military risks during this period, budgetary considerations were at least still more influential. The pressure of both public opinion and the Treasury were important considerations in the allocation of defence expenditure.

Indeed, between 1929 and 1932, the Treasury consistently hampered the Admiralty's construction programmes. Between 1929-34, expenditure on new construction fell by twenty-five percent and there was a perceptible decline in ship building orders.³⁴ The axe had first begun to swing in 1929, with the election of the second Labour government. First, the newly established Fighting Services Committee (FSC)³⁵ recommended the suspension of work on two eight inch cruisers from the 1928 programme.³⁶ Secondly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, demanded a reduction in the 1929 new construction programme. Included in this programme were two cruisers of the fourteen ship replacement programme agreed to by MacDonald.³⁷ Nevertheless, one cruiser and four destroyers were cancelled.

The 1930 construction programme also came under harsh criticism from the Chancellor, who was anxious that the fifty cruiser figure agreed upon be regarded as a maxima, rather than a minima, for future naval building, thus reducing unnecessary expenditure.³⁸ The Admiralty anticipated laying down three cruisers and one flotilla of destroyers each year from 1930 to 1933, in order to attain the tonnage figures allowed under the London Naval Treaty by 1936, and to keep up with the new construction by other Powers. This time, the Admiralty programme was approved, but it was only a partial victory for the Board. The FSC only gave its recommendation to the 1930 programme - future building was not considered - and £4 million was cut from the

³⁴ Ferris, 'Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy', 158.

³⁵ CAB 23(29), Cabinet Meeting, 21 June, 1929, CAB 23/61.

³⁶ F.S. (29) 7, 'First Report dealing with the Naval Construction Programme', 6 July, 1929, CAB 27/407.

³⁷ 'New Construction Programme, 1929', 17 October, 1929, ADM 167/79.

³⁸ C.P. (12)30, 'Memorandum by the Treasury on the Financial Aspects of the Naval Conference', 16 December, 1929, CAB 24/209.

estimates, forcing the Royal Navy to sacrifice its maintenance and war reserves programmes.³⁹

The prospects for 1931 did not bode well for future construction either. In a memorandum on Britain's deteriorating financial situation, the Chancellor warned that 'the Budget prospect for 1931 is a grim one...the financial prospect constantly and steadily deteriorates.'⁴⁰ A deficit approaching £50-70 millions was forecast. Imposing higher levels of taxes was felt to be counterproductive, so it was to current expenditure, Snowden argued, that attention must be devoted. 'It is not enough now to refrain from undertaking fresh expenditure. We must secure substantial reductions in existing expenditure.'

Accordingly, Snowden proposed that one cruiser and two destroyers be cut from the 1931 construction programme.⁴¹ However, as in 1930, Ramsay MacDonald once again came to the defence of the Admiralty, arguing that naval construction had already been severely pruned.⁴² In the event, the FSC recommended the approval of the 1931 programme in toto, but subject to two conditions: first that the programme authorized was for 1931 only, and second, 'that the ships *shall not be laid down before the calendar year 1932*.'⁴³ Although delaying the construction of new vessels until the fourth quarter of the financial year instead of the first was a normal expedient, these conditions were not conducive to the steady replacement programme that the Board had insisted upon in 1930.

In late 1931, the Report of the Fleet Committee, appointed to determine the minimum new construction that the Admiralty would be willing to accept for the next few years, addressed the necessity for a steady replacement programme:

³⁹ Board Minutes, 5 June, 1930, ADM 167/81; Babij, 'The Royal Navy and the Defence of the British Empire'.

⁴⁰ C.P. 3 (31), 'The Financial Situation. Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 7 January, 1931, CAB 24/219.

⁴¹ F.S. (29) 42, 'Naval Construction Programme 1931. Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 23 January, 1931, CAB 27/407.

⁴² F.S. (29) 14 Mtg., 26 January, 1931, CAB 27/407.

⁴³ C.P. (29) 31, 'Naval Construction Programme 1931', 2 February, 1931, CAB 24/219.

Placed as we are now, under limitation by treaty, and with a large proportion of our fleet ageing, we cannot afford to defer the replacement of ships for any period longer than that to which we have already agreed: nor can we afford, after that period, to see our ships grow obsolete as compared with corresponding ships in foreign fleets: such a policy would lead to nothing else but a second class navy.⁴⁴

The situation was especially serious in regard to capital ships. Any extension of the building holiday beyond 1936, the Sea Lords argued, 'would thus involve either a battle fleet seventy-five per cent obsolete or a building programme larger than we could hope to obtain in normal times.' The depleted reserves of war material was also in need of restitution. In their efforts to maintain the tonnage allowed under the LNT, the Admiralty had, over the past two years, been forced to forego the provision of oil fuel reserves.⁴⁵

Despite these warnings, the financial situation did not improve the following year; indeed, 1932 witnessed the lowest level of appropriations for the Royal Navy during the interwar period.⁴⁶ The abandonment of the Ten Year Rule by the Cabinet had been qualified by the proviso that 'this must not be taken to justify an expanding expenditure by the Defence Services without regard to the very serious financial and economic situation which still obtains.'⁴⁷ The hamstrings of the Exchequer were therefore still obvious. As the year came to a close, the Sea Lords prepared a memorandum calling the Government's attention to the material condition of the Fleet and criticizing the extent of the search for arms limitation:

Successive Governments have been so engrossed in the task of digging for the elusive buried treasures of disarmament that we feel it has not been generally recognized to what depth the pit has been dug, the sides of which are now in danger of falling in and engulfing us. The length and therefore the cost of the ladder by which we climb out of the pit to some more secure position must of necessity bear some relation to the depth to which we have sunk ourselves. The

⁴⁴ Report of the Fleet Committee of 1931, 7 December, 1931, ADM 116/2860.

⁴⁵ First Lord of the Admiralty to Snowden, 31 January, 1930, ADM 116/3389.

⁴⁶ Navy Estimates for 1932-33 totalled £50,476,000, compared to the interwar high of £157,529,000 in 1919-20. Figures in Roskill, *Naval Policy* vol. I, 586.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 285.

task of putting the Navy right is so extensive that it is not possible to set about it in a piecemeal manner.⁴⁸

It was a prescient document that had as its inspiration the Government's failure during the preceding three years to respond to the changing conditions under which the London Naval Treaty had been accepted. To recapitulate, 'adequate limitations in the building programmes of other Powers' - that is, France and Italy - had not been achieved; a *steady* programme of new construction had not been effected; and the 'existing international conditions' under which the Treaty had been signed were clearly no longer applicable. Thus, the Royal Navy found itself bound to a treaty which no longer had a practical relevance for the situation in which Britain found itself by early 1933.

Moreover, by late 1932/early 1933, the strategically unsound position of the Royal Navy was becoming more obvious. In the Far East, intelligence reports indicated an acceleration in Japan's cruiser and destroyer programme and an increase of eighty per cent in the naval estimates for 1933/34; a build up that suggested expansion and preparations for operations even larger than the Manchurian and Shanghai incidents.⁴⁹ The general feeling was that the paucity of Britain's armaments in the Far East had provided Japan with their opportunity and that 'they [were] preparing to defend their policy against interference - if necessary by force of arms.'⁵⁰ With the Singapore base still unfinished and lacking adequate defences the Sea Lords were understandably nervous.⁵¹

After 1933, however, the Admiralty was to find its attention increasingly divided between the Far East and Europe, where the rise of Hitler in Germany once again raised the spectre of uncontrolled rearmament on the Continent. One of the 'invisible' threats of

⁴⁸ 'Memorandum by the Sea Lords on the condition of the Navy and its reserves', 3 November, 1932, Chatfield papers [hereafter CHT] 3/1, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

⁴⁹ Memoranda and minutes by Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), 28 November, 1932; 21 January, 1933, ADM 116/3116.

⁵⁰ Minute by Dreyer, 16 December, 1932, ADM 116/3116.

⁵¹ Admiralty Memorandum to C-in-C China, 'Naval Dispositions in the Far East in an Emergency', 26 April, 1933, ADM 116/3472.

the past decade - German militarism - had become visible. The dilemma now faced by the Admiralty was how to reconcile the public and political preoccupation with German rearmament with their own anxieties in the East. Moreover, this accommodation of conflicting concerns would have to be accomplished with a fleet that was not only below the minimum strategical requirements, but also semi-obsolete and ageing; a fleet whose position as the world's foremost navy had been compromised by events between 1930-32, and whose present strength did not enable it to maintain a Two-Power Standard policy.

ii

With Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, the Royal Navy's ability to maintain its maritime supremacy in all parts of the Empire - already compromised - was further undermined. The challenge, as shall be seen, came not from a reconstituted German Navy, but rather from the Admiralty's opponents at home, particularly the Treasury and the Foreign Office, whose insistence on the greater threat from Germany was to divert attention from the Japanese danger in the Far East. Between 1933 and the end of 1934, the Admiralty attempted - in vain - to expose the enormous gulf that existed between Germany's intentions and her capabilities; to argue that while Nazi Germany may indeed be Britain's 'ultimate potential enemy', it was Imperial Japan that posed the more *immediate* and major threat to the security of the Empire.

This, in essence, was the Admiralty's motivation for signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June 1935. The accord was not concluded because of any fear of Germany's naval ambitions or the need to stem them. On the contrary, it was the fear of *Japan's* naval capabilities and intentions that inclined the Admiralty towards agreement with Germany. Only by limiting the *potential* naval threat of Britain's 'ultimate enemy' could the Admiralty concentrate once again on the *actual* and *immediate* threat of Japan

in the Far East. Germany may have been officially identified as Britain's 'ultimate', or paramount, enemy in the mid-1930s, but as far as the Admiralty were concerned, Germany's designation as the 'ultimate enemy' had a second, more realistic definition - as Britain's furthestmost and last enemy. Only when one understands the true nature of both the Japanese and German naval threats in the mid-1930s can one fully appreciate the Admiralty's motivation for signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

Just as the Admiralty's arguments in the early 1930s were ignored, however, historians in the post-war era have also tended to overlook the facts. No other Power, except Japan, was in a sufficiently strong position to attack the British Empire at this time. War with both the United States and France had largely been discounted from strategic policy and Germany was certainly in no material condition to pose a challenge to British interests. In the early 1930s, Germany was, for all practical purposes, still disarmed. In 1933, for example, the German Navy did not even possess the fleet allowed under the Versailles Treaty.⁵² The challenge to Britain's interests would not become effective until *after* the Munich Crisis in 1938-9. Nevertheless, many historians have criticized the British Admiralty for failing to predict this eventuality; for responding too slowly to the threat of the Nazi regime - in essence, for failing to perceive in 1933-34 the extent to which the German war machine would be able to threaten them in 1939.⁵³ By overestimating the nature of the German naval threat in the mid-1930s, they have, conversely, underestimated that of Japan. As a result, historians have yet to fully appreciate the Admiralty's motivation for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

Such arguments rest on an assumption that the Admiralty misread or misinterpreted the intelligence received about Nazi Germany in general, and the German Navy in

⁵² The Treaty of Versailles limited the size of the German Navy to 6 battleships of the pre-Dreadnought era, 6 cruisers, 12 destroyers, and 12 torpedo boats. In addition, 2 battleships, 2 cruisers, 4 destroyers and 4 torpedo boats were allowed as reserve units. Wilhelm Deist, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 70.

⁵³ Geoffrey Till, 'Perceptions of Naval Power Between the Wars: the British Case', in *Estimating Foreign Military Power* ed. Philip Towle (London: Croom Helm, 1982); Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*; idem., 'Baltic Myths and Submarine Boogies: British Naval Intelligence and Nazi Germany 1933-39', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 6, 1 (1983), 60-81.

particular. This introduces a second element that historians have tended to overlook in their analyses - Germany did not, *at this time*, harbour any motives to challenge Britain's naval interests, either in her Home Waters or elsewhere in the Empire. Japan was the only naval Power with whom war in the near future was a real possibility. The Japanese menace in the Far East was a far more serious threat than Whitehall realized. Although the Tirpitzian idea of a blue water battlefleet may still have been alive amongst the German Naval High Command, Hitler had yet to be convinced that a naval emphasis in German policy was of any value at all; that Germany's future did, in fact, 'lie with the sea.'⁵⁴

The main criticism that can be levelled at such arguments, however, is their tendency to analyze the evolution of British naval policy within the confines of the development of German Navy alone. The concomitant dangers represented by the Japanese and Italian fleets are given only summary recognition and are not taken into account when the Admiralty's reaction to Nazi Germany is assessed. In fact, on a relative scale of danger, Japan was the greatest single threat faced by Britain during this period. More than any other Power, Japan had the material and incentive to attack British interests. Only by examining *all* the threats confronting the Royal Navy can one begin to understand the difficult position in which the Admiralty found itself by the end of 1934, and the enthusiasm with which the suggestion for an Anglo-German naval understanding was embraced.

Throughout 1933-34, the Admiralty's principal concern remained the strength and ambition of the Imperial Japanese Navy. By 1932, it had become clear that Japan was pursuing an offensive policy on the Chinese mainland. What was less clear was whether Japan would pursue this policy elsewhere in the Far East. As the British Ambassador in Tokyo, Sir Francis Lindley, assessed the situation: 'Japan has no foreign aspirations

⁵⁴ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 71; Herwig, *The United States in German Naval Planning. 1889-1941* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1976), 189.

outside Asia. ...The question is how far her Asiatic aspirations go.'⁵⁵ Extensive reports on such a possibility were produced by both the Plans Division (PD) and Naval Intelligence Department (NID) at the Admiralty. The increasing divergence of views between the Foreign Office and the Admiralty on the Japanese threat to the Empire becomes apparent in these reports. While they concurred in the belief that a clash between Japan and the USSR was inevitable,⁵⁶ the NID did not share Lindley's conclusion that Japan's Asiatic aims did not extend further than Manchuria.⁵⁷ In their opinion:

Japan's cardinal aim is nothing more or less than the consolidation of her position as the dominant first-class power in the Pacific area and Asia: she is proceeding openly on the Jesuitical principle of the end justifying the means.⁵⁸

Of more immediate concern to the Admiralty, however, was the danger posed to the security of the Empire during this process of consolidation:

It is important that we should be fully alive to the reality of the Japanese Pan-Asiatic Movement and try and follow its workings. It is a much bigger thing than the mere chipping off of bits of China, and is probably the principal means by which Japan hopes to become the leading Empire in the East.⁵⁹

Compounding the danger was the Royal Navy's inability to be, quite literally, in two places at one time. Their ability to defend the Empire and maintain a Two-Power Standard was still in question.

The alarm with which Hitler's rise to power in Germany was greeted by the government in Great Britain was shared by the Admiralty, but for slightly different reasons. While the majority of the Establishment agonized over the prospect of a revival of 'Old Adam' of German militarism on the Continent, the Admiralty worried

⁵⁵ C.P. 145 (33), memorandum by Francis Lindley on 'The Policy of Japan', 20 May, 1933, CAB 24/241.

⁵⁶ Minute by Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), Dickens, 10 March, 1933, ADM 116/3116.

⁵⁷ C.P. 145 (33), 20 May, 1933, cab 24/241.

⁵⁸ 'Japanese Policy in the Pacific Area', [NID 0308/33], 1 May, 1933, ADM 116/3116.

⁵⁹ Minute by Dickens, 19 September, 1933, ADM 116/3116.

lest a renewed concentration on the German menace might jeopardize the naval estimates that were presently geared towards maintaining security in the Far East. In a minute to the Sea Lords, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff (DCNS), Vice-Admiral Charles Little, advised:

The Foreign Office survey of the political situation for 1933 has inclined the finger towards Europe again, but it is not considered desirable to draw attention to this...as it would seriously affect estimates.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, for the remainder of the interwar period, the British Government focused almost exclusively on the German situation to the exclusion of the Japanese menace. The Admiralty's efforts to reorientate attention towards the Far East, however, became increasingly futile after Germany's withdrawal from the Disarmament Conference and League of Nations in October 1933, and the adjournment of the Conference in May 1934. Public and political attention focused even more sharply on the European arena.

The danger lay recognizing Germany's right to equality of armaments that had been granted by the Conference delegates in November 1932.⁶¹ Since Germany had been acceded the *moral* right to rearm, there was nothing to prevent her from rearming in *practice* now that the Conference had broken down. Admittedly, both the Foreign Office and the Admiralty had been in favour of relaxing the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles to allow Germany to possess some arms,⁶² but this had been envisaged as taking place *within* the mechanism of the League of Nations. Now, with Germany's estrangement, the fear was that 'Germany would rearm at pleasure without any stipulated

⁶⁰ Minute by Little, 2 August, 1933, ADM 116/3629.

⁶¹ C.P. 387 (32), 'Form of Declaration on Germany's Claim to Equality of Rights', 9 November, 1932, CAB 24/234.

⁶² C.P. 164 (32), memorandum by the Foreign Office, 'Proposals for Hastening the Work of the General Disarmament Conference', 26 May, 1932, CAB 24/230; C.P. 182 (32), memorandum by the FLA, 'Disarmament', 31 May, 1932, CAB 24/230.

limit and without any international supervision'⁶³, thus precipitating an arms race in Europe, especially among her neighbours.

France had already responded to the new German 'pocket-battleships' (*Deutschland* class) by laying down the *Dunkerque* battle cruiser, prompting Italy to begin plans for two 35,000 ton battleships. The threat of a European naval competition, both to the degree it was real and in terms of its perception, was powerful inducement to the Admiralty to seek an agreement with Germany. By restricting the size of the Germany navy, it might also prove possible to diminish the likelihood of a naval race developing among the other Powers.

Should an uncontrolled armaments race begin, the delicate balance achieved between the principal naval Powers at the London Naval Conference in 1930 would thus be undermined. The real difficulty in Germany beginning to rearm openly, however, was the dilemma of whether to acknowledge or deny it. 'We shall...find ourselves in the embarrassing position,' wrote the Foreign Secretary:

of either having to acknowledge patent violations of the Peace Treaties or of professing ignorance or uncertainty as to the breaches which everybody knows are taking place. Indeed, if Germany comes to the conclusion that there is no prospect of legalizing her illegal armaments, she may prefer to take the bull by the horns and repudiate Part V of the Treaty of Versailles outright.⁶⁴

Indeed, it was widely accepted that Germany had been violating the disarmament clauses of the Versailles settlement all along, with the result that:

Part V [was], for practical purposes, dead, and it would become a putrefying corpse which, if left unburied, would soon poison the political atmosphere of all Europe. Moreover if there [was] to be a funeral, it [was] clearly better to arrange it while Hitler [was] still in a mood to pay the undertakers for their services.⁶⁵

⁶³ C.P. 68 (34), memorandum by John Simon, 'Consequences of a Breakdown of the Disarmament Conference', 9 March, 1934, CAB 24/248.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ C.P. 82 (34), memorandum by the Foreign Office, 'Germany's Illegal Rearmament and its Effect on British Policy', 21 March, 1934, CAB 24/248.

The implication was, that since German rearmament was inevitable, it would be better not to resist it, but to contain it as far as possible. There was already ample evidence of German violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Even as the General Disarmament Conference opened, it was clear that 'Germany, prohibited as she is by the Versailles Treaty from possessing certain weapons, is strongly suspected - to put it no higher - of having acquired some of these prohibited weapons and of having a trained cadre of personnel to operate them.'⁶⁶ The difficulty for the Admiralty during this period, however, lay in convincing the Foreign Office that these infractions, particularly of the naval clauses, did *not yet* amount to a serious threat to the security of the British Isles. Their task was made all the more arduous by the conviction that the German air force was being developed for a 'knock-out blow' against the capital. It was a perception fanned by the view of the Air Ministry that air power would be an important determining factor in the outcome of future wars.⁶⁷ Baldwin's ominous statement in the House of Commons in November 1932, that 'whatever people may tell [the man in the street]...the bomber will always get through',⁶⁸ was a prophecy that bore as heavily on the Admiralty as it did on 'the man in the street.' As Roskill observed:

Partly through the assiduity with which that doctrine was propagated, and partly because the actual effects of air bombing were much overestimated before the war, it came to pass that 'strategic bombing' was always given priority over maritime needs and purposes.⁶⁹

If the Admiralty therefore attempted to down play the threat to Great Britain from the air, they also endeavoured to persuade the foreign policy-making elite that the German threat from the sea was non-existent. Although there *were* indications that German naval

⁶⁶ Memorandum by FSL, 'Abolition of Bombing Aircraft', 29, March, 1932, ADM 116/2826.

⁶⁷ Watt, 'British Intelligence and the coming of the Second World War in Europe', in *Knowing One's Enemies. Intelligence Assessments Before the Two World Wars* ed. Ernest R. May (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 267.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 735.

⁶⁹ Roskill, *Strategy of Sea Power*, 150.

designers had kept abreast of technical progress in submarines since 1919,⁷⁰ and that the illegal replacement of ships was taking place, the number of *confirmed* cases of infringement of the naval clauses was small.⁷¹

The real danger, according to the Admiralty, lay in the Far East, where the United States and Japan were building new 8,500 - 10,000 ton six inch cruisers. 'We are now in fact witnessing,' wrote Bellairs, 'the first steps in competitive building in a new type. ...We shall inevitably have to follow suit and the prospects in regard to future naval limitation will be gloomy in the extreme.'⁷² Clearly the other Powers had not followed Britain's lead in building 7,250 ton, six inch cruisers of the *Leander* type. The alternatives were put before the Board by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Ernle Chatfield:

Is it safest...to have the number of cruisers we need, knowing them to be on average inferior to individual ships of our opponents, or to accept a lower number some of which can meet their foreign contemporaries on fair terms?⁷³

In Chatfield's view, the more immediate need was to build larger cruisers to protect Britain's trade routes. Indeed, he was now of the opinion that 'we have made a mistake in building no less than eight *Leanders* before we were aware whether America and Japan would follow suit or not. ...No doubt we can make good use of the *Leanders* somehow, but I refuse to build another.'⁷⁴ The 1933 Programme of New Construction was subsequently altered to include two six inch cruisers (the new *Minotaur* class) of 8,900 tons displacement and one *Arethusa* type cruiser (5,400 tons).⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Minute by DNI, 28 July, 1933, ADM 116/2945.

⁷¹ Minute by DNI, 15 June, 1933, ADM 116/2945; C.P. 184 (33), 'Memorandum on German Rearmament', 14 July, 1933, CAB 24/242.

⁷² Memorandum by Roger Bellairs, 'USA - Construction of 10,000 ton 6-inch Cruisers', 7 September, 1933. ADM 116/2998.

⁷³ Memorandum by FSL, 'Cruiser Construction', 25 July, 1933, ADM 167/89.

⁷⁴ Letter to Admiral Sir William Fisher, 19 September, 1933, CHT/4/5.

⁷⁵ The original 1933 Programme of New Construction consisted of one cruiser of the *Leander* class and three cruisers of the *Arethusa* class. The deficiency of one cruiser in the new programme would be met by including four ships in the 1934 programme. C.P. 213 (33), memorandum by FLA, 'Programme of New Construction, 1933. Proposed Alterations', 31 August, 1933, CAB 24/243; C.P. 233 (33), memorandum by FLA, 'Programme of New Construction, 1933. Proposed Alterations', 24 October, 1933, CAB 24/243.

The Admiralty were substantially supported in their assessment of the Far Eastern threat by the Chiefs of Staff (COS). In their Annual Review for 1933, the Service Chiefs assigned priority to the defence of Britain's possessions and interests in the Far East over European commitments.⁷⁶ Although the danger of German rearmament and the prospect of conflict on the Continent within five years *was* emphasized, the COS were keen to impress upon the Cabinet that the situation in the Far East, although relaxed, was by no means stable; that 'the Far East remains a potential danger zone, and its importance from the point of view of Imperial Defence has in no way diminished.' The twin problems of Europe and the Pacific, they argued, were different in kind. Whereas the problem of Europe 'may resolve itself into the fulfillment of obligations into which we have entered...with the object of maintaining the peace of Europe', that of the Far East 'is the defence of *our interests and possessions*.' In this respect, Britain's naval responsibilities involved, firstly, the provision and operation of a main fleet in the Far East sufficient to meet the Japanese Fleet; and secondly, the protection of sea communications with the Dominions, India, and the colonial Empire.

As far as Britain's European commitments were concerned, the COS maintained that the risks to this country from Germany were negligible. The matter assumed a different complexion, however, when the possibility of simultaneous trouble in the Far East was taken into consideration. Indeed, during this period, the Admiralty saw the danger from Germany only in relation to dangers posed by other Powers, in particular, Japan and Italy. The fear was that conflict in one sphere of operations would necessarily lead to war in the other. As Chatfield summarized the situation at the beginning of 1934:

At the present moment we have no European dangers of a serious nature. Germany is still unarmed compared to the countries which surround her. ...In five years time it may be a very different matter and we have got to prepare ourselves during that time for a definite European threat of war.... As long as we have not got that threat our possibility of operating in the East is much easier and that is quite apparent to Japan, and therefore I feel that she is unlikely to provoke this

⁷⁶ C.I.D. 1113-B, 'Imperial Defence Policy. Annual Review (1933) by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', 12 October, 1933, CAB 4/22. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this paper.

country too far until she knows that we have a danger nearer to home to worry us also.⁷⁷

This aspect of the Admiralty's assessment of the Nazi threat is frequently overlooked by historians. Far from exaggerating the Japanese threat at sea, for instance, and 'playing down' the German menace to improve its bargaining position with the Treasury, as one scholar has claimed,⁷⁸ the Admiralty undertook astute assessments of *both* dangers in formulating the Navy's requirements in the early 1930s. That they continued to stress the Far Eastern danger over and above the German threat during this period was based on a sound evaluation of both the aims and abilities of the Japanese and German navies. While Japan's naval capabilities and intentions were close enough to indicate that an imminent crisis might be more than just 'idle gossip'⁷⁹, the disparity between the German Navy's capabilities and intentions were wide enough for the Admiralty to discount a German naval threat in the immediate future.

Similarly, the Admiralty's perception of the German danger was also substantially influenced by its understanding of the danger posed by the Italian Navy. In formulating strategy and determining defence priorities in the early 1930s, the choice between a relatively unarmed and impotent German Navy and an elaborately armed and powerful Japanese Navy was a simple one. When the Regia Marina was thrown into the equation, however, the options were less clear-cut and more ambiguous. The danger, as perceived by the Admiralty, was the distinct possibility that Germany and Italy would, in the near future, pair up and form an aggressive alliance against Great Britain. Should that happen,

⁷⁷ Letter to Admiral Sir Frederic Dreyer, 2 February, 1934, CHT/4/4.

⁷⁸ Wark claims that 'a single-minded concentration by the government and public on the German menace inevitably placed the Admiralty at a disadvantage when it came to the crucial annual negotiations with the Treasury over defense estimates. The only way for the Admiralty to improve its bargaining position was to continue to stress the Far Eastern threat and to attempt to keep the German danger in its "proper perspective"', *Ultimate Enemy*, 127. See also his article 'In Search of a Suitable Japan: British Naval Intelligence in the Pacific before the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 1, no. 2 (May 1986), 191.

⁷⁹ C.I.D. 1154-B, 'Imperial Defence policy. Annual Review (1934) by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', Appendix 'Japanese Naval Preparations', 30 November, 1934, CAB 4/23.

Britain's maritime position in Europe, especially in the Mediterranean, would be placed in jeopardy. The situation was aggravated by the rate of Italian naval building during the early 1930s. Since the end of the war, Franco-Italian naval antagonism had steadily developed. Although little actual building by either took place until 1933, Italy and France had been engaged in a 'verbal' competition, with the former demanding the right to parity with the latter. By the mid-1930s, this rivalry had gathered momentum, so that by 1934, the Italian Navy had built or authorized nineteen cruisers and fifty five submarines.⁸⁰

The position in respect to capital ships was especially serious. Under the Washington and London naval treaties, Great Britain had been allowed fifteen capital ships. Since ten would be needed to match Japan's nine in the East, leaving five for Home Waters to equal France, the Admiralty argued that fifteen was an irreducible minimum, especially since only two of these fifteen were of postwar construction. In 1934, however, Italy began the construction of two 35,000 ton, fifteen inch battleships, with the likelihood that France would quickly lay down ships of the same size.⁸¹ Moreover, Germany had four 'pocket' battleships either built or building by 1934. With just five capital ships available for the maintenance of security in Europe - two of which would be under refitment at any one time - and a moratorium on the laying down of capital ships until at least 1937, the prospect of a hostile Italian-German naval combination was therefore worrying to the British Admiralty. Furthermore, a Two-Power Standard - the ability to provide in the Far East a naval force of sufficient strength to secure the Empire against Japanese aggression and, at the same time, to ensure against interference by the strongest naval power in Europe - was not yet a reality. With the development of the Italian Navy, therefore, both the security of the Mediterranean - the gateway through which the principal trade routes

⁸⁰ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. II, 182.

⁸¹ The two Italian ships - the *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto* - were completed in 1940. France did respond by laying two similar ships in 1935 and 1936, the *Richelieu* and *Jean Bart*, completed 1939-40. Ibid., 181-182, 235.

and the Main Fleet's passage to the Far East ran - and the availability of a fleet for the Far East were in question.

During the early 1930s, therefore, the German menace was only considered in relation to its effect on other dangers. On its *own* merits, the Admiralty argued, the German Navy did not yet constitute a serious threat to Britain's security. The more immediate and real danger lay in the Far East. Before one can either substantiate or reject the Admiralty's claims, however, a more thorough examination of both Germany's naval ambitions and abilities and the Admiralty's assessment of the information it received between 1933 and 1934 is necessary.

iii

It is often noted that the Admiralty's assessment of the German threat during the 1930s developed in isolation from that of the Air Ministry, War Office and Foreign Office, with the insinuation that the analyses thus formulated were incorrect.⁸² Wesley Wark, for example, claims that:

the Admiralty took seriously the various German statements that the German navy would not be built against the British. The message that the Tirpitz conception was dead was music to the Admiralty's ears.⁸³

His meaning is clear - the Admiralty were wrong to trust Germany's word. It was their naïve interpretation of intelligence, and their tendency to measure Germany's naval power in terms of the number of her ships that led the Sea Lords to believe such

⁸² Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 124; idem., 'British Military and Economic Intelligence: Assessments of Nazi Germany Before the Second World War', in *The Missing Dimension. Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* eds. Christopher Andrew & David Dilks (London: Macmillan, 1984), 90.

⁸³ Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 128.

statements. Others have made similar accusations, asserting that the thesis of German desire for good relations with England was 'largely mistaken.'⁸⁴

However, such interpretations fail to acknowledge both the limited extent of Germany's naval rearmament and the narrow scope of Hitler's naval ambitions in the early 1930s. More significantly, they have a tendency to equate Germany's foreign policy goals in the early 1930s with her goals in the later 1930s, thus projecting backwards from the war years. In terms of both her naval abilities and intentions, Nazi Germany did *not* pose a serious threat to Britain in the early 1930s. Between 1933 and 1935, the German Navy was both too small and limited in its objectives for the Admiralty to seriously regard it as a viable enemy.

As far as German naval rearmament was concerned, the Admiralty were aware that the Navy did not receive the same priority as the Luftwaffe or the Army. Hitler's foreign policy goals when he came to power in 1933 were essentially land-based - the reoccupation of the Rhineland, the Austrian *Anschluß*, the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the East, and the restoration of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia were continental objectives that required no naval capability. Moreover, in 1933 the German fleet did not even possess what was permitted under the Versailles Treaty,⁸⁵ and the 1932 naval construction plan (the *Umbauplan*) did not envisage the creation of such a fleet until 1938.⁸⁶ Even had Germany aimed at building a fleet capable of posing a serious challenge to Britain's maritime supremacy, the limited capacity of Germany's shipbuilding yards would have proved an effective block. Germany's armaments industry had been severely emasculated by the Treaty of Versailles; there was a shortage of both skilled labour and the steel and non-ferrous metals needed for ship construction. When

⁸⁴ Gerhard L. Weinberg, 'Hitler and England, 1933-1945: Pretense and Reality', *German Studies Review*, no. 8 (1985), 299.

⁸⁵ See Appendix I for the comparative naval strengths of Germany and Britain in 1933 and 1939. For the Versailles Treaty limits, see footnote 52.

⁸⁶ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 71; Carl-Axel Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation. A Study of German Naval Strategic Planning 1888-1940* (Lund: Scandinavian University Books, 1973), 275.

naval rearmament *did* begin to accelerate in 1935, the inadequacies of the German ship-yards brought costly delays:

It is not possible to accelerate the construction of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, fleet escort vessels, torpedo boats, mine sweepers and aircraft carriers since the quickest possible schedules have already been set, the ship-yards are working at the limits of their capacity and all available skilled workers are fully employed... . The German ship-yards can accept no new orders for the time being.⁸⁷

Hitler's assertion to Admiral Raeder at the beginning of November 1934 that no lack of money would be allowed to interfere with the progress of naval rearmament, even if a truthful account, was clearly not a practical point of view.⁸⁸

Naval rearmament - for all maritime powers - was therefore slow, expensive and resource-intensive. But for Germany, more than others, the construction of an 'instant' fleet was impossible. In a trial of strength with the Royal Navy, the German Navy would be totally unprepared; indeed, in 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland, Germany was not ready for a major war at sea with Britain.

In the early 1930s the German Navy alone did not constitute a material threat to the Royal Navy or to the security of Britain's Home Waters. The Admiralty were therefore entirely justified in discounting Germany along such lines. In terms of battleship tonnage, the Imperial Japanese Navy posed the more immediate and dangerous threat. Just as the Admiralty were painfully aware of the gulf between their own capabilities and intentions during this period, they were also aware of other Powers' abilities, and in this respect, the difference between Germany's capabilities and intentions was greater than it was for Japan.

Indeed, the Admiralty's assessment of Germany's naval intentions in the early 1930s is important in explaining their reaction to the rise of Hitler. Their evaluation of the German threat was based on more than just the number of ships the German Navy

⁸⁷ Statement by the German Navy, 1935. Quoted in Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 82.

⁸⁸ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany* vol. I *Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933-36* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 210.

possessed; it was also based on a perceptive appraisal of Germany's naval aims. As one historian, speculating on Hitler's naval ambitions nearly fifty years ago, argued:

The naval clauses of the Versailles Treaty could have been broken, as was almost every other clause in that settlement, before Germany obtained her release from them; yet, by and large, they were observed until they were replaced in 1935. When so much else was undertaken in Germany, her ship-building yards could have been expanded if the determination to expand them had been there... These points suggest that Hitler's preoccupation with the Army and Air Force *could as easily have been a deliberate policy as the result of a careless neglect of naval affairs*.⁸⁹

Studies by a new generation of German naval scholars have confirmed Hinsley's belief that Hitler did not, in fact, have the 'determination' to expand the German Navy, at least not before 1938/39, and certainly not against Britain.⁹⁰ Hitler was, if anything, *anti-Navy*; he did not believe that Germany's 'future lies on the water.'⁹¹ Indeed, Hitler did not envisage a major strategic role for the Navy at all. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had argued that the restoration of Germany's world power status lay in continental expansion. To secure Great Britain's acquiescence, however, Germany would have to renounce her right to sea power. Hitler believed that Germany's defeat in 1918 had been due in part to Germany's challenge to British sea power *before* hegemony in Europe had been secured. If Germany was therefore to become a world power again, she would first have to guarantee Britain's supremacy at sea, in return for a 'free hand' in Europe. In October 1932 Hitler had publicly criticized the *Umbauplan* for precisely that reason. It would be better for Germany's future international position, he argued, to concentrate its resources on the Army.⁹²

⁸⁹ F.H. Hinsley, *Hitler's Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 5.

⁹⁰ Dülffer, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine. Reichspolitik und Flottenbau 1920-39* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1973); Herwig, *The United States in German Naval Planning*; Keith W. Bird, *Weimar, The German Naval Officer Corps and the Rise of National Socialism* (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner Publishing Co., 1977); Deist, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*; Charles S. Thomas, *The German Navy in the Nazi Era* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

⁹¹ In September 1898, Wilhelm II gave a speech in which he said "Our future lies on the water."

⁹² Bird, *German Naval Officer Corps*, 280; Thomas, *German Navy*, 71.

In the fulfillment of Hitler's continental goals - revising the Versailles Treaty and acquiring 'living space' in Eastern Europe⁹³ - a naval accent would therefore be of little value. In a meeting with the Commander of the Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, in April 1933, Hitler outlined his concept of the Navy's future role as lying 'within the framework of its responsibilities toward European continental policy.'⁹⁴ In other words, a Tirpitzian naval policy, such as that favoured by Raeder and the German Naval Command, would not be adopted. In fact, Hitler would be satisfied with a navy that could accord Germany coastal protection in the Baltic Sea.⁹⁵

This last point is an important one. The Admiralty has been criticized for succumbing to the so-called 'Baltic hypothesis'; for accepting uncritically the 'messages' of the German Naval Command that Germany's naval aims were to rule the Baltic Sea, not the Atlantic, and that naval operations were in fact being planned against Russia not Great Britain.⁹⁶ By evolving a 'maverick analysis' of Nazi Germany, the Admiralty were able to only regard Germany as an 'implausible enemy' while continuing to stress the Japanese danger:

This reassuring vision of the European political situation served as a complement to the Admiralty's strategic outlook on the Pacific theatre and was essential to the viability of the Royal Navy's 'main fleet to Singapore' strategy.⁹⁷

⁹³ Hitler defined the role he envisaged for the Armed Forces and outlined his goals at a meeting with the *Reichswehr* generals, 3 February, 1933, *Nazism 1919-1945*, vol. 3 *Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination. A Documentary Reader* eds. J. Noakes & G. Pridham (Four volumes, Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1988), 628-9.

⁹⁴ Erich Raeder, *My Life* (Trans. Henry W. Drexel, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1960), 166.

⁹⁵ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 71.

⁹⁶ The chief proponent of this view in recent years has been Wesley Wark, 'Baltic Myths', 65; idem., 'In Search of a Suitable Japan', 191; idem., *Ultimate Enemy*, 127, 132. A similar argument may be found in Geoffrey Till, 'Perceptions of Naval Power Between the Wars.' In late 1933 Admiral Raeder gave assurances to the British Naval Attaché in Berlin that 'the German fleet would never again be England's enemy at sea, but a small powerful squadron in the Baltic might prove to be a very useful support of British policy', C10777/404/18, 1 December, 1933, FO 371/16730.

⁹⁷ Wark, 'In Search of a Suitable Japan', 191.

In such a way, it is argued, the German Navy 'could be said to be an enemy only of the Admiralty's budget'.⁹⁸

However, the Admiralty's 'acceptance' of the validity of the 'Baltic hypothesis' was fundamentally correct. As noted, Hitler did not intend, at least before 1938, to build a Navy capable of challenging Great Britain at sea.⁹⁹ Moreover, German naval policy at this time *was* motivated by a *Drang nach Osten* concept that included control of the Baltic Sea. As one historian has observed:

The navy that Germany would need for its first wars was the kind that would protect its access to Swedish iron ore, safeguard communications with East Prussia, ensure control of the Baltic against the Soviet Union, and give it the ability to threaten the oceanic supply routes of France.¹⁰⁰

If the German Navy's role in the Reich lay within the 'framework of its responsibilities toward European continental policy', then the possibility that it *was* designed to secure communications in support of such a policy was entirely feasible.¹⁰¹ Beginning in the early 1920s, in fact, the Reichsmarine *had* begun to prepare plans for a war in the Baltic.¹⁰² A series of special studies were commissioned, followed up by exercises and manoeuvres. According to Admiral Raeder, the assumed enemies were the French and Polish navies.¹⁰³ The possibility of a war with Poland occupied German planners after 1918, and the Naval Command were no exception. Moreover, they anticipated that a war with Poland also opened up the risk of war with France. A war against both Poland and France therefore formed the basis of German naval strategic

⁹⁸ Ibid., 'Baltic Myths', 61.

⁹⁹ It was only after the 'May Crisis' in 1938 that Hitler called for speed up in the naval construction programme and the attainment of 100% parity of German with British submarines.

¹⁰⁰ Weinberg, *Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. I, 211.

¹⁰¹ Wark, 'British Military and Economic Intelligence', 91.

¹⁰² Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation*, 257. Unless otherwise indicated, the remainder of this paragraph is based on this work.

¹⁰³ Raeder, *My Life*, 154.

planning until 1938, with France, as the main potential enemy, replaced by Russia after Hitler's assumption of power in 1933.¹⁰⁴

The decision to build two 'pocket-battleships' in 1928, followed by two others in 1931, is often interpreted as early testimony of the Reichsmarine's offensive intentions. Certainly, their relatively light armour, fast speed and their range of 15,000 to 20,000 miles suggested a reach that extended into the Atlantic, and, as the Second World War demonstrated, these ships were more than capable of operating as rapid offensive units. However, the use of pocket-battleships for offensive naval operations against Great Britain in World War Two can not be made retroactive; in other words, in 1933 and 1934, their precise operation in a naval war was not yet certain. Indeed, in January 1933, none of the orders for the pocket-battleships had been completed and the first (the *Deutschland*) was only launched in April 1933.¹⁰⁵

A timely reminder of the divergence between capabilities and intentions is therefore Wilhelm Deist's comment that 'the operations envisaged by the naval leadership developed almost independently of the availability of ships.'¹⁰⁶ Taking this observation one step further, it could also be argued that they developed independently of Hitler. In many respects, the German Naval Command misunderstood Hitler. Raeder believed he could win Hitler over to a more Tirpitzian appreciation of naval strategy by demonstrating the Navy's unswerving loyalty to the Nazi state. He believed, mistakenly, that Hitler could be 'tamed.'¹⁰⁷ However, as various scholars have demonstrated, Hitler was very much the master in his own house, and this included naval policy.¹⁰⁸ Although the German Naval Command, led by Raeder, may have had Tirpitzian aspirations, it

¹⁰⁴ Gemzell, 258.

¹⁰⁵ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁷ Bird, *German Naval Officer Corps*, 282.

¹⁰⁸ See for example Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985); W. Carr, *Hitler. A Study in Personality and Politics* (London: St. Martins Press, 1978).

cannot be inferred that Nazi naval policy between 1933 and 1934 shared such aims; as demonstrated above, it clearly did not.

iv

The British Admiralty were therefore justified in largely discounting a German naval challenge between 1933 and 1934. The Reichsmarine was too limited, both in terms of its rearmament capabilities and its intentions, for the Admiralty to seriously regard it as a threat to the security of Britain or the Home Waters. Nevertheless, the *potential capacity* of the German Navy to become a menace was not discounted. Germany was only an ‘implausible enemy’ insofar as the German danger was considered in isolation from other potential trouble-makers around the world, particularly in the Far East. In conjunction with the threat from Japan in the Pacific, and, increasingly during 1934 and 1935, from Italy in the Mediterranean, Germany was, in fact, a *most plausible* enemy. The principal failure of historical analyses of this period is their tendency to examine the Admiralty’s response to the rise of Nazi Germany *in isolation* from the Far Eastern threat posed by Japan and the Mediterranean threat posed by Italy. The Sea Lords interpretation of intelligence on Nazi Germany was affected not only by their assessments of that country’s ability to wage war against Great Britain, but also by their understanding of other dangers, particularly the nature of the Japanese threat to Imperial security and the need to maintain a Two-Power Standard. In ascribing certain attitudes to the Admiralty, it is impossible to provide a balanced picture without giving equal weight to *all* the threats faced by the Royal Navy in the early 1930s.

The endeavour of the historian, striving to provide this balanced picture, is a mere echo of the efforts of the Admiralty in the mid-1930s to keep the German threat in perspective. Throughout 1934, the Admiralty struggled against the increasing tendency of the public and the politicians to see the German menace in isolation from the Japanese

threat in the Far East, and progressively during this period, from the Italian threat in the Mediterranean. In April 1934, for example, the Admiralty reiterated the view that if the Royal Navy was to maintain the policy of a Two-Power Standard, then:

a proper naval defence policy is that we should be able to provide in the Far East a naval force of sufficient strength to secure the Empire and our supplies against any Japanese encroachment, and at the same time insure ourselves in Europe against interference by the strongest European naval Power.¹⁰⁹

A memorandum by Chatfield later that month, however, made it clear that:

this is not the position today and the Naval Staff would be failing in their duty if they left any doubt in the minds of the Government as to the risks we are taking with our present policy and present strength, risks which can only be counterbalanced by a correlated foreign policy.¹¹⁰

In other words, any reduction in Britain's naval strength would have to be compensated for by a foreign policy that aimed at diminishing *all* the risks - Japan, Italy, and Germany *in conjunction* - that jeopardized the ability of the Royal Navy to defend both the Empire and the Home Waters. However, the dispute over which threat should be considered of the greatest importance, initiated by the Chiefs of Staff assignment of priority to the Far East, had yet to be resolved.¹¹¹ If the Royal Navy was to benefit from a foreign and defence policy that would enable it to fulfill a Two-Power Standard and counter the more immediate threat emanating from the Far East, then the resolution of this dispute in the Admiralty's favour was critical.

However, the order of priorities - hitherto in the Admiralty's favour - were rearranged in early 1934 with the report of the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC) which concluded that Germany was to be regarded as the 'ultimate potential enemy' and that

¹⁰⁹ 'Naval Staff Appreciation of Requirements for the 1935 Naval Conference', April 1934, ADM 1/8802.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum by the Chief of the Naval Staff in Preparation for the 1935 Naval Conference', April 1934, ADM 1/8802.

¹¹¹ C.I.D. 1113-B, 'Imperial Defence Policy. Annual Review (1933) by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee', 12 October, 1933, CAB 4/22.

five years was the deadline for Britain's defence deficiencies be made good to meet the German threat.¹¹² Ironically, it was the same report that assigned first priority to the Far Eastern theatre - the COS Annual Review for 1933 - that had led to the creation of this Government committee. Given that no new defence principle had been adopted to replace the now defunct 'Ten Year Rule', the Chiefs of Staff had requested that further guidance be given to the Services responsible for Imperial Defence in framing their Estimates. Moreover, Germany's withdrawal from both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations and Japanese aggression in the Far East made just such a reevaluation imperative. At a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence at the end of 1933, it had therefore been decided that 'the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, with representatives of the Treasury, and the Foreign Office, and the Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, should prepare a programme for meeting our worst deficiencies for transmission to the Cabinet.'¹¹³

Upon its completion, the report was duly passed to the Cabinet where it was considered by the Ministerial Committee on Disarmament. The original report was significantly modified, largely at the instigation of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, including a reduction in the total defense spending earmarked for making good the deficiencies and an increase in the size of the Royal Air Force at the expense of the Navy and Army.¹¹⁴ In a note on his proposals, Chamberlain argued that since Great Britain could not afford to carry out all the recommendations contained in the DRC Report, 'we must begin again by considerations of priority and seek to isolate the salient points.'¹¹⁵ In this respect, it could not be disputed that:

¹¹² C.P. 64 (34), 'Imperial Defence Policy: Report of the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee', 28 February, 1934, CAB 16/109. A copy can also be found in ADM 116/3435.

¹¹³ C.I.D. 261st Meeting, 9 November, 1933, CAB 2/6.

¹¹⁴ C.P. 205 (34), 'Ministerial Committee: Defence Requirements Report', 31 July, 1934, CAB 24/250.

¹¹⁵ D.C. (M)(32) 120, 'Note by Chancellor of the Exchequer on the Report of the Defence Requirements Committee', 20 June, 1934, CAB 16/111. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this document.

the anxieties of the British people are concentrated on Europe rather than on the Far East, and that if we have to make a choice we must prepare our defence against possible hostilities from Germany rather than from Japan.

As far as these new priorities affected the Navy, Chamberlain concluded that 'we must postpone the idea of sending out to [the Far East] a fleet of capital ships capable of containing the Japanese fleet or meeting it in battle.' Furthermore, a reduction in the DRC figures for expenditure on naval deficiencies from £21.1 millions to £13 millions was proposed.

In defending the Navy, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Bolton Eyres-Monsell, claimed that 'any naval preparations which were taken in hand to meet the German threat did nothing to secure our position in the Far East, whereas, conversely, if the Navy deficiencies were put right in order to meet the Far Eastern menace then the European danger would be covered thereby.'¹¹⁶ Moreover, the Chancellor's proposals, if accepted, would mean the abandonment of Britain's sea power, thereby altering 'the whole basis of Imperial policy, and the whole system of Imperial Defence.'

In the event, the Chancellor's proposals as they pertained to the Royal Navy were rejected by the Cabinet as too radical, but it was also clear that political and public opposition to fighting a two-front war remained strong. More importantly, the Admiralty had patently failed in their attempt to convince both audiences that the Far Eastern menace was more immediate than the German threat. All that the Sea Lords could do now was to confirm amongst themselves that 'insufficient account [had been] taken of Germany's present naval weakness and what she is likely to be able to accomplish in a period of five years'.¹¹⁷ The fear of Germany was 'a fear of what Germany *may* do', while in the East, Britain was in 'a much more immediately vulnerable position.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ D.C. (M)(32) 50th Cons, 25 June, 1934, CAB 16/110.

¹¹⁷ Plans Divisions Comments on DRC Report [n.d.], ADM 116/3434.

¹¹⁸ Remarks by DCNS, 21 June, 1934, ADM 116/ 3436.

Indeed, the tense situation in the Far East had not been alleviated during 1934; if anything, it had intensified. The passage of the Vinson-Trammell Act in the United States - authorizing an increase of 102 ships to allow the navy to reach treaty limits by 1942 - increased the likelihood that Japan would respond to the United States programme with further building.¹¹⁹ What is more, the Japanese Naval Command - now dominated by officers who were dedicated to the elimination of unequal ratios - had been given full control in determining the size and composition of the Imperial Japanese Navy.¹²⁰ Accordingly, in August 1934 Japan announced her decision to abrogate the Washington and London Naval Treaties and formulated a 'Second Replenishment Programme' to be completed by 1937.¹²¹

The preliminary negotiations for the next London Naval Conference, due in 1935, had also proved disappointing.¹²² During talks in October 1934, Japan - determined to end the 5:5:3 ratio established at Washington and achieve parity with the United States and Britain - had put forward proposals for a 'Common Upper Limit' in naval strengths to which all Powers would have the right to build. This was rejected by the Admiralty who argued that Britain 'should never, under any circumstances, agree to sign a declaration which amounts to stating that all powers have equal naval needs.'¹²³ As Admiralty reasoning since the end of the war dictated, Great Britain, with a global Empire unmatched by any other Power, clearly had naval requirements that were absolute, and not relative to the strengths of other navies. A British compromise along the lines of declared building programmes with qualitative limitations only also proved impossible of agreement.¹²⁴ Having announced her intention to achieve parity with the USN and RN,

¹¹⁹ Fanning, *Naval Rivalry and Arms Control*, 141.

¹²⁰ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 144.

¹²¹ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. II, 179.

¹²² Records of the meetings with representatives of the United States [N.C.(USA)], Japan [N.C.(J)], France [N.C.(F)], and Italy [N.C.(I)] can be found in 'Naval Conference, 1935: Anglo-Foreign Conversations', CAB 29/149. Unless otherwise indicated, the remainder of this paragraph is based on these files.

¹²³ Plans Division memorandum, 'The Common Upper Limit', 6 November, 1934, ADM 116/3373.

¹²⁴ N.C.M. (35) 25, 'Draft Statement of the British Position vis-à-vis the Japanese Proposals', 6 November, 1934, *DBFP*, 2, vol. XIII, (London: HMSO, 1973), No. 41, 80-81.

Japan was clearly not prepared to accept a navy smaller than either America or Britain in any future naval limitation agreement.

Anglo-American relations were no more cordial. Whereas Britain aimed at recommencing battleship construction in 1936 and building up to seventy cruisers, the United States sought to uphold the *present* treaty ratios whilst simultaneously affecting a twenty percent all round *reduction*. Suspicion that Britain planned to reach agreement with the Japanese over the parity issue - perhaps a non-aggression pact - also soured Anglo-American conversations. Clearly, the British Government's aim of reaching an 'ultimate policy of accommodation and friendship with Japan' - as advocated in the DRC report - was only feasible at the expense of American support in the Pacific.¹²⁵

Privately, the Sea Lords held out little hope of an agreement between the principal naval Powers at London.¹²⁶ Quantitative limitation, in the form of ratios, was now defunct, making the need for some form of qualitative limitation imperative. Japan, however, had been unequivocal about her opposition to qualitative limitation agreements.¹²⁷ The dilemma facing the Admiralty, therefore, was how best to preserve both the Empire and Home Waters intact. In a letter to the Secretary to the Treasury, Sir Warren Fisher, Admiral Chatfield summarized the general situation in which Britain found itself by the end of 1934:

We are in the remarkable position of not wanting to quarrel with anybody because we have got most of the world already, or the best parts of it, and we only want to keep what we have got and prevent others from taking it away from us. The best way, in my view, to do that is to look after our own defences, both East and West, and so make it less likely that our dominant position in the world, geographically, shall not be challenged.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ D.R.C. 14, 'Defence Requirements Sub-Committee Report', 28 February, 1934, ADM 116/3435.

¹²⁶ See for example Chatfield's letter to Fisher, 11 May, 1934, CHT/4/5.

¹²⁷ N.C. (J) 7th Meeting, 6 December, 1934, *DBFP*, 2, vol. XIII, No. 88, 147.

¹²⁸ Letter to Sir Warren Fisher, 4 June, 1934, CHT/3/1.

The simplicity with which Chatfield portrayed the dilemma facing Britain - and, by implication, the Royal Navy - at the end of 1934 belied a complex state of affairs. In both East and West, naval rearmament by all the principal Powers was proceeding apace, threatening to undermine not only the naval agreements already agreed upon but also further naval limitation. With apparently irreconcilable interests, the prognosis for agreement between the Powers at the forthcoming London Naval Conference was not promising. As far as Great Britain was concerned, the possibility of controlled and supervised naval rearmament giving way to unregulated and unilateral naval building, leading to a general armaments race, was all the more worrisome given the condition of Britain's economy. The Royal Navy was well below the requirements considered necessary for the security of the Empire and Home Waters and, as matters stood, the ideal of a Two-Power Standard could not be fulfilled. Indeed, the First Lord of the Admiralty cautioned that if the Navy's building programmes were not carried out, and if the deficiencies were not made good, then not even a *One-Power Standard* could be maintained. 'If that standard were to be abandoned,' he warned, 'we could not defend the Empire and we might as well have no Navy at all.'¹²⁹

As far as the Admiralty were concerned, the unsound strategical position of the Royal Navy in the Far East was most alarming. By the end of 1934, the Committee of Imperial Defence had concluded that under existing circumstances, Britain's war policy in the Far East must be purely defensive, at least in the opening stages. Furthermore, 1936 was identified as the most likely critical year vis-à-vis Japan and Britain, since:

Japan will have almost completed the modernization of her capital ships and, for the most part, the expansion of her air forces, including her Fleet Air Arm, whereas in these two respects the British Fleet will be unready and the garrison of Singapore incomplete.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ CAB 31 (34), 31 July, 1934, CAB 23/79.

¹³⁰ C.I.D. 266th Meeting, 22 November, 1934, CAB 2/6.

However, the Admiralty's Far Eastern concerns were not shared by either the Government or the public. For them, the more immediate danger lay closer to home, in Europe, where the prospect of a revival of German militarism appeared to secure a firmer footing as each day passed. By the end of 1934, the British Government found itself in a difficult position vis-à-vis Germany. Evidence of illegal German rearmament in all spheres had increased during 1934, to the extent where it could no longer be safely ignored.¹³¹ The Committee on German Rearmament had therefore recommended that knowledge of German rearmament be announced. Having reached the stage when recognition had become inevitable, it was concluded that it would be far better for German rearmament to be controlled than remain uncontrolled. It was not a risk-free policy to adopt, for there was always the risk that Germany would interpret British recognition as a de facto legalization of her rearmament to date and a mandate for future development. It could also be interpreted as a sign of Britain's weakness and provide the opportunity for Germany to undermine the unity of the Versailles powers. 'Such a situation', the Committee concluded:

would be very serious, *but there does not appear to be any alternative*. If the situation is just left to drift, Germany will continue to re-arm to whatever degree she may ultimately desire. She may break all her agreements by unilateral action, and we shall have lost in the end all chance of ever getting control of her actions, a control, which, in our opinion, is essential for the security and peace of Europe.¹³²

Supported by the Chiefs of Staff, the Admiralty again stressed that the menace of German aggression in the West was *not* imminent.¹³³ Their efforts, however, were in vain. Neither the public nor the political elite were willing to concede to the Admiralty that the danger in the Far East was greater and more immediate. They continued to

¹³¹ C.P. 82 (34), 'Germany's Illegal Rearmament and its Effect on British Policy', 21 March, 1934, CAB 24/248; C.P. 268 (34), 'German Rearmament. Memoranda prepared in the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry', 23 November, 1934, CAB 24/251.

¹³² C.P. 295 (34), 'Committee on German Rearmament', 11 December, 1934, CAB 24/251.

¹³³ C.O.S. 350, 'Defence Plans. Memorandum by Chief of the Imperial General Staff', 4 October, 1934, CAB 53/24.

demand that the situation in Europe be dealt with decisively and immediately. By the end of 1934 the Sea Lords recognized that the Royal Navy also had no alternative but to make some practical response to the German situation. If the Admiralty was ever to be capable of waging a two-front war, then it was imperative to secure some kind of agreement that would limit the German Navy. Only by pacifying domestic opinion in this way would the Royal Navy be able to exercise its might in the far reaches of the Empire and finally focus public and political attention on the Far Eastern theatre.

In the meantime, the ultimate aim was to return Germany to the supervisory fold of the League, and to secure her adherence to the new London Naval Treaty - an aim that was essential if Franco-Italian agreement on naval strengths was finally to be secured. However, even by mid-1934, Chatfield had begun to express doubt as to the feasibility of such a goal. As the four years since the first London Naval Conference had made all too plain:

The one thing which causes all the trouble is the endeavour to make military agreements to limit arms. That is why I should like to see the attempt to make Naval agreements abandoned and substitute for them political understandings, leaving each nation free to build what she wants.¹³⁴

If the British Admiralty was ultimately to contain the combined naval menace represented by the fleets of Japan, Italy and, increasingly, Germany, thus attaining the desired Two-Power Standard of naval strength, then a possible solution *was* to reach a political understanding with one or other of these Powers. Since such an understanding with Japan was only possible by sacrificing American friendship and support in the Pacific, and with Italy at the expense of the French entente, the only feasible alternative was Nazi Germany. As far as the Sea Lords were concerned, a political understanding with Germany would serve a dual purpose. Not only would it place the German menace

¹³⁴ Letter to Sir Warren Fisher, 4 June, 1934, CHT/3/1.

in Europe in a more realistic perspective, but it would also free up much needed financial resources for the Far Eastern theatre.

In January 1935, therefore, the decision was made by the Admiralty and, reluctantly by the Foreign Office, to approach Germany along these lines: not by opening *formal* negotiations with the German Government, but by 'the taking of *soundings* as to Germany's requirements for a building programme on the British basis...to ascertain what in fact are likely to be the practical steps Germany wishes to take should she eventually participate in a general naval conference.'¹³⁵

Thus, having opposed naval arms limitation in the 1920s, the Admiralty by late 1934 now favoured such measures. Financial limitations and an over-emphasis of the German menace to the exclusion of the more immediate Japanese threat precluded the construction of the kind of Navy that the Sea Lords desired and needed. By the mid-1930s, the Admiralty faced a strategic dilemma. If a Two-Power Standard was ever to be realized and the security of the Empire preserved, then either the Royal Navy must rearm on a greater scale or the size of foreign navies must also be limited. The former was not yet an option. Full-scale naval rearmament along the lines advocated by the Admiralty during 1934 was not accepted by the Government until the end of 1935.¹³⁶ The forthcoming London Naval Conference could be a step in the latter direction, but it would be a faltering one unless Germany could also be induced to limit by treaty the size and composition of her navy. Otherwise, the likelihood of an unrestrained - and expensive - naval race developing was a distinct possibility. In order to acquire the Navy they ultimately wanted - one which would enable them to meet the Japanese fleet in the Far East, while retaining in Home Waters a force sufficient to meet the largest European navy - the Sea Lords therefore found themselves by late 1934 in the ironic position of pressing for a 'liberal' solution (naval limitation) for entirely 'realistic' reasons (naval security).

¹³⁵ N.C.M. (35) 46, Memorandum by the Admiralty and the Foreign Office, 'Survey of the Present Position of the Naval Conversations and Recommendations as to Future Procedure', 17 January, 1935, FO 371/18731.

¹³⁶ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 171.

CHAPTER III

THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT

*"Diplomacy must bear the burden of diminishing Britain's enemies."*¹

By the beginning of 1935 it had become apparent to the Admiralty that if the Royal Navy was to be able to meet the impending Japanese threat in the Far East, then the requisite forces would have to be freed from Home Waters by first securing Britain's European base. However, as the Admiralty's experiences with naval negotiations since 1921 had demonstrated, a satisfactory European agreement on naval matters was unlikely under the present Treaty system. Indeed, many Sea Lords believed that as a result of the Washington and London Naval Treaties, Britain had 'surrendered' her strategic position in the world, both navally and politically.² In the first instance, naval rearmament by all powers had progressed rapidly since the 1930 London Naval Conference, and by 1934/35 the semblance of an arms race was clearly discernible. In the Far East, the United States and Japan were engaged in the competitive building of a new larger type of cruisers, while in Europe, France and Italy were involved in tit-for-tat construction of capital ships. Furthermore, the difficult preliminary talks for the forthcoming Naval Conference had confirmed that Britain no longer enjoyed the same political prestige or influence in negotiating with other Powers as she had in the 1920s.

The strategic vista was complicated still further by the re-emergence of Germany as a power on the Continent. For the Admiralty, German rearmament, however limited, was a double blow. First, it served to distract attention and, more importantly, resources away from the more immediate danger posed by Japan in the Far East. Secondly, it acted as a powerful inducement to French, and by implication, Italian naval building in Europe. If

¹ Lord Halifax, 22 December, 1937. Quoted in Keith Middlemas, *Diplomacy of Illusion. The British Government and Germany, 1937-1939* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), 2.

² Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 213.

the Admiralty was ever to attain the desired Two-Power Standard that would enable it to meet dangers in two spheres of operation simultaneously, then the Royal Navy would inevitably have to follow suit. However, this would involve Great Britain in an armaments race which it could neither afford nor desired. With the breakdown of the Geneva Convention, disarmament was no longer a feasible solution for the Admiralty. Without a practical alternative, however, the Sea Lords continued to adhere - in spite of their reservations - to the concept of naval limitation.

The Admiralty's blue-print for 1935 was therefore to push ahead with the negotiations for the impending London Naval Conference, even if the long-term forecast for its success was gloomy. In the first instance, Japan had announced her intention to achieve parity with the USN and RN, a prospect that was abhorrent to both Britain and the United States. Secondly, the United States desire to maintain present treaty ratios and reduce still further the size of fleets was anathema to the British Admiralty who hoped both to recommence battleship construction and build up to the requirement of seventy cruisers. In this respect, the Naval Staff were eager that the Conference be convened as soon as possible, so that one way or the other, the problem of European naval limitation would either be solved or confirmed as unobtainable, thus permitting the Admiralty to reformulate its plans.³ Before the Conference could begin, however, the attitude of Germany in respect to her future naval requirements had to be considered. The Admiralty were anxious that any prospects of agreement at the Conference should not be prejudiced owing to unnecessary differences of opinion in Europe on naval matters. France had already indicated that she was unwilling to attend any naval conference unless Germany was included.⁴ Taking their cue from the Committee on German Rearmament which had urged its limitation by negotiation, the Admiralty had proposed that Germany be approached to ascertain what her naval construction programme between 1937 and 1942

³ 'Naval Conference, 1935', minute by DCNS, Admiral Sir Charles Little, 26 February, 1935, ADM 116/3373.

⁴ C.P. 23 (35), 'Strength of the German Armed Forces. Report prepared by the Foreign Office and the three Defence Services', 25 January, 1935, CAB 24/253.

was likely to be.⁵ The Admiralty's principal interest in learning what the future size of the German Navy would be therefore stemmed from a desire to facilitate the Naval Conference, rather than from any fear of Germany's naval forces or ambitions per se.

Their eagerness to gauge German opinion received additional impetus by Hitler's declaration in February 1935 that Germany is:

determined to stand absolutely on our feet if the world demands anything unworthy from us. As unworthy we shall regard every attempt to measure our rights by standards different from those by which the rights of other countries are measured.⁶

Hitler's meaning was clear: Germany was no longer content with just the *theoretical* right to equality of arms; she also wanted the *practical* right to equality. It was now increasingly doubtful whether Germany would be bound by the Treaty of Versailles for very much longer.

As far as naval armaments were concerned, Germany had on several occasions indicated her desire for an agreement with Britain on a ratio basis. According to Raeder's testimony at the Nuremberg trials, Hitler had first mentioned his intention to seek an Anglo-German naval agreement on a ratio basis in February 1933.⁷ A ratio of thirty-five per cent was claimed, although there is no substantial evidence of the precise origin of this figure.

Hitler's desire to conclude a naval agreement with Britain was intimately connected to his wider foreign policy aspirations. First, if Germany was to succeed in her policy of continental expansion, and restore her global status, then Germany would have to sacrifice her right to sea power. Secondly, a naval agreement with Britain would increase the prospect of a general Anglo-German alliance. Both of these goals reflected Hitler's

⁵ N.C.M. (35) 46, Memorandum by the Admiralty and Foreign Office, 'Survey of the Present Position of the Naval Conversations and Recommendations as to Future Procedure', 17 January, 1935, FO 371/18731.

⁶ C1535/134/18, translation of Hitler's speech at Munich, 24 February, 1935, FO 371/18859.

⁷ Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935', 160.

view of British intentions towards Germany. In the first case, Hitler believed that Germany's defeat in 1918 had been due to Germany's challenge to British supremacy at sea before and during the war. If Germany was to fulfill its continental plans, then Britain would have to be 'won over' by the offer of a naval agreement that effectively renounced Germany's claim to supremacy at sea. This 'offer' would secure Germany a free hand in Europe, since Britain was not concerned with German policy on the continent, only her policy at sea. In the second instance, Hitler believed that once he had voluntarily sacrificed Germany's right to sea power, and demonstrated his will for peace with Britain, the British Government would then be more favourably disposed towards an Anglo-German political alliance. Again, this alliance would imply disassociation by Britain from any resistance to Germany's continental plans.⁸ Hitler believed that a naval agreement with Britain would therefore ensure her condonation of Germany policy in Europe.

The German Navy under the leadership of Raeder were less inclined towards a naval agreement with Britain than Hitler was, but nevertheless favoured such an accord, although for slightly different reasons. Whereas Hitler favoured a naval agreement for the advantages it would bring in his policy towards Britain, the Naval Staff believed that an agreement with Britain would be necessary in the long-term process of building a fleet. Although Hitler had rejected naval rearmament, the German Naval Command were still hopeful of securing a Tirpitzian naval policy. A peaceful accord with Britain would therefore be more conducive to the development of the German Navy than conflict with the world's foremost naval power.⁹

The subject of a naval agreement was not broached with British representatives until December 1933. In an aide-memoire given to the British Naval Attaché in Berlin, Captain G.C. Muirhead-Gould, Raeder gave his assurance that the German Navy would never be built against Britain and suggested that a German fleet of '*certain size*' could be of

⁸ Watt, *The Immediate Origins of the Second World War*, 22.

⁹ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 75.

advantage to British policy, adding that in view of the numerical equality that existed between the fleets of England and the United States, such a German squadron, '*with a good understanding between Germany and England*, would represent a distinct political asset for England.'¹⁰ The Foreign Office, however, decided not to reply to Raeder's 'offer.' With the Nazi regime still in its political infancy, and the German Navy well below the Versailles Treaty limits, Raeder's proposition - which was not accompanied by any official backing from the German leadership - was considered to be insincere.¹¹

It was not until November 1934 - nearly a year later - that Germany reiterated their offer. This time a more official approach was adopted and their claim to build a fleet equal to thirty-five per cent of Britain's fleet was made through the British Government's representative in Berlin, Sir Eric Phipps, by Hitler himself.¹² At the same time, Admiral Raeder informed the British Naval Attaché that:

whatever the result of the London Conference, Germany would like to have a separate conference with England, and, if possible to come to an agreement with England by which Germany's fleet should be limited and defined in direct proportion to England's fleet.¹³

Despite assurances that 'these percentages would be surprisingly low',¹⁴ the figure of thirty-five percent struck Phipps 'as so exaggerated that [he] pretended not to hear it.'¹⁵ Indeed, on the basis of Britain's present strength, the German demand amounted to about 400,000 tons in total, compared to the figure of 178,000 tons which the Naval Staff had proposed as reasonable.¹⁶ Nevertheless, with Hitler's personal endorsement, it was felt

¹⁰ C10777/404/18, translation of aide-memoire, 1 December, 1933, FO 371/16730.

¹¹ C10777/404/18, minute by V. Perowne, 30 November, 1933, FO 371/16730.

¹² Conversation between Hitler and Phipps, 27 November, 1934, *DGFP*, C, vol. III, No. 358, 680.

¹³ C8066/2134/18, Naval Attaché's report on conversation with Raeder, 28 November, 1934, FO 371/17765.

¹⁴ C8008/2134/18, telegram from Phipps, 27 November, 1934, FO 371/17765.

¹⁵ Telegram from Phipps to Sir John Simon, 30 January, 1935, Phipps Diplomatic Papers [hereafter PHPP] 1/14, Churchill College, Cambridge.

¹⁶ In July 1934, the Admiralty suggested that the size of the German Fleet to be allowed up to 1942 should be 178,000 tons, an increase of 70,000 tons on that allowed by the Treaty of Versailles. The specific details of this tonnage broken down into categories can be found in C.P. 23 (35), 25 January, 1935, CAB 24/253.

that this time, the communication from Germany could not be ignored, lest it 'be regarded by the Germans as a snub' for which Britain may 'have to pay for later.'¹⁷ Moreover, the Foreign Office were confident that Germany could be persuaded to reduce such a high figure and adopt the compromise proposal put forward in the preliminary negotiations with the United States and Japan that naval strengths be computed on the basis of building programmes:

In the first place, it seems unlikely that the Germans really contemplate the building of a fleet of 400,000 tons in the near future; and, in the second place, agreement should prove less difficult if, as we propose, the discussions take place on the basis of building programmes rather than the basis of a ratio.¹⁸

With the Admiralty and Foreign Office's recommendation that steps should be taken to informally 'sound' the Germans as to what their *desiderata* in the naval sphere was likely to be in a general naval conference, the conditions for such a *tête-à-tête* therefore seemed ripe.¹⁹ But before a direct approach to Germany could be made, French opinion on a possible revision of the naval clauses of the Treaty of Versailles needed to be sought. Anglo-French talks on the European political situation had been arranged for the beginning of February 1935, yet the prospects for French acquiescence on the question of German naval armaments were remote. Since the end of the war, France had been extremely critical of any suggestion that Germany be allowed to rearm, however modestly, and in January 1935, she had joined forces with her erstwhile rival, Italy, to press Britain to take a firmer line against German violations of the Treaty.²⁰ Anticipating difficulties in persuading the French to accede to Germany the right to a measure of naval rearmament, the British Government duly prepared their case. The main line to be taken with the French was that:

¹⁷ C8066/2134/18, note by Craigie, 30 November, 1934, FO 371/17765.

¹⁸ A2343/22/45, minute by Craigie, 7 March, 1935, FO 371/18732.

¹⁹ N.C.M. (35) 46, Minute by Craigie, 17 January, 1935, FO 371/18731.

²⁰ On 7 January 1935, France and Italy signed two agreements. The first guaranteed the security of Austria and the second, a General Declaration, declared their intention to cooperate in arms control.

it is worse than useless to allow the existing situation to drift. Germany is, in fact, increasing her armaments, and the facts must be faced and dealt with in the only practicable way. ...We must deal with the German situation as it exists today... . We should press strongly the point that it is far better that this rearmament should be controlled than that it should remain uncontrolled. ...We should ask the French Ministers whether they have a practicable alternative.²¹

In the event, it did not prove possible to raise naval questions. According to the conventional view of the origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, Britain simply decided to disregard French opinion on the matter.²² The British, so the story goes, were unwilling to coordinate defence and foreign policy with France and had little sympathy for French interests. Britain therefore played down her intentions to sound Germany regarding German naval plans. Such claims, however, do not tally with the facts. Before the Anglo-French talks began, the French *themselves* requested that naval questions should not be discussed at the meeting in London.²³ Not only would France refuse to discuss German naval rights until Germany's intentions in that sphere were known, but she also made it clear that any revision of the armament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles would first have to be linked with an air pact.²⁴ It was the French Government, therefore, who were unwilling to coordinate their defence and foreign policy with Britain, not vice versa. The British Government, by contrast, had gone to the talks fully prepared - and willing - to discuss with the French their plans to sound out the German Government on naval matters. It was France's lack of sympathy for Britain's naval interests, not the other way around, that ensured naval questions were not addressed at London.

²¹ C.P. 6 (35), 'Material for Impending Discussion with French Ministers', Memorandum by Simon, 9 January, 1935, CAB 24/253.

²² For example, Hines H. Hall, 'The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain, 1934-1935, and the Origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1976), 489, n.46; Richard Best, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935: an Aspect of Appeasement', *Naval War College Review*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1981), 82; Reynolds M. Salerno, 'Multilateral Strategy and Diplomacy: the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Mediterranean Crisis, 1935-1936', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (June 1994), 46.

²³ A1712/22/45, Conversation between Craigie and Gambon, 16 January, 1935, FO 371/18752.

²⁴ Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. II, 301.

Nevertheless, an Anglo-French Communiqué was signed, inviting Germany to join in an aerial agreement and stating, on French insistence, that no *separate* agreements on land, air or naval armaments were to be concluded with Germany.²⁵ In London, however, the view that naval agreements *must* be discussed separately from land and air agreements was gaining currency. Not only was the timetable for a new naval treaty drawing close, but it was also felt that French intransigence on naval matters, as demonstrated during the London talks, might frustrate any chances of progress on this question as it had on the land and air issues.²⁶ It was therefore decided by the Foreign Office that although the French should be informed of the decision to sound out the Germans as to their requirements in the naval sphere, Britain should not *specifically* ask for the consent of the French Government to do so. Instead, they should rely on the statement made by France in July 1934 on the question of approaching Germany - that 'France agreed to the suggested procedure but reserved all her rights.'²⁷ The French Government were therefore given two opportunities before the Anglo-German naval negotiations began to voice their opinions on the question of Germany's future naval forces. That they did not do so until *after* the AGNA had been signed was not the fault of the British Government. The 'shock' and 'surprise' with which the agreement was greeted by the French - a reaction subsequently endorsed by historians - thus rested on slender foundations.

Germany's response to the Anglo-French communiqué was to suggest a German-British exchange of views on a possible air and Eastern security pact.²⁸ Berlin's proposal for Anglo-German conversations to be held in Berlin during March came at an opportune moment for the British Government, for the Foreign Office were anxious to forestall any

²⁵ Draft communiqué, 2 February, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, vol. XII, No. 400, 482-4.

²⁶ On 17 April 1934, the French rejected Germany's proposal for a limited measure of land and air rearmament. Although the Geneva Disarmament Convention was, for all intents and purposes, defunct by this stage, the French attitude was seen as instrumental in the decision to adjourn the Convention indefinitely in May 1934.

²⁷ A1713/22/45, Craigie memorandum, 13 February, 1935, FO 371/18732.

²⁸ Memorandum by von Neurath, 14 February, 1935, *DGFP*, C, III, No. 490, 927-8.

premature German pronouncements that 'might commit them publicly to any principle from which it might afterwards be difficult for them to recede' and disrupt plans for naval negotiations later.²⁹ The invitation was therefore accepted, but it was decided that separate naval discussions should be held later in London so that the Admiralty would have more time to formulate the scope and character of the compromise proposals to be put to the Germans, and thus increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. As far as future naval negotiations were concerned, therefore, the visit to Berlin would be of a purely exploratory nature.

ii

In the interval before the Berlin visit, a series of events threatened to place an insurmountable obstacle in the way of *any* Anglo-German discussions. That these difficulties were overcome is testimony not only to the desire of both countries to establish a direct line of communication between them on the armament issue, but also to Britain's determination to seize the opportunity, afforded by Germany's invitation, to lay the foundations for future armaments limitation.

The first blow was received by Germany. On 4 March Britain published the White Paper on Defence announcing her rearmament plans.³⁰ Hitler was infuriated, less by Britain's rearmament plans in general, than that the 'Statement relating to Defence' cited the increase in German arms as the *raison d'être* for British rearmament. The resentment caused by Britain's 'relapse' after her apparent amenability to German rearmament, resulted in the postponement of John Simon's visit to Berlin.³¹ The ostensible reason

²⁹ A1713/22/45, Craigie minute, 14 February, 1935, FO 371/18732.

³⁰ C.P. 38 (35), 'Statement relating to Defence, issued in connection with the House of Commons Debate on March 11, 1935', 11 March, 1935, CAB 24/253.

³¹ Telegram from von Neurath to the German Embassies, 6 March, 1935, *DGFP*, C, III, No. 517, 979.

given was Hitler's cold, but in reality, the relationship between the publication of the White Paper and the postponement of the Berlin visit was one of cause and effect.³²

On 9 March Hitler delivered his riposte by announcing the existence of the German Air Force, prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles, and supplemented it a week later by a decree that reintroduced universal male conscription and increased the size of the peacetime army to thirty-six divisions.³³ Germany's determination to negotiate with other Powers on an equal footing was thus given its first practical expression. Indeed, in a decree a few days later, the Foreign Minister, Baron Constantin von Neurath, gave notice that 'Part V of the Treaty of Versailles...is no longer binding on us because of the others' failure to fulfill their disarmament obligations.'³⁴ Clearly the forecast that in naval armaments Germany would not be bound by the Versailles Treaty much longer was a prediction that held true in other spheres.³⁵

In a meeting to discuss Germany's Declaration on Rearmament in general, and its effect on the forthcoming visit of British Ministers to Berlin in particular, the Cabinet agreed that it should not be made a reason for abandoning the discussions. As Simon reasoned, 'It will not alter the German decision and it will break down whatever contact is left and destroy finally any prospect of agreeing about anything.'³⁶ Evidently the recommendation of the Committee on German Rearmament that the latter must be brought under control or else Germany 'may break all her agreements by unilateral action, and we shall have lost in the end all chance of ever getting control of her actions, a control which, in our opinion, is essential for the security and peace of Europe'³⁷, still reverberated around the corridors of Whitehall.

³² 'Herr Hitler's Cold', *The Times*, 6 March, 1935.

³³ Telegram from von Neurath to the German Embassies, 16 March, 1935, *DGFP*, C, III, No. 532, 1005-6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, telegram from von Neurath to the German Embassies, 18 March, 1935, No. 537, 1014.

³⁵ 'Naval Forces of Germany and the British Commonwealth, 1939 and 1942', Plans Division memorandum, January 1935, ADM 116/3373.

³⁶ CAB 15 (35), 18 March, 1935, CAB 23/81; C.P. 63 (35), 'Proposed reply to the German announcement. Note by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 17 March, 1935, CAB 24/254.

³⁷ C.P. 295 (34), 'Committee on German Rearmament. Report', 11 December, 1934, CAB 24/251.

Although a letter of disapproval of Germany's unilateral repudiation of treaty obligations was delivered, the Berlin conversations went ahead as scheduled on 25 March. For the British Government, the visit was primarily exploratory, ostensibly to discuss the various questions raised in the Anglo-French Communiqué with a view to progress on an Eastern pact, an aerial agreement, and Germany's return to the League of Nations.³⁸ London was particularly anxious to avoid giving the visit the appearance of a separate negotiation. The Government was not yet convinced of the need for a separate agreement with Germany even if some at Admiralty House were beginning to favour such an approach.

The visit also had another objective; to reconnoiter possible negotiations on naval armaments. Both the Foreign Office and the Admiralty were keen to hear firsthand the Führer's views on the subject. They agreed that if Germany repeated their claim to thirty-five per cent of the British Fleet, Hitler should be informed that 'such claims would make the conclusion of a general naval agreement extremely difficult.'³⁹ Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was especially eager for the British Ministers to adopt a firm line with the Germans. He felt the Cabinet had already gone too far and too fast. 'Unless we are extremely careful, indeed *more* careful in future,' he urged, 'we may find that the German jack o' lantern has led us into a deep and irretrievable bog.'⁴⁰

Following talks on a possible Eastern security pact and aerial convention during the Berlin visit, naval armaments eventually came up for discussion.⁴¹ In accordance with the policy of 'taking soundings', Germany was invited to take part in an *informal exchange of views* on the naval question, so that the British Government could learn what Germany's requirements at a future naval conference would be. The method of

³⁸ C2413/55/18, Foreign Office memorandum, 22 March, 1935, FO 371/18831.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Norman Rose, *Vansittart. Study of a Diplomat*, (London: Heinemann, 1978), 116.

⁴¹ C.P. 69 (35), 'Notes of Anglo-German Conversations held at the Chancellor's Palace, Berlin, on March 25 and 26, 1935', CAB 24/254. Unless otherwise indicated, the remainder of this paragraph is based on this document.

negotiation recommended as the most likely to give positive results was 'not to raise or seek to formulate proposals in the form of ratios, but to consider whether it was possible to reach agreement about programmes', probably to 1942. This was a couched rejection of Germany's claim to possess a fleet thirty-five percent that of Britain's, but it was obviously not clear enough.

Undeterred by Britain's stance, Hitler declined to accept this approach: as a disarmed nation, Germany would require very large construction programmes to achieve equality and thus an agreement with Britain on the basis of a thirty-five per cent ratio was more favourable. Faced with German intransigence, Simon was forced to state his objections more categorically. 'The figure of 35 per cent of the British fleet', he argued:

would appear to the British Government - apart from any other question - to be so large as to make general agreement almost impossible. ...He did not want the German Government to be under any misapprehension as to the view which the British Government would take on any such figure.

The conversations ended without any consensus being reached on the issue of ratios, both parties agreeing to leave the matter for the forthcoming London talks.

This failure to reconcile the conflicting opinions on the form future Anglo-German naval negotiations should take threatened to place the British Government in a difficult position at the forthcoming conversations. What historians have failed to appreciate, however, is that this turn of events had as much to do with the British attitude towards Germany as it did with German unwillingness to compromise. Despite Hitler's intractability, London was confident that the Germans would eventually comply with Britain's desire for an agreement based on building programmes rather than ratios. In Berlin, however, it was clear that Hitler gave little credence to British demands. In a conversation with Raeder the day after the Berlin talks, Hitler stated that in accordance with *his* wishes:

the build up of the Navy would take place according to plan. There should be no big public announcements, so as to avoid complicating England's difficult situation vis-à-vis the other Great Powers. The watchword should be: Go ahead and keep quiet. In any case England was fully informed.⁴²

That the British Government continued to believe that Hitler's naval demands could be moderated in their favour, despite his insistence on a thirty-five per cent ratio, needs to be explained. The foundations for their confidence need to be uncovered. After all, as previous naval negotiations with the principal naval Powers since the end of the war had clearly demonstrated, Britain's naval requirements and aims were not, by themselves, sufficient reason to induce other Powers to reduce their naval demands in Britain's favour. In the Pacific, for example, neither the United States nor Japan had followed Britain's example in building smaller, less expensive cruisers. In fact, Japanese-American competition in the construction of new, larger classes of cruisers had forced Britain, in the interests of Imperial security, to make several changes to her *own* naval construction plans, most recently the 1935 building programme.⁴³ The assumption that the Germans could be persuaded to alter their naval requirements to accommodate Britain's maritime interests therefore appears to be a peculiar anomaly.

The most common explanation of British diplomacy during the 1930s is that Britain and her statesmen were hoodwinked by Germany; that they were lulled into a false sense of security by Hitler's 'cunning diplomacy'.⁴⁴ Indeed, endowed with the benefit of hindsight and the pertinent documentary evidence, the thesis of German duplicity during the 1930s is very difficult to dispute. However, in the context of 1935 and the origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, such an explanation is hardly adequate. It does

⁴² Discussions between Hitler and Raeder, note by an Officer of the Naval Command, 27 March, 1935, *DGFP*, C, III, No. 560, 1086.

⁴³ C.P. 42 (35), 'Programme of New Construction. Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty', 25 February, 1935, CAB 24/253. To compete with the construction of 1,700 - 1,850 ton destroyers by Japan and the United States, the Admiralty recommended that the 1935 destroyer programme be altered from one leader and eight destroyers of 1,375 tons each to seven destroyers of 1,830 tons displacement, an overall increase of 310,000 tons in total. (See Chapter II, 64 for details of changes made to previous construction programmes).

⁴⁴ Hines Hall, 'The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain', 493.

little to illuminate the process of deduction whereby Britain came to believe it could compel Germany to modify their demands for thirty-five percent of the British Fleet. In this respect, the historian needs to look at the assessments made of Hitler and to examine the notions that were held about Germany in 1935.

One of the most prevalent attitudes was that Hitler was controllable, either by his own mandarins or by other Powers. The British Ambassador in Berlin, Phipps, on whom the Government relied most heavily for its assessments of Germany, believed the Nazi regime was much more moderate than supposed. Any extremist tendencies had largely been expunged by the purge of June 1934:

The whole regime has been modified; Goebbels has been practically silenced; the wild men have been shot; the balance between right and left is being maintained very skillfully. One might almost say that the country is now being ruled by the permanent officials while Hitler looks on benevolently. No doubt the murder gang would slay him but this is a chance Hitler must take.⁴⁵

If he could not be controlled internally, many statesmen also shared the belief that they could 'talk sense' into Hitler and return him to the collective system of the League by making concessions to Germany.⁴⁶ Since 1919, it was believed that this could be achieved by revising the Treaty of Versailles in such a way as to conciliate Germany whilst maintaining the post-war order.⁴⁷ In an examination of the political, psychological and intellectual factors that affected British foreign policy-making during the mid-1930s, Hines Hall argues that this view had formed the basis of British policy towards Germany since the days of the Weimar Republic:

During the Weimar period, Britain had consistently shown a willingness to bend or modify the treaty of Versailles, especially when revision seemed likely to foster

⁴⁵ Letter from Phipps to Orme Sargent, 7 November, 1934. Quoted in Norton Medlicott, 'Britain and Germany: the Search for Agreement, 1930-1937', in *Retreat from Power. Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century*, vol. I, 1906-1939 ed. David Dilks (London: Macmillan, 1981), 83.

⁴⁶ Salerno, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Mediterranean Crisis', 47.

⁴⁷ Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 186.

German economic recovery and German acceptance of disarmament, collective security and the League of Nations as the foundation of European order.⁴⁸

In the Britain of the mid-1930s, a significant degree of pro-German sympathy was also evident.⁴⁹ There were those, largely right-wing Conservative politicians, who welcomed the Nazi regime for its stance against Communism, and those, particularly in the Army, who empathized with Germany's treatment under the Treaty of Versailles. In many respects, they argued, Hitler's claims were reasonable; he was only demanding what they too would demand had such a treaty been imposed upon England.

Such attitudes helped to foster the belief that Hitler was, in fact, a moderate leader with moderate aims whose demands could be reduced still further by concessions. The very fact that Britain had decided to consult with Germany at all over a possible revision of the naval clauses of the Versailles Treaty was considered to be more than enough to induce Hitler to recede from his demand for thirty-five per cent of the British fleet and accept a compromise based on agreed building programmes.

The confidence of the Foreign Office in their ability to 'talk Hitler round' to their way of thinking was not shared by the Admiralty. Historians have assumed, erroneously, that the blunders of the Foreign Office during the 1930s were necessarily those of the Defence Services as well. Moreover, they have treated the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as the Admiralty's blunder, committed against the judgment of the Foreign Office.⁵⁰ This impression has evolved, partly because it was the Armed Forces who ultimately acted on the recommendations of the Foreign Office, but also because critics have failed to draw a firm distinction between the various offices of British Government during the 1930s.

What has been overlooked is that the decisions and errors of one branch are not

⁴⁸ Hines Hall, 'The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain', 481.

⁴⁹ Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 161-2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 168-9. Watt suggests that the decision to accept the German claim to 35% was taken on Admiralty advice at a time when the Foreign Office was preoccupied with the change in Foreign Minister and Prime Minister and the ratio seemed of secondary importance. This view is supported by Best, 'Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 75; and Hines Hall who argues that the British Government overrode the objections of the Foreign Office in favour of the Admiralty, 'The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain', 497.

necessarily those of *all* branches; there is a division of roles and responsibilities in government, both between and within different ministries, and this distinction is equally true of Britain in the 1930s as it is of contemporary Britain.

A valuable reminder of this division in the realm of foreign policy is D.C. Watt's study of the nature of the foreign policy-making elite in Britain in the twentieth century.⁵¹ His thesis is that Britain is essentially an 'oligocratic' society, instead of an 'oligarchic' one, since it is the *exercise* of power by the minority, rather than its *possession*, that is important. The participants in the process whereby foreign policy is made can be divided into four categories: political, diplomatic, bureaucratic, and military. What is significant for the argument being made here, however, is that this minority is:

not a united, self-conscious and self-interested group. ...There are different groups and different élites to be distinguished within the minority. ...The groups may be divided or united, at some moments at logger-heads with each other in fields where their interests conflict, at others totally indifferent to one another's existence.⁵²

The net result of the participation of each of these groups in foreign policy-making, is to produce in each a cadre 'almost as experienced in, familiar with and capable of advising the Government of the day on matters of British foreign policy as the diplomatic advisers of the Government.'⁵³

As far as the argument under consideration is concerned, it is interesting that Watt should illustrate this point by reference to the career of a Navy officer, Admiral Sir Charles Little, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff during the period in question. Little was among those in the Admiralty who were sceptical about the practicability of persuading Hitler to withdraw his demand for thirty-five per cent of the British fleet. Although no public pronouncements had been made to the effect that thirty-five per cent

⁵¹ Watt, *Personalities and Policies. Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

had been accepted as the basis for agreement, for all intents and purposes, Hitler had officially placed on record his demand for such a ratio during the Berlin visit. This now made it extremely unlikely that Hitler would recede from his demands. Even if Hitler could not be 'encouraged' to negotiate on the basis of building programmes, it was considered that, whatever the form, any agreement with Germany was better than no agreement.

According to the received view, the Admiralty's decision to accept Germany's claim to thirty-five per cent of the British fleet was based on a 'high and naïve level of trust in Hitler.'⁵⁴ They placed their confidence in Hitler's word that the Anglo-German Naval Agreement would be a 'permanent and fixed' relationship and did not carefully consider the 'apparently attractive German proposal on naval limitations, which would incidentally and cavalierly override important provisions of the Versailles Treaty.'⁵⁵ Such views, however, are not consistent with the facts. The Admiralty's endorsement of the thirty-five per cent ratio was based on a sound strategic assessment of both the short- and long-term implications for British defence and the prospects for Germany's adherence to thirty-five per cent. It was never assumed that Hitler's word could be completely trusted or that a naval agreement with Nazi Germany would be honoured permanently. After all, it was widely known that Germany's adherence to the naval clauses of Part V of the Versailles Treaty was 'more apparent than real.'⁵⁶ But before one can fully appreciate the Admiralty's role in the negotiations and signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the motivation and reasoning behind the Sea Lords' decision needs to be more thoroughly examined.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Britain, America, and Arms Control*, 179.

⁵⁵ Best, 'Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 72.

⁵⁶ C2418/206/18, secret memorandum prepared for the Chief of the Naval Staff and the First Lord of the Admiralty by the DNI, 21 March, 1935, FO 371/18860.

iii

In the two months between the Berlin visit and the opening of the Anglo-German naval conversations in London on 4 June 1935, the Admiralty undertook a number of assessments of the strategical implications of a thirty-five per cent ratio. Their conclusions were influenced by more than the mere projection of German ship numbers and size. Several factors, both internal and external to the Admiralty, influenced the Sea Lords final decision. Between April and June, a series of events left the Admiralty, and the country, with the choice of either negotiating with Germany, or 'sulking in their tents.'⁵⁷

Following the Berlin visit, many in Whitehall feared that time to negotiate a naval settlement with Germany was running out. Not only was the deadline for the new naval conference drawing near, but there was also considerable disquiet about Germany's future intentions. Phipps, who would eventually become one of the Admiralty's most fervent supporters in accepting a thirty-five per cent ratio, was especially concerned about the march of German demands. Most recently:

Herr Hitler has categorically declared that, until the return of the German colonies, Germany will remain in a condition of inferiority which will preclude her return to the League of Nations. It is interesting and instructive to note how rapidly the German attitude has changed under the influence of a consciousness of revising strength.⁵⁸

The worry was that any further increase in German strength would encourage Hitler to advance even more demands which would be difficult to rescind. As far as naval armaments were concerned, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI) speculated that Germany's next step would be to denounce *officially* the naval clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. While definite evidence was still wanting, it was considered likely that

⁵⁷ Weinberg, *Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. I, 212.

⁵⁸ C2949/55/18, telegram from Phipps, 6 April, 1935, FO 371/18834.

Germany had *already* begun to build up her fleet, although admittedly, in the case of submarines, the DNI had been unable to obtain any 'useful clues.'⁵⁹

In mid-April, Phipps and the Admiralty were finally given good cause to be anxious. Within the space of two weeks, the German Air Ministry claimed to possess between 800 and 850 first-line planes,⁶⁰ and the German Navy to have begun to construct U-boats, despite assurances to the contrary.⁶¹ Moreover, with reports of the fortification of the Baltic coast between the Danish frontier and the Polish corridor and the refortification of the North Sea coast, both violations of the Treaty of Versailles, the need for naval discussions as soon as possible were regarded as imperative by the Admiralty.⁶² Such developments also served to stiffen the resolve of the Foreign Office, at times wavering, to reach a naval agreement with Germany. Thus, Vansittart, although very sceptical of Hitler's intentions, argued:

We had better not put off the naval conversations - though I do not expect anything to come of them. ...[The German Government] mean to have a military superiority, and indeed a superiority amounting to dictatorship in Europe: words will not alter that. Our policy must surely be, from henceforth, not to stick any more verbal pins into the Germans nor to irritate them by excessive criticism; but to show them by deeds, not words, that we mean to hold our own in the air and at sea.⁶³

The 'verbal pins' to which he referred were the recent declarations made by France, Italy, and Britain at Stresa on 14 April and the League of Nations council in Geneva on 17 April, which condemned German rearmament and the unilateral repudiation of the Treaty of Versailles.⁶⁴ The 'Stresa Front' declared that the three Powers 'were in

⁵⁹ C2148/206/18, memorandum by DNI, 21 March, 1935, FO 371/18860.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Rostow, *Anglo-French Relations, 1934-36* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 162.

⁶¹ C3446/206/18, telegram from Phipps, 25 April, 1935, FO 371/18860. On the 12 April, the Naval Attaché in Berlin had been told that Germany was not building any submarines at present.

⁶² C4437/55/18, memorandum on alleged German violations of the demilitarized zone on the Danish frontier, 13 May, 1935, FO 371/18844.

⁶³ C3446/206/18, minute by Vansittart, 29 April, 1935, FO 371/18860.

⁶⁴ The Joint Resolution of the Italo-Franco-British conference at Stresa, 11-14 April, 1935, *Survey of International Affairs*, 1935, vol. I (London: Humphrey Milford, 1936), 159-161; League of Nations Resolution, 17 April, 1935, *ibid.*, 163-165.

complete agreement in opposing, by all practicable means, any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe, and will act in close and cordial collaboration for this purpose.' Significantly, the British Government had elected not to mention their forthcoming naval talks with Germany, for fear that they may be asked to put an end to the conversations and make a complete breach with Germany.⁶⁵ They were also anxious to prevent the Stresa Conference from appearing to be a 'determining point in policy'.⁶⁶ Having established contact with Germany, they wanted to keep it.

Nevertheless, historians have tended to interpret Britain's silence at the Stresa meeting as a decisive point in policy, signifying a greater commitment toward Germany than the security of the European Powers:

It was obvious that the possibility of a bilateral 'deal' with Germany on naval armaments was becoming the favoured option of British policy-makers rather than the opportunity afforded by Stresa to organize an anti-German diplomatic front under the aegis of collective security.⁶⁷

These views have necessarily contributed towards the interpretation of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as a 'breach' of the Stresa Front. Such arguments, however, stem from a general misconception of what was agreed to at Stresa. Despite their final communiqué, neither France, Italy *or* Britain had undertaken any specific obligations in respect of German rearmament. All they had agreed to was their common opposition to the repudiation of any treaty that '*may* endanger the peace of Europe.' French opinion, however, believed that a policy of firmness and solidarity among the three powers against the German menace had been established and historians have tended to assumed likewise. Britain's policy during this period, however, was clearly *non-committal*. The British Government favoured neither a definite 'anti-German diplomatic front', which would give the impression Germany was being 'encircled', nor a definite policy in favour of

⁶⁵ A3323/22/45, note by Craigie, 1 April, 1935, 1935, FO 371/18732; CAB 20 & 21 (35), 8 April, 1935, CAB 23/81.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Hines Hall, 'The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain', 495.

large-scale German rearmament, which would disturb the balance of power in Europe. Instead, British statesmen favoured a middle course: granting Germany limited concessions which would placate both sides. Thus, Britain's omission to raise the forthcoming naval negotiations with the Stresa Powers did *not* signify a break in British policy, nor did the eventual agreement represent a breach of the Stresa Resolution. Rather, it represented a continuum in British policy since 1919 - that Germany could be reconciled to the post-war order by a gradual policy of altering the Treaty of Versailles.⁶⁸ And as one commentator has recognized, 'it is clear that it was Mussolini's determination to attack Abyssinia...that destroyed any hopes of the Stresa front continuing.'⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the German Government interpreted the resolutions as evidence that Britain's conciliatory attitude towards Germany had evaporated. Hitherto, the German Government had believed that the aim of British policy was to secure her return to the League and her cooperation in a general European security system. The Stresa and Geneva resolutions, however, suggested that Britain had given up on these plans and adopted an anti-German attitude.⁷⁰ The resulting uncertainty regarding the real aims of British policy had therefore caused a great deal of 'misunderstanding and resentment' in Germany.⁷¹ It was with this unstable European situation in mind that Vansittart recommended that the naval conversations with Germany *not* be put off.

As far as the Admiralty were concerned, the ambiguous situation in Europe was not the only consideration for pressing ahead with the Anglo-German naval conversations. The situation in the Far East was still an important motivating factor in the Admiralty's strategic assessments. In their opinion, the Japanese danger in the Pacific had *not* diminished, Britain's responsibilities in the Far East had *not* been reduced, and a Japanese threat to British interests was imminent. In the spring of 1935, therefore, the Admiralty

⁶⁸ Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy*, 41.

⁶⁹ Watt, *Immediate Origins of the Second World War*, 22-23.

⁷⁰ Memorandum by State Secretary von Bülow, 17 April, 1935, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 37, 67-8; telegram from Bismarck, Chargé d' Affaires in Britain, to Foreign Ministry, 25 April, 1935, *ibid.*, No. 46, 79-82.

⁷¹ Telegram from Phipps to Simon, 21 April, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, XIII, No. 125, 193.

began to re-emphasize the Far Eastern danger and the Royal Navy's inability to fulfill a Two-Power Standard. The Admiralty's stress on the Japanese menace was not unintentional. Hitler's claim at the Berlin talks to have achieved air parity with Great Britain had initiated a period of intense debate within Whitehall on German air figures. The Foreign Office were inclined to accept the more alarmist interpretation of the figures, despite the assurances of the Air Ministry that Germany would not be ready for war before 1942.⁷² Indeed, it was primarily the fear that continued inferiority in the air would further weaken British influence in Europe - rather than any desire for an agreement with Germany - that encouraged Vansittart to support the Anglo-German conversations. Moreover, his insistence on the German air menace had persuaded the Ministerial Committee on Defence Requirements to establish, at the end of April, a sub-committee on Air Parity, which ultimately recommended that the RAF be expanded.

Historians have been apt to explain the Admiralty's support for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in terms of their apprehension lest the primacy in national defence and financial policy shift towards the Royal Air Force.⁷³ This explanation is only partially true, and threatens to distort the overall strategic picture as viewed by the Admiralty. Since the maintenance of the Empire's sea communications remained the first principle of Imperial defence, it was not unnatural that the Sea Lords should be alarmed at the prospect of an over-reliance on air power in Britain's national defence. Should this eventuality occur, the provision of a Main Fleet and adequately defended bases - made necessary by the first principle of Imperial defence - would be jeopardized. Nonetheless, in their enthusiasm for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the Sea Lords were motivated by more than the mere desire to preserve their share of the budget cake. As defenders of the first principle of Imperial defence, the Admiralty were more keenly aware of Britain's global commitments than were the other Services. For the Royal Navy,

⁷² Memorandum by Sir Robert Vansittart on the German Air Programme, 24 April, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, XIII, No. 127, 195-7.

⁷³ See, for example, Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*, 127; Lambert, 'Strategic Origins of the Battle of the Atlantic', 91.

Imperial defence entailed more than just the defence of the Home Islands. British interests and possessions overseas also had to be defended, and - as has been observed - in the early to mid-1930s, the region that gave the most cause for anxiety was not Europe but the Far East. In their support for an Anglo-German naval negotiations during the spring of 1935, therefore, the Admiralty were motivated by two considerations: first, by their understanding of the situation in the Far East, and secondly, by their obligation to consider the minimum naval strength needed for security in two spheres of operation. It is against *this* background, therefore, and not against the increase in the budget of the RAF that the Admiralty's enthusiasm for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 1935 must be viewed.

In their assessment of the Far Eastern threat, the Admiralty were again substantially supported by the Chiefs of Staff. In their Annual Review for 1935, the COS once again assigned priority to the defence of Britain's interests in the Far East over European commitments.⁷⁴ Although the danger of a revival of German militarism and rearmament on the Continent was stressed, the conclusion reached was that it was the Far Eastern theatre that was most likely to deteriorate at any time. The Japanese Government was spending forty-seven per cent of total annual expenditure on her Fighting Services. In particular, Japan had built up her Navy to treaty limits, modernized her capital ships, expanded her Naval Air Service, and placed her Navy 'generally on a war footing.' In contrast, British naval forces were largely unready and the defences of Singapore incomplete. Moreover, by the signing of the Treaty of Locarno, Britain had undertaken definite commitments that made her participation in a European war more likely, *without* reducing in any way British responsibilities in the Far East.⁷⁵ The danger was increased by the fact that Britain was still officially committed to a One-Power Standard. If the

⁷⁴ C.O.S. 372, 'Imperial Defence Policy. Annual Review by the Chiefs of Staff, 1935', 29 April, 1935, CAB 53/24. Unless otherwise indicated, the remainder of this paragraph and the next is based on this document.

⁷⁵ By the Treaty of Locarno, signed by Britain, France, Germany and Italy in October 1925, Britain guaranteed the Franco-German border and undertook to come to the aid of either France or Germany if the frontier was broken.

Royal Navy had only the existing German Navy to reckon with, the risks would be negligible, but:

when the possibility of simultaneous trouble in the Far East is taken into consideration, and having regard to Germany's known intention to increase her naval forces, the matter assumes a different complexion.

The prospect of a combination of German-Japanese capital ship strength against Britain was especially dangerous. On 1 May 1935 the total number of Japan's capital ships was calculated to be nine; Germany's was three (including the three *Deutschland*'s as representing one capital ship), and Italy four. At any given time until 1940, however, Britain would have four of her fifteen capital ships absent for repairs or modernization. The minimum naval strategical requirement therefore recommended for security was a Two-Power Standard. Even more alarming were the intelligence reports warning about the consequences of a possible German and Japanese 'understanding' on the naval question:

Germany and Japan may have some plan to produce at a given moment such a force that we should be powerless to interfere with some simultaneous aggressive action on their part at each end of the world. These are merely the ruminations of a Director of Intelligence who must try and connect up the different bits of intelligence he gets!⁷⁶

The Anglo-German naval negotiations were originally scheduled to take place at the beginning of May. However, the stinging effect of the Stresa and League Resolutions, combined with the Franco-Soviet agreement on 2 May, compelled Hitler to postpone the discussions until he had delivered his reply, in the form of a statement on foreign policy, on 21 May.⁷⁷ Neither the Admiralty nor the Foreign Office had any idea of what Hitler would say, but both feared that Hitler would revert publicly to his claim to a thirty-five

⁷⁶ A5900/22/45, Letter from Dickens to Craigie, 31 May, 1935, FO 371/18735.

⁷⁷ Telegram from Phipps to Simon, 26 April, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, XIII, No. 144, 212.

per cent ratio, thus placing Britain in a difficult position with respect to both the forthcoming negotiations and with the other Powers.⁷⁸

As feared, Hitler reiterated Germany's naval claims in his speech to the Reichstag. Included in the so-called 'Thirteen Point' programme of foreign policy initiatives, designed to assist in pacifying Europe, was an offer of a 'final and abiding' naval agreement on a thirty-five per cent ratio with Britain. Hitler also repeated his argument that Germany would not return to the League of Nations until the 'real legal equality' of *all* members have been established.⁷⁹

With Hitler's speech delivered, the Admiralty were anxious that the naval conversations begin as soon as possible. In a letter to Vansittart, Sir Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the Defence Requirements Committee and one of the Admiralty's most ardent supporters, urged that Hitler's latest overtures be taken seriously:

I believe that you will be making a profound mistake if you do not throw every possible energy you possess into trying to secure a deal with Germany out of Hitler's speech. ...I do not believe the country will ever forgive the Government or the Foreign Office if a whole-hearted effort is not made to bring about a more peaceful atmosphere and outlook. The desire for peace with us is a standing condition. We need it, especially just now, in order to recondition our defences.⁸⁰

Although they were keen to get the talks started, the delay in opening the Anglo-German naval conversations had given the Admiralty more time in which to prepare its final assessment of the strategical implications of accepting a thirty-five per cent ratio. At the end of May, the Plans Division delivered its conclusions.⁸¹ They began by reiterating that a proper naval defence policy - one which allowed Britain to send a Fleet to the Far East and, at the same time, retain in Home Waters a force capable of meeting the strongest European naval power - necessitated a Two-Power Standard. Since Britain did

⁷⁸ Letter from Craigie to Phipps, 10 May, 1935, *ibid.*, No. 189, 247.

⁷⁹ The final section of Hitler's foreign policy speech, including the Thirteen Points, in the official English translation, can be found in *DGFP*, C, vol. IV, no. 96, 171-9.

⁸⁰ Letter from Hankey to Vansittart, 24 May, 1935, CAB 21/540.

⁸¹ 'Strategical Implications of the German 35% ratio', memorandum by the Plans Division, 27 May, 1935, ADM 116/3373. The remainder of this paragraph and the next is based on this document.

not have this standard of naval strength, the Admiralty could not guarantee the security of Britain's sea communications. A thirty-five per cent ratio for Germany would therefore only be strategically acceptable '*provided we maintain our present ratio vis-à-vis Japan.*'⁸² The ratio was also conditional upon a number of other factors: the rate at which German built up to thirty-five percent; the rate at which Britain replaced and modernized her battlefleet; and the proportion of Britain's battlefleet immediately ready for service. In addition, the date and readiness of the Singapore dockyard was considered to be pertinent, since upon this depended the number of ships that must be sent to the Far East to face the Japanese fleet. The practical application of the thirty-five per cent ratio was therefore examined in relation to these factors.

As far as the effect of the readiness of the Singapore base was concerned, the floating dock was already in use and a reduced margin of capital ships to be sent to the Far East, from three to two, was considered acceptable. In the proportion of the British battlefleet ready for service and the rate of replacement and modernization of capital ships, the position was less satisfactory. It was assumed that the first replacement battleship would be laid down in 1937 and completed in 1940. Thereafter, one ship a year would be laid down and one ship a year completed. On the basis of this building assumption, the Royal Navy only had a sufficient margin in capital ships until 1937, after which they would become inferior to the German and Japanese total until the beginning of 1940. Moreover, the margin in new or modernized capital ships would not be reached until 1943. Complicating the situation even more was the fact that replacements could not, under existing treaty conditions, take place before 1937. Rather than fall behind in capital ship construction, the Plans Division concluded that 'the only alleviation that could be gained is to use every influence we possess to slow down the *rate* of German increase.'

⁸² It was calculated that Japan's total naval strength by tonnage was approximately 64% of Britain's, and Germany's less than 11%. In capital ships the percentages were 57% and 15%, so that in the spring of 1935, Britain's margin was acceptable.

The strategical implications of accepting a thirty-five percent ratio therefore depended not only on maintaining the existing ratio with Japan, but also on the rate of German construction. The poor state of intelligence on German ship construction, however, precluded any *detailed* assessments on this point. Any assumptions as to Germany's naval programme would therefore only be of a speculative nature. Nonetheless, the Plans Division did attempt to estimate, in general terms, the rate of German building on several occasions. In January 1935, for example, a calculation of Germany's naval forces in 1939 and 1942 was produced for the Joint-Planning Sub-Committee. It was concluded that Germany would, over the next few years, devote most effort to building up her land and air forces.⁸³ In May, the implications of the thirty-five per cent ratio were addressed. In terms of capital ships, thirty-five per cent of Britain's tonnage of 450,000 tons was 157,000 tons. This was regarded as representing three '*Deutschland*'s (30,000 tons) and four other ships (120,000 tons). Of these four, two had already been laid down (the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*) and it was assumed that the other two would be laid down in 1938 and 1941. In regard to cruisers, the German ratio would be satisfactory, provided that the rate of construction designed to give Britain seventy cruisers by 1945 be maintained.

Some commentators ascribe the Admiralty's enthusiasm for conducting negotiations with Germany to this poor state of intelligence on German naval construction.⁸⁴ Admittedly, the Admiralty *did* lack the most pertinent information on German ship building, and were only able to produce a detailed intelligence report on the real rate of German construction in July 1936.⁸⁵ However, an even more important consideration for the Admiralty than the rate of German construction was whether or not Germany would be able to build up to thirty-five percent *at all* in the near future. In this respect, it was

⁸³ 'Germany's Naval Forces, 1939 and 1942. Estimate for the Joint Planning Sub-Committee', 9 January, 1935, ADM 116/3373.

⁸⁴ Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*, 134; Salerno, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Mediterranean Crisis', 51.

⁸⁵ C.I.D. 1252-B, 'German Naval Construction', 22 July, 1936, CAB 4/24.

estimated that Germany would not be able to attain a thirty-five per cent ratio until the end of 1942, by which time Britain's naval strength, especially in capital ships, would have reached the margin required for security.

By the end of May, therefore, the Admiralty had come to the conclusion that a thirty-five per cent ratio for Germany was *strategically* acceptable. The only question that remained was whether it was *politically* acceptable. The British Government had already decided to go ahead with the Anglo-German negotiations, but it was unclear whether the other Powers, most notably France, would raise objections. Any unilateral agreement made with Germany would be contradictory to both the Anglo-French communiqué and the Stresa Resolution. There were also questions as to whether Britain could, from the juridical point of view, revise Part V of the Treaty of Versailles.⁸⁶

The Admiralty argued, however, that to raise such political and legal objections was only to ignore that Germany rearmament was already taking place and that a *de facto* revision of the Treaty of Versailles had thus already been effected.⁸⁷ Moreover, the Sea Lords were anxious that unless the offer to limit the German Navy to thirty-five per cent was accepted soon, the Germans may raise their claim to one of parity with the British fleet. The Führer's idea to limit the German Navy to thirty-five per cent was known to be far from popular with the German Naval Staff, and it was feared that any weakening of Hitler's power would inevitably lead to attempts to increase the size of the German fleet. If a binding agreement with Germany could be secured now, it would therefore be more difficult for political and naval pressure to destroy it.⁸⁸

It was also widely felt that similar opportunities to restrict German rearmament on land and in the air had been missed because of the failure to accept Germany's offers. In April 1934, for example, Hitler's offer to accept only a limited measure of rearmament in return for its legalization was rejected by France. The result had been the illegal

⁸⁶ C8008/2134/18, note by Wigram, 28 November, 1934, FO 371/17765.

⁸⁷ C2148/206/18, 'Germany. New Construction', memorandum by the DNI, 21 March, 1935, FO 371/18860.

⁸⁸ A5414/22/45, letter from Chatfield to Vansittart, 13 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

expansion of both the Air Force and Army, a defiance of the Western Powers that had only served to increase German confidence. Thus, in a telegram to the Foreign Secretary, Phipps urged that:

Herr Hitler has now bound himself definitely to a navy limited to 35 per cent of ours. ...I think that not only we but the French and Italians should be thankful for small mercies, and that we should not miss opportunities in the naval sphere, like we have done on land and in the air owing to French shortsightedness. It would therefore be advisable for His Majesty's Government to place on official record their acceptance of the Chancellor's offer.⁸⁹

Accordingly, Phipps was instructed to enquire of the German Government what would be the earliest date on which they could send representatives to London.⁹⁰ The date set was 4 June.

iv

Britain's proposals for the forthcoming Anglo-German naval negotiations were outlined by the Foreign Office and Admiralty in a note on the agenda for the discussions.⁹¹ In particular, the German delegation were to be encouraged to negotiate an agreement based on building programmes, rather than ratios, for the years 1937-42, and urged to 'hasten slowly' with the reconstruction of their fleet. If the German representatives should insist on a thirty-five per cent ratio, they were to be informed that further progress in the negotiations was unlikely.

The Admiralty also took the opportunity to impress upon the Cabinet that, in addition to maintaining the existing capital ship ratio with Japan, a 'more rapid increase in the replacement of the British Battle Fleet, in order to ensure that *in new ships* the British

⁸⁹ Telegram from Phipps to Simon, 23 May, 1935, PHPP/1/14.

⁹⁰ Letter from Phipps to von Neurath, 24 May, 1935, *DGFP*, C, vol. IV, no. 104, 195.

⁹¹ N.C.M. (35) 49, 'Note on Agenda for Anglo-German Naval Discussions', 3 June, 1935, CAB 29/148.

Fleet does not fall behind the capital ship strength of Japan and Germany combined' may be necessary.

Britain's hopes of persuading Germany to negotiate on the basis of building programmes rather than ratios were dealt a serious blow by Joachim von Ribbentrop's opening statement that the German Delegation could only expect these negotiations to be successful and could only take part in these conversations:

if this ratio of Great Britain 100 to Germany 35 is accepted as an inviolable and firmly established relationship. In order, however, to avoid any possible misunderstanding on this point, the German Delegation would be very grateful to the British Delegation for confirmation that there is agreement on this basic principle.⁹²

Ribbentrop's demand that thirty-five must be agreed to before the discussions could continue forced the British Government into a corner. The onus for the success of the Anglo-German negotiations was placed on their shoulders.

Historians have argued that by such tactics, Britain was 'rushed' into the Anglo-German Naval Agreement; that the German ratio was 'accepted in haste and with little thought.'⁹³ However, this was clearly not the case. The implications of accepting a thirty-five per cent ratio had already been carefully assessed *and* confirmed as strategically acceptable. All that remained now for the British Delegation, once it had become clear that the Germans would not recede from their original demands, was to reconfirm officially that such a ratio was admissible. At a Cabinet meeting the following day, the British representatives recommended that the Government accept the offer while it was still open.⁹⁴ Otherwise, Hitler might withdraw the offer and seek to build higher than thirty-five per cent. In a clear reference to the diplomatic repercussions of accepting the

⁹² Record of the Meeting on 4 June, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 131, 255.

⁹³ Watt, 'Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 169; Roskill, *Naval Policy*, vol. II, 303; Hall, *Britain, America, and Arms Control*, 179.

⁹⁴ CAB 32 (35), 5 June, 1935, CAB 23/81. The Cabinet had under consideration N.C.M. (35) 50, 'Report by the British Representatives', 5 June, 1935, FO 371/18733. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references are drawn from this document.

German offer, especially in France, the representatives urged that 'it would be a mistake to withhold acceptance merely on the ground that other Powers might feel some *temporary annoyance* at our action.' However, it was considered desirable that notification of the decision to accept the ratio should be given to the other Powers, so that they could formally express their views.

Admiralty pressure to accept the ratio was particularly strong. Their case for agreeing to Hitler's offer was closely bound up with the Far Eastern threat. With their emphasis on the general strategical situation, the Naval Staff argued that both Germany *and* Japan needed to be taken into account; that the naval forces of each or either of them should (a) be limited, and (b) be limited at as low a figure as possible. Since the combined future strength of Germany and Japan in new capital ships threatened to be greater than that of Britain, it was essential that the German rate of building be slowed down, and this they were unlikely to do unless the thirty-five per cent ratio was agreed to. With regard to other categories of ships, on a basis of seventy cruisers and the current destroyer tonnage, the situation would be 'satisfactory.'

In the pressure to accept the German offer, the Admiralty found themselves a strange bed-fellow in the guise of their erstwhile adversary, the Treasury. Although Chamberlain drew the line at accepting *in toto* the Admiralty's case for the more rapid replacement of the battle fleet, he could find no argument against accepting the thirty-five per cent ratio.⁹⁵ Therefore, on 6 June the British Government officially confirmed its acceptance of the German offer.⁹⁶ With the thirty-five percent ratio secured, the German delegation, in accordance with their directives for the discussions, proved entirely flexible on all other points and the final agreement was reached without difficulty.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ 'Anglo-German Naval Discussions, 1935, leading to the ratio of 100:35 between the two fleets', 6 June, 1935, [T]reasury file 161/920/S40150.

⁹⁶ N.C.(G) 4th Meeting, 6 June, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, XIII, No. 311, 375-80.

⁹⁷ 'Directives for the Preliminary Discussions on the 1935 Naval Conference', unsigned memorandum, 23 May, 1935, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 100, 189-92.

In the form of an 'Exchange of Notes', the Anglo-German Naval Agreement embodied all the details that had been agreed upon in the course of the negotiations (Appendix III).⁹⁸ The future strength of the German Navy was to be thirty-five per cent of the strength of the British Fleet. This was to be a 'permanent and definite' ratio between the two navies, applicable to the tonnage of each category of vessel. However, there were a number of specious clauses. Although the 35:100 ratio would 'not be affected by the construction of other Powers', this was accompanied by the proviso that 'if the general equilibrium of naval armaments...should be violently upset by any abnormal and exceptional construction by other Powers, the German Government reserve the right to invite His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to examine the new situation thus created' (2(c)). Exactly what constituted 'abnormal and exceptional construction' was not defined. The potential for the abuse of this clause was therefore not circumscribed.

More surprising than clause 2(c), however, was the decision to allow Germany to possess submarine tonnage equal to forty-five per cent of that possessed by Britain, with the theoretical right to parity 'in the event of a situation arising which in [the German Government's] opinion makes it necessary for Germany to avail herself of her right to a percentage of submarine tonnage exceeding the 45 per cent' (2(f)). Again, the type of 'situation' in which Germany might claim parity with Britain was not defined. That the British Government should accede to Germany the right to possess 100 per cent of her total submarine tonnage is initially perplexing and warrants explanation. During the war, unrestricted submarine warfare against British sea-borne trade had made the U-boat a formidable foe. However, only by examining the Admiralty's reasoning on this point in the context of the 1930s can their decision be explained.

⁹⁸ 'Exchange of Notes. Limitation of Naval Armaments. London, June 18, 1935', FO 93/36/136.

The most influential factor shaping the Admiralty's attitude towards the submarine in the interwar period was the development of asdic, or sonar.⁹⁹ The Admiralty believed that with asdic capabilities, the submarine threat had been mastered. In 1932 two new types of sloops designed as asdic platforms had been introduced and it was decided that all new destroyers should be fitted with asdic sets.¹⁰⁰ There was, therefore, a widespread belief in the effectiveness of surface vessels in anti-submarine warfare. As a result, 'the Admiralty were rather less apprehensive of submarines today than they were during the war.'¹⁰¹ Moreover, the Sea Lords did not believe that Germany would wage unrestricted submarine warfare again. The lesson learnt from the war was that such tactics would only serve to bring the United States into conflict with Germany. The emphasis in German naval thinking now lay on cruiser warfare rather than the U-boat,¹⁰² and Germany had also agreed to adhere to the rules governing submarine warfare established by the London Naval Treaty.¹⁰³

While the actual programmes of construction and the rate at which Germany intended to build up to the thirty-five per cent were still being discussed with the German delegation, the general substance of the Agreement was presented to the Cabinet.¹⁰⁴ Both the Foreign Secretary and the First Lord of the Admiralty argued that 'a better Agreement could not be obtained from Germany', and it was officially concluded that the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was 'an advantageous one.'

Nevertheless, the reaction from domestic and foreign critics was as violent as it was immediate. Opponents of the Agreement argued that it was anything but advantageous, certainly not for Britain, and even less so for Europe. In Britain, Winston Churchill -

⁹⁹ An excellent account of the Royal Navy's involvement in the development of anti-submarine technology is Willem Hackman's *Seek and Strike. Sonar, Anti-Submarine Warfare and the Royal Navy, 1914-54* (London: HMSO, 1984).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁰¹ CAB 33 (35), 19 June, 1935, CAB 23/82.

¹⁰² Watt, 'Anglo-German Naval Negotiations on the Eve of the Second World War - Part II', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, vol. 103 (August 1958), 384.

¹⁰³ 'Report by the British Representatives on the course of Anglo-German Naval Conversations since the conclusion of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 18 June, 1935' [n.d.], ADM 116/3377.

¹⁰⁴ CAB 33 (35), 19 June, 1935, CAB 23/82.

officially out of office but acting as a critic of the Government over defence issues - mounted a scathing attack on the Agreement from the backbenches. What had in fact been done, he argued, was to authorize Germany to build to her utmost capacity for the next five years. Ironically, given the Admiralty's motivations in signing the Agreement, Churchill condemned the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as a threat, not only to European peace, but also to the Far East:

What a windfall this has been to Japan! Observe what the consequences are. ...The British Fleet, when this programme is completed, will be largely anchored to the North Sea. That means to say that the whole position in the Far East has been very gravely altered, to the detriment of...Great Britain.¹⁰⁵

Churchill's lambaste against the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in Britain was only an echo of the criticisms that could be heard in Europe's capitals, especially Paris. The French reply to the British aide-memoire of 7 June informing Paris of the decision to accept the German offer was received on 17 June.¹⁰⁶ Their hostility to the Agreement was barely disguised. Not only would an agreement of this kind violate the Resolutions reached at London and at Stresa, the French remonstrated, but the repercussions of an agreement which involved a revision of the Versailles Treaty would not be limited to the naval armaments of Britain and Germany. Indeed, the increase in German naval strength would necessarily involve an increase in French global tonnage: 'This may mean that the future tonnage of the French Fleet may materially exceed its present relation to the tonnage of the British fleet.' The French attitude towards an Anglo-German naval agreement was not enough, however, to deflect the British Government from the course they had chosen and the AGNA was signed on 18 June.

¹⁰⁵ Speech to House of Commons, 11 July, 1935. Quoted in Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. I *The Gathering Storm* (London: Cassell & Co., 1949), 126.

¹⁰⁶ A5399/22/45, copy of French reply to the British aide-memoire, 17 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

In an attempt to assuage French opinion, it was decided that Eden should go to Paris and explain the 'circumstances' of the Agreement.¹⁰⁷ The French, however, were in an acrimonious mood. The press were vitriolic about both the principle and matter of the Agreement, which they interpreted as encouragement to an arms race.¹⁰⁸ The Government were no less forgiving, claiming that they had been misled as to the intended scope of the conversations. And when that scope had changed from exploration to the conclusion of an agreement, they had been given only the shortest notice.¹⁰⁹ The fear was that the trend in British policy was changing, away from France and towards Germany.¹¹⁰ Indeed, many French historians have interpreted the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as a reaction against the Franco-Soviet alliance; that the Admiralty's dislike of the Pact reinforced their decision to conclude a naval accord with Germany as an attempt to 'bolster' her against France.¹¹¹ Others view the Agreement as a deliberate slight against France for more than a century of misdemeanours:

Consciously or unconsciously, London had repaid Paris for the Chanak, Ruhr, reparations and rearmament crises and contretemps, and most recently for the Soviet Alliance. Nobody seems to have noticed that 18 June 1935 marked the 120th anniversary of Waterloo.¹¹²

However, the Franco-Soviet Pact had little effect on the Admiralty's motivations for signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. In fact, most British statesmen, once they had been reassured of their obligations under the Locarno Treaties, welcomed the alliance.¹¹³ Neither were the Admiralty interested in forming any kind of a tacit alliance

¹⁰⁷ CAB 33 (35), 19 June, 1935, CAB 23/82. Minutes of the meeting between Eden and the French representatives on 21 June, 1935 can be found in C4902/55/18, 'Record of Anglo-French Conversation', 22 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹⁰⁸ A5460/22/45, telegram from British Ambassador in Paris, Sir George Clerk, 19 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹⁰⁹ A5763/22/45, conversation between Vansittart and the French Ambassador, 25 June, 1935, FO 371/18735.

¹¹⁰ A5770/22/45, letter from French Ambassador to Vansittart, 25 June, 1935, FO 371/18735.

¹¹¹ Bloch, 'The Naval Agreement of 1935', 137; Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), 217.

¹¹² Rostow, *Anglo-French Relations*, 170.

¹¹³ Minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, 25 & 26 April, 1935, *DBFP*, 2, XIII, No. 135, n.9, 206.

against France. Although Hitler harboured such aims, the Admiralty had informed Germany during the Berlin talks, they were not interested in 'substituting one friend for another.'¹¹⁴ Rather, the immediate aim of the British Government had 'been to circumscribe, by agreement with Germany, the ultimate consequences of a unilateral decision to which Germany had already begun to give effect.'¹¹⁵ Despite their best efforts, the British Government were unable to soothe France's anxieties about the future. On 25 June the Naval Commission of the French Senate declared that France would resume complete liberty of action in naval affairs, pending the conclusion of new agreements.¹¹⁶ France would therefore seek to increase the size of her navy until such time as a new general armaments treaty could be enforced.

The reactions of other foreign powers were more muted. Neither the United States nor Japan lodged formal objections; both regarded the 'differential between the British and German fleets [as] primarily one for British decision.'¹¹⁷ The Italian Government did not protest at the Agreement either, although it did take the opportunity to issue a Communiqué stating that due to the altered naval situation, 'various measures have been decided upon to increase the efficiency of our naval forces.'¹¹⁸ Thus, by decreasing both the British and French naval presence in the Mediterranean and aiding the completion of the Italian naval building programmes, some historians have criticized the AGNA for facilitating the Mediterranean Crisis and Italy's conquest of Abyssinia in 1935-36:

Finally, in the summer of 1935, the fruits of these naval building programmes, combined with the immediate ramifications of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, allowed the Duce to exploit the changed circumstances in the Mediterranean and, thus, achieve his goal of Italian Mediterranean hegemony.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ C2580/55/18, notes on conversations between British and German Ministers in Berlin, 28 March, 1935, FO 371/18832.

¹¹⁵ A5573/22/45, 'Memorandum communicated to the French Embassy, June 22, 1935', FO 371/18734.

¹¹⁶ A5716/22/45, telegram from Clerk, 26 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹¹⁷ A5399/22/45, replies of the Foreign Governments, 17 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹¹⁸ A5996/22/45, telegram from British Ambassador in Rome, Sir Eric Drummond, 8 July, 1935, FO 371/18736.

¹¹⁹ Salerno, 'Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Mediterranean Crisis', 67.

Against this background of domestic and foreign criticism, the British Government still had to steer the Anglo-German Naval Agreement through Parliament. In a debate on foreign affairs on 11 July, the new Foreign Secretary, Samuel Hoare, assisted by Eden, began the Government's defence of the Agreement. The accord, they argued, was to the advantage of *all* naval Powers, including France. It was 'in no sense a selfish agreement. On no account could we have made an agreement that was not manifestly in our view to the advantage of the other naval Powers.' It was *not* contrary to the spirit of cooperation established at Stresa, to which the Government remained committed, and Britain had *not* made it 'possible for Germany to do something which she would not otherwise have done.'¹²⁰ In the Admiralty debate on 22 July, the First Lord, Eyres Monsell, confirmed that on naval grounds, the Admiralty 'entirely approved of the Agreement' and that Britain had much to lose and nothing to gain by rejecting it. In the event, the Government won its case, with 247 to 44 votes in favour of accepting the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

In Germany the response to the naval treaty was exuberant. The press hailed the AGNA as the first practical recognition of Germany's equality of rights, an agreement which excluded the possibility of naval rivalry between Britain and Germany and thus opened a new chapter in relations between the two countries.¹²¹ To Hitler, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement represented more than a naval treaty. It was also the foundation stone of his foreign policy which envisaged an Anglo-German alliance as the first step, if not towards world mastery, then certainly the conquest of Eastern Europe.¹²² The agreement had cooled relations between Britain and France and undermined the

¹²⁰ A6439/22/45, Extract of speeches made by Hoare and Eden on the AGNA, 11 July, 1935, FO 371/18737.

¹²¹ A5454/22/45, telegram from Phipps on attitude of German press to AGNA, 19 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹²² There is considerable disagreement over the goals of Hitler's foreign policy during the 1930s. Interpretations differ over whether Hitler truly wanted peace with England and signed the naval accord as evidence of this desire, or if his 'England policy' was just a temporary expedient until Germany had secured her continental objectives. See Gerhard Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 2 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971, 1980).

Stresa Front. The path was apparently clear for an Anglo-German partnership. Believing he had finally laid the foundations for an alliance with Britain, Hitler described 18 June 1935 as 'the happiest day in his life.'¹²³

Britain's motives in signing the agreement, however, were more naval than political - to bring Germany into the forthcoming London Naval Conference where her naval armaments could be limited in relation to other Powers and to allow the Royal Navy to maintain a Two-Power Standard. Neither the British Cabinet nor the Admiralty envisaged any political alliance would develop from the naval treaty. Hitler was therefore disappointed with the short-lived political effect of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. His disillusionment was 'due to a faulty political evaluation of the fact of the Naval Agreement.'¹²⁴ This assessment, made by Hitler's Ambassador in London, Leopold von Hoesch, was correct. British motives in concluding the treaty were fundamentally different from those of Germany. Britain wanted to limit German naval rearmament while Hitler's 'offer' was still open, and before Germany raised her claim. 'This train of thought,' Hoesch observed, 'contains not the slightest intention of changing Britain's political orientation, nor has there either in thought or in deed been any such change.'¹²⁵

Amongst the officers of the German Navy the response to the signature of the AGNA was less enthusiastic. There was dissatisfaction over the size of the ratios: Captain Karl Dönitz was unhappy with the relatively small number of submarines that the German Navy would build, despite having theoretical right to parity with the British fleet, and others were disappointed with the size of the surface fleet.¹²⁶ In the wake of Hitler's euphoria, Raeder felt compelled to issue a memorandum on the agreement to direct officers' views on the agreement. His guide described the AGNA as:

¹²³ Quoted in Bloch, 'The Naval Agreement of 1935', 148.

¹²⁴ Letter from von Hoesch to Ministerialdirektor, Richard Meyer, 15 August, 1935, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 262, 557.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Thomas, *German Navy*, 99.

entirely satisfactory for the Navy. ...It will give us the opportunity of creating a modern fleet which is appropriately constituted and in accordance with our maritime needs. ...Britain has formally accepted the expansion of the German Navy on the lines laid down by the Führer.¹²⁷

Despite Raeder's official approval of the agreement, the AGNA had not expanded the German Navy along the lines favoured by the Naval Command. In private, neither Raeder nor the rest of the Navy's leadership regarded the thirty-five per cent ratio as 'final' or 'permanent'; they had not renounced their long-range ambitions to construct a Tirpitzian fleet, nor did they regard the AGNA as a fixed settlement.¹²⁸ The British were well aware of the German Navy's attitude to the agreement, and were concerned 'lest the German Admiralty in their desire to secure 'elbow room' were to strain Article 2(g) of the Anglo-German Agreement' in such a way as to seek a virtual departure from Herr Hitler's declaration that in no circumstances should Germany's naval strength exceed thirty-five per cent that of the United Kingdom.¹²⁹

Nonetheless, Raeder and the German Naval Command continued to pay lip-service to the terms of the agreement until it was renounced by Hitler on the eve of war in 1939. The British Admiralty were aware that Germany would probably scrap the AGNA as soon as it was advantageous for her to do so: 'she will never have any difficulty in finding excuses,' warned the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral William James, 'however careful we are to avoid giving them.'¹³⁰ But even if Germany did repudiate the naval agreement, it was well known that a lack of resources would prevent the German Navy from reaching even the thirty-five per cent ratio for some time. Hermann Goering's threats in 1938 that Germany would, presumably after denouncing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, proceed to build up to 100 per cent of the British Fleet were the bluff that the British Admiralty concluded they were:

¹²⁷ Unsigned memorandum, 28 August, 1935, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 275, 587.

¹²⁸ Deist, *Wehrmacht and German Rearmament*, 77.

¹²⁹ Memorandum by Craigie, 17 October, 1935, ADM 116/3377.

¹³⁰ Minute by DCNS, 7 August, 1937, ADM 116/3378.

In view of the great existing disparity in the size of the two navies this threat could only be executed if British construction were to remain stationary over a considerable period of years, whilst German tonnage was being built up to it. This would not occur.¹³¹

Indeed, of the three potential enemies that Britain faced at sea in 1939, Germany was the smallest.¹³²

¹³¹ Holman to Henderson, 17 August, 1938, ADM 116/3378.

¹³² Lambert, 'Strategic Origins of the Battle of the Atlantic', 92.

CONCLUSION

Until its repudiation by Hitler in April 1939, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was more or less faithfully observed by Germany. Meanwhile, German naval strength expanded far less rapidly than Britain had feared would be the case. A report by the Industrial Intelligence Committee (IIC) in July 1936 cautioned that Germany might not only be able to complete, but also considerably exceed, thirty-five per cent by the end of 1940, rather than 1942. Moreover, it was speculated that Germany's capacity for building warships was little inferior to that of Britain.¹ However, by the outbreak of war in September 1939, the German Navy did not even possess an AGNA fleet, let alone the fleet predicted by the IIC (Appendix I), and it was woefully ill-equipped to meet the Royal Navy at sea. Only in submarines did Germany have an advantage over Britain (Appendix II). When Germany went to war against Britain in September 1939, Raeder's only consolation was that, unlike the First World War, the German Navy would know 'how to die gallantly.'²

Evaluated in these terms, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 was a resounding success for British foreign and defence policy. Some commentators have claimed that the AGNA had merely sanctioned Germany to build to her utmost capacity for the next few years and thus hastened a threat to British security. In fact, the agreement had a paradoxical effect - helping to restrict German naval construction to a lower level than possible for Germany while the British were free to build at a more rapid rate. The arguments of the Admiralty, which defended the AGNA on the grounds that without the agreement Germany would have built faster and a more powerful navy were therefore vindicated.³

¹ C.I.D. 1252-B, 'German Naval Construction', 22 July 1936, CAB 4/24.

² Raeder expressed these views in a private memorandum which he did not include in the official navy war diary. Quoted in Herwig, *The United States in German Naval Planning*, 197.

³ See for example the FLA's statement to the House of Commons on the Anglo-German naval negotiations, 21 June, 1935, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 1934-35*, vol. 303 (London: HMSO, 1935), 706-7.

However, to assume that the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was the principal means whereby the expansion of the German Navy was restricted before the Second World War would be to confuse the cause of Germany's unreadiness for war at sea in 1939 with its effect. In reality, the terms of the AGNA had little impact on the development of the German Navy before 1939 and the practical effect of the agreement on German power was minimal. The significance of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement lay more in its effect on Anglo-German *political* relations during the later 1930s than naval relations. The impression it made on Hitler's understanding of British intentions was more influential than its impact on German naval power.

It has been argued that 'the yardstick of Hitler's intentions towards Britain was always his policy on the German navy.'⁴ Certainly, Hitler regarded the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as primarily a political arrangement rather than a naval treaty. By offering to limit the Germany Navy to thirty-five per cent, Hitler wanted to demonstrate Germany's renunciation of her right to sea power. In return for this voluntary sacrifice, he hoped to acquire both a free hand in Europe to secure his continental objectives and a general Anglo-German alliance. For Hitler, 'the subsequent Anglo-German Naval Agreement represented the concentration of German strength on dominion in Central and Eastern Europe and an act of demonstrative disassociation by Britain from any resistance to these plans.'⁵ If Hitler was to secure these twin aims, then any naval challenge to Britain was unthinkable. Before 1938, therefore, the German Navy suffered less from the limited capacity of Germany's shipbuilding yards, and even less from the restrictions of the AGNA, than it did from a deliberate starvation of resources under the direction of the Führer. Of course, it is also possible that had the agreement *not* been signed, Hitler may have realized that Britain would not meet his expectations before he did and begun to build a Navy against it sooner rather than later; at a time when a naval race could have seriously compromised the strength of the Royal Navy. In this respect, the AGNA may

⁴ Watt, *The Immediate Origins of the Second World War*, 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

indeed have helped restrain the construction of the German Navy, although its significance as a factor in the pace of German naval expansion cannot easily be measured. These questions aside, the AGNA did not hurt Britain at all and from the Admiralty's point of view, it was marginally useful. Even more beneficial was its effect on Hitler's view of Britain; by confirming Hitler's belief in a deal with Britain, a naval arms race was prevented from developing in time to matter, while the Royal Navy was able to build what it wanted before the outbreak of war.

In the later 1930s, moreover, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement also served as an indicator of Germany's intentions toward Britain. By 1938-39, it became one of the principal means whereby Hitler gave notice of his intentions to confront Britain and also a key instrument by which Britain gauged Germany's future plans. Between 1936 and 1938, it became increasingly obvious to Hitler that he was not going to secure British acquiescence in his continental policy or an Anglo-German alliance. The British Government had not acceded to any of the actions taken by the Third Reich since the signature of the naval agreement - to Germany's reoccupation of the Rhineland, Hitler's support for Franco in the Spanish Civil War, or the Austrian *Anschluß*. Nor had an Anglo-German alliance materialized.

Hitler's 'faulty political evaluation' of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was typical of the course of Anglo-German strategic and diplomatic relations since before the First World War.⁶ German diplomatic historians have alleged a 'continuity of error' in German perceptions of British intentions since 1870.⁷ As with Hitler, Kaiser Wilhelm II also believed that Britain would be happy to see a large German Navy which could help it against the United States. Hitler's misconception of British policies was therefore a fundamental aspect of Anglo-German strategic relations for a much longer period than just the interwar years.

⁶ Letter from German Ambassador in London, Leopold von Hoesch, to Ministerialdirektor, Richard Meyer, 15 August, 1935, *DGFP*, C, IV, No. 262, 557.

⁷ Paul Kennedy explores this idea in *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1869-1914* (London: Ashfield Press, 1987).

By 1938, Hitler was disappointed with the short-lived political benefits of the agreement for Germany. When Hitler finally saw the AGNA for what it was - a naval rather than a political accord - his attitude towards it and Britain changed dramatically. Having once regarded it as an emblem of Anglo-German political unity, Hitler now saw it as a symbol of British obstructionism. Following the 'weekend crisis' in May 1938, Hitler indicated for the first time that war with Britain was a possibility and immediately ordered that Germany's naval construction programme be accelerated, since 'the Führer must reckon Britain permanently among his enemies.'⁸ Although Hitler later signed the declaration of Anglo-German friendship which stated that Britain and Germany regard the Munich agreement and the AGNA as 'symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again', his words were insincere.⁹ A few weeks later Hitler warned that although he had so far honoured the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and had not yet reached the authorized level of construction, 'circumstances might eventually compel him to consider whether or not the Agreement should be revised.'¹⁰ As rumours of the Führer's intention to scrap the AGNA began to circulate, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, began to fear German hostility towards Britain. From this moment onward, the British Government realized that the days of the AGNA were numbered and that Germany harboured intentions to challenge Britain. Indeed, six months later, Britain's guarantees to Poland, Romania, Greece, and Turkey were the 'circumstances' used to justify Germany's repudiation of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.¹¹

It would seem, therefore, that the AGNA had more impact in the field of Anglo-German political-diplomatic relations than it did in restricting the size of Germany's naval forces before the Second World War. It was Hitler's interpretation of the AGNA as

⁸ Quoted in Watt, *The Immediate Origins*, 41.

⁹ 30 September, 1938, *ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Telegram from Phipps, British Ambassador in Paris, to Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, reporting on a conversation between Hitler and Francois-Poncet, French Ambassador to Berlin, 1 November, 1938. FO 800/311.

¹¹ Text of Hitler's speech to the Reichstag, 28 April, 1939, *DBFP*, Third Series, vol. V, No. 307.

a political accord, rather than a strictly naval agreement, that was primarily responsible for the condition of the German Navy in 1939.

The Anglo-German Naval Agreement had even less of an impact in the field of international naval limitation. In agreeing to a thirty-five per cent ratio, the Admiralty hoped not only to serve the interests of Britain and Germany, but also to facilitate 'the ultimate conclusion of naval armament' at the forthcoming London Naval Conference.¹² By fixing the size of Germany's future naval strength, the Admiralty were confident that agreement between all the principal naval powers at London - including Germany - on qualitative, if not quantitative limitation, could also be reached. In the event, however, Germany did not participate in the Conference and neither Japan nor Italy were among its signatories.¹³ Moreover, by 1938, both Japan and the United States had begun to increase the size of their fleets above the limits set by the London naval treaties, thus threatening the basis on which the thirty-five per cent ratio had been accepted.¹⁴

Did the events of 1939-1945 necessarily mean that the AGNA was not a worthwhile undertaking for Britain? The historiography of this period is unequivocal in its judgment. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement, it is argued, was a 'landmark on the road to war.'¹⁵ In signing the agreement, Germany had made no real concessions and was given time to rearm. As a result, 'the substantial losses of the British Fleet [during the first ten months of war] were a consequence of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.'¹⁶ The diplomatic advantages for Germany were also considerable: 'the Stresa Front was broken; France was isolated' and Germany had been allowed to abrogate the Treaty of Versailles with impunity.¹⁷ Consequently, 'the Nazis were encouraged in their belief in the

¹² A5595/22/45, FLA's statement to the Commons, 21 June, 1935, FO 371/18734.

¹³ Berg, 'The Second London Naval Conference', 220-221.

¹⁴ The Admiralty had accepted the 35% ratio as strategically acceptable '*provided...the present ratio vis-à-vis Japan*' was maintained. 'Strategical Implications of the German 35% ratio', Plans Division memorandum, 27 May, 1935, ADM 116/3373.

¹⁵ Bloch, 'The Naval Agreement of 1935', 149.

¹⁶ Nicholas G. Papp, "The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Connecticut, 1969), vi.

¹⁷ Weinberg, *Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. I, 213.

weakness of the walls which had kept the Weimar state from Germany's rightful position in Europe. One trumpet blast, one ultimatum, and the walls would fall down.'¹⁸

In contrast, Britain got 'nothing concrete in return.'¹⁹ From the Admiralty's standpoint, 'the agreement was unnecessary in the long run'; it only disposed of a minor problem and the 'naval advantage obtained was recognizably small.'²⁰ The real danger to British naval power came from the United States and Japan. The British had been 'set up for the purpose of discrediting Versailles', and the diplomatic repercussions of the AGNA were 'out of all proportion to the gains achieved in the realm of disarmament.'²¹ The treaty was therefore 'a serious miscalculation on the parts of the Government and the Admiralty as to the advantages to be gained', and their decision to conclude the agreement contributed in no small degree to 'the catastrophe of 1939.'²²

Considered in these terms, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 does not appear to have been worthwhile for Britain. Indeed, many of these criticisms are merited: Germany had not made any substantial concessions in the naval negotiations and Hitler had been encouraged in his belief that Germany could reestablish her dominant position in Europe. Furthermore, the AGNA did only deal with a minor problem for the Admiralty. During the 1930s, the German Navy was never, *by itself*, a real threat to the Royal Navy; the real danger lay in the Far East, or in simultaneous action by Japan and another European naval Power.

The difficulty with all these assessments of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, however, is that they distort the real significance of the agreement. Commentators tend to judge the agreement based on an evaluation of its significance for the *post*-1935 period only; on its contribution to the descent into war. This tendency has developed largely as a result of a preoccupation with the policy of appeasement, especially in the later 1930s.

¹⁸ Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 174.

¹⁹ Hall, *Britain, America and Arms Control*, 179.

²⁰ Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 172-3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 174; Best, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 81.

²² Papp, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 303.

Many studies of the AGNA interpret the agreement as marking the first step in Britain's policy of conciliation towards Nazi Germany. Thus, 'the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 was the first stop on a 4-year excursion along a policy of appeasement that ended with Britain and Germany once again at war.'²³ And that appeasement ultimately failed to contain German aggression and prevent war has necessarily coloured historians opinions on the AGNA.

The debate over the origins of appeasement is of minor concern here, but what does need to be recognized is that if it is possible to regard the AGNA as symptomatic of a *new* policy - appeasement - during the late 1930s, then it also possible to consider the agreement as the logical culmination of an *old* policy - naval limitation - that had its roots in the era before 1935. This is where previous accounts of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement have fallen short. By assessing the agreement only in light of its *effect*, or in terms of its immediate origins, historians have failed to appreciate its long-term *cause*. At the same time, historians have also failed to distinguish the intention behind the AGNA from its consequences. Thus, analyses of the AGNA have so far been unbalanced. Only by examining the long-term origins of the AGNA in the *pre*-1935 period can this balance be restored and a fair assessment of the agreement made.

In signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, the Admiralty was concerned to preserve British power at sea and reconcile its naval commitments in Europe and the Empire. Their anxiety had its origins in the changed circumstances following the First World War. Competition from other naval powers - both quantitatively and qualitatively - had increased steadily during the interwar period, challenging the security of Britain's Empire and Home Waters. The post-war trend towards fiscal orthodoxy and general disarmament resulting in monetary restraint and defence cuts further hampered the Royal Navy's ability to fulfill its role as the guardian of the first principle of Imperial Defence.

²³ Best, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement', 78.

During the 1920s, these challenges were slight enough to enable the Admiralty to safeguard its supremacy at sea, but by the early 1930s, its ability to do so had been compromised by two developments. First, the steady growth of the Japanese Navy after the war meant that a deterrent naval presence in the Far East would be a major task for the Royal Navy. The Admiralty's need to attain a Two-Power Standard - the ability to provide in the Far East a naval force of sufficient strength to secure the Empire against Japanese aggression and, at the same time, to ensure against interference by the strongest naval Power in Europe - thus became imperative. The second, related development, was the 1930 London Naval Treaty. Unable to secure the financial resources that would enable the Royal Navy to reach and maintain a Two-Power Standard, the Admiralty turned, in the late 1920s/early 1930s, to international naval limitation as a means of preserving Britain's security and maritime supremacy. Although harmless in the short-term, the treaty had potentially serious long-term consequences for the Royal Navy's ability to fulfill its Imperial commitments. A strategic risk had been taken: the LNT could only be allowed to govern the strength of the British fleet under three conditions. First, that the international political climate did not change; secondly that the terms of the treaty were extended to all principal naval powers; and thirdly, that a steady programme of replacement - to compensate for the reduction in total ship numbers - be started. More importantly, while the LNT had reduced the threat of conflict in Europe, it had introduced no new factor tending to diminish the strategic importance of the Far East.

Between 1930 and 1934, the conditions under which the London Naval Treaty had been accepted were not fulfilled; the 'gamble' that had been taken by Britain's policy-makers failed. The strategically unsound position of the Royal Navy became more obvious, particularly in the Far East, where Japanese aggression threatened British interests. Moreover, a Two-Power Standard had not yet been accomplished and the Admiralty's ability to maintain naval supremacy in all parts of the Empire was in question. After 1933, this ability was undermined further by Hitler's rise to power in

Germany. The new challenge came less from a reconstituted German Navy than it did from public and political opinion in Britain, whose insistence on the greater threat from Germany diverted attention - and resources - away from the more immediate and powerful Japanese danger in the East.

Indeed, it was the fear of *Japanese* rather than German naval capabilities and intentions that ultimately motivated the Admiralty to sign the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Japan was the only naval Power capable of challenging the Royal Navy's maritime supremacy in the mid-1930s. The danger from Germany was, by itself, negligible. Hitler had neither the naval capability nor ambition to challenge Britain in her Home Waters. Germany's foreign policy goals at this time were essentially land-based objectives, which necessitated a greater concentration of material on the army and air force. The risk from Germany assumed greater significance, however, when the possibility of simultaneous trouble in the Far East was considered. The Admiralty's fear was that war in one theatre would lead to war in the other. Should that possibility occur, the Royal Navy would be ill-equipped to deal with both threats simultaneously.

By 1935, therefore, the Admiralty faced a strategic dilemma. The Royal Navy still did not have the desired Two-Power Standard, yet the imperatives of national and Imperial defence increasingly demanded that they have one. Financial stringency and international naval limitation agreements already entered into, however, precluded the construction of more ships as a solution to the dilemma. The only alternative, if Britain was to maintain its maritime supremacy, was to place limits on the size of other navies. If the naval strength of either Japan in the Far East, or Germany in Europe, could be restrained, then the Royal Navy would be able to fulfill its Imperial commitments in both spheres of operations with a satisfactory margin of security. The prospect of reaching an acceptable naval agreement with Japan was bleak, however, since Japan had already made clear her intentions to acquire parity with the British fleet. A naval agreement with Germany therefore held out the only hope that the Admiralty would be able to meet a European and

a Far Eastern threat at the same time. By reducing the risk of the German menace, the Admiralty could redirect its attention and resources towards the more immediate danger represented by Japan in the East. A naval accord with Germany would also increase the likelihood of agreement being reached at the Second London Naval Conference. With the future size of the German fleet predetermined, the Admiralty were hopeful that agreement among the other principal naval Powers, if not on quantitative then certainly qualitative limitation could be concluded without difficulty.

The Admiralty's decision to sign the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was therefore a logical response to a practical strategical dilemma: how best to maintain Britain's maritime supremacy and achieve a Two-Power Standard. Ironically, the Admiralty could only solve their dilemma by advocating what they had always opposed. Arms limitation, the traditional 'liberal' solution, had become by 1935 the only solution to a 'realistic' problem, maintaining security. Conversely, historians have tended to interpret the AGNA as a sacrifice of British security and a surrender to German demands. This view stems from the penchant to analyze the agreement as the first step in the policy of appeasement. However, the AGNA symbolized less the start of a new foreign and defence policy than it did the culmination of an old policy. Ever since the end of the First World War, the Admiralty had endeavoured to establish a Two-Power Standard to enable them to maintain national and Imperial defence. Their efforts were thwarted by the dominance of 'liberal' ideas after the war; ideas which favoured disarmament over rearmament and increased spending on social and welfare services rather than defence. By 1935, with the threat of conflict in the Far East gaining momentum and Hitler's demands for equality in armaments becoming more menacing, the need for greater security and the Two-Power Standard which this implied reached new heights. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement was the solution to this impasse.

Britain's intentions in signing the AGNA were therefore more realistic than conventional wisdom assumes, and the effect of the agreement has been overstated. Its

motivation in concluding the AGNA was not as foolish as historians have supposed. The British decision was based on a sound strategic assessment of the position in which the Royal Navy found itself by 1935. It did *not* stem from a desire to mollify Hitler or to pamper to Germany's foreign policy aims in the vain hope they could be placated, as advocates of the 'appeasement argument' claim. Neither was the effect of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as serious as traditionally accepted; a tradition that has evolved from the tendency to portray the AGNA as a symbol of British appeasement. In the first place, there is no evidence to suggest that the agreement had a negative effect on European diplomacy, particularly the attitudes of France and Italy, during the later 1930s as is widely assumed. Moreover, by confirming Hitler's belief in a deal with Britain, the Royal Navy was protected against the expansion of the German Navy, that is until Hitler realized that his hopes in this respect were an illusion. At least with the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, Britain was able to prepare more thoroughly for a possible war at sea, at a time when a naval arms race would have been detrimental to British security. Without the agreement and the attendant restraint on German naval expansion, the events of 1940-1942 could have been very different.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Naval strengths of Britain and Germany 1933 and 1939

	1933		1939	
	Germany	Britain	Germany	Britain
Battleships	0	12	3 pocket	12
Battlecruisers	0	3	2	3
Cruisers	5 light	52	8	62
Aircraft carriers	0	6	0	7
Destroyers	14	150	22	159
Torpedo Boats	12	0	12	11
Submarines	0	52	57	54
Minelayers	0	1	0	1
Sloops/escorts	0	34	8	38

Source: Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 248.

Appendix 2. Predicted and actual German naval strength 1939-1942

	Predicted size of AGNA Fleet by 1942	IIC Report - predicted maximum construction by 1940	Actual size of German Fleet in 1939
Capital Ships	8	9	3
Aircraft Carriers	3	8	0
Cruisers	15	20	8
Destroyers	38	92	22
Submarines	44	89	57

Source: C.I.D. 1252-B, 'German Naval Construction', 22 July 1936, CAB 4/24; Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*, appendix 11.

Appendix 3. Anglo-German Naval Agreement, 18 June 1935 (Exchange of Notes)

Note from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Herr von Ribbentrop

FOREIGN OFFICE, June 18, 1935

Your Excellency,

1. During the last few days the representatives of the German Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom have been engaged in conversations, the primary purpose of which has been to prepare the way for holding a general conference on the subject of the limitation of naval armaments. I have now much pleasure in notifying you Excellency of the formal acceptance by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of the proposal of the German Government discussed at those conversations that the future strength of the German navy in relation to the aggregate naval strength of the Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations should be in the proportion of 35:100. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom regard this proposal as a contribution of the greatest importance to the cause of future naval limitation. They further believe that the agreement which they have now reached with the German Government, and which they regard as a permanent and definite agreement as from today between the two Governments, will facilitate the conclusion of a general agreement on the subject of naval limitation between all the naval Powers of the world.

2. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom also agreed with the explanations which were furnished by the German representatives in the course of the recent discussions in London as to the method of application of this principle. These explanations may be summarized as follows:

(a) The ratio of 35:100 is to be a permanent relationship, i.e. the total tonnage of the German fleet shall never exceed a percentage of 35 of the aggregate tonnage of the naval forces, as defined by treaty, of the Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, or, if there should in future be no treaty limitations of this tonnage, a percentage of 35 of the aggregate tonnages of the Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

(b) If any future general treaty of naval limitation should not adopt the method of limitation by agreed ratios between the fleets of different Powers, the German Government will not insist on the incorporation of the ratio mentioned in the preceding sub-paragraph in such future general treaty, provided that the method therein adopted for the future limitation of naval armaments is such as to give Germany full guarantees that this ratio can be maintained.

(c) Germany will adhere to the ratio 35:100 in all circumstances, e.g. the ratio will not be affected by the construction of other Powers. If the general equilibrium of naval armaments, as normally maintained in the past, should be violently upset by any abnormal and exceptional construction by other Powers, the German Government reserve the right to invite His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom to examine the new situation thus created.

(d) The German Government favour, in the matter of limitation of naval armaments, that system which divides naval vessels into categories, fixing the maximum tonnage and/or armament for vessels in each category, and allocates the tonnage to be allowed to each Power by categories of vessels. Consequently, in principle, and subject to (f) below, the German Government are prepared to apply the 35 per cent ratio to the tonnage of each category of vessel to be maintained, and to make any variation of this ratio in a particular category or categories dependent on the arrangements to this end that may be arrived at in a future general treaty on naval limitation, such arrangements being based on the principle that any increase in one category would be compensated for by a corresponding reduction in others. If no general treaty on naval limitation should be concluded, or if the future general treaty should not contain provision creating limitation by categories, the manner and degree in which the German Government will have the right to vary the 35 per cent ratio in one or more categories will be a matter for settlement between the German Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, in the light of the naval situation then existing.

(e) If, and for so long as, other important naval Powers retain a single category for cruisers and destroyers, Germany shall enjoy the right to have a single category for these two classes of vessel, although she would prefer to see these classes in two categories.

(f) In the matter of submarines, however, Germany, while not exceeding the ratio of 35:100 in respect of total tonnage, shall have the right to possess a submarine tonnage equal to the total submarine tonnage possessed by the Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. The German Government, however, undertake that, except in the circumstances indicated in the immediately following sentence, Germany's submarine tonnage shall not exceed 45 per cent of the total of that possessed by the Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. The German Government reserve the right, in the event of a situation arising which in their opinion makes it necessary for Germany to avail herself of her right to a percentage of submarine tonnage exceeding 45 per cent above mentioned, to give notice to this effect to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, and agree that the matter shall be the subject of friendly discussion before the German Government exercise that right.

(g) Since it is highly improbable that the calculation of the 35 per cent ratio should give for each category of vessels tonnage figures exactly divisible by the maximum individual tonnage permitted for ships in that category, it may be necessary that adjustments should be made in order that Germany shall not be debarred from utilizing her tonnage to the full. It has consequently been agreed that the German Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will settle by common accord what adjustments are necessary for this purpose, and it is understood that this procedure shall not result in any substantial or permanent departure from the ratio 35:100 in respect of total strengths.

3. With reference to sub-paragraph (c) of the explanations set out above, I have the honour to inform you that His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom have taken note of the reservation and recognize the right therein set out, on the understanding that the 35:100 ratio will be maintained in default of agreement to the contrary between the two Governments.

4. I have the honour to request your Excellency to inform me that the German Government agree that the proposal of the German Government has been correctly set out in the preceding paragraphs of this note.

I have, & c.,
SAMUEL HOARE

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