

YVON DELBOS AND ANTHONY EDEN: ANGLO-FRENCH COOPERATION, 1936-38

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Anthony Eden was appointed foreign secretary at the end of 1935 following the dismissal of Sir Samuel Hoare for his part in the infamous Hoare-Laval Pact. Yvon Delbos, a member of the Radical party, became French foreign minister six months later as a result of the victory of the Popular Front in the May 1936 elections. Eden resigned as foreign secretary on 20 February 1938. Delbos followed suit less than four weeks later on 14 March 1938. When he became foreign secretary at the age of thirty eight, Eden was already the ambitious, rising star of the Conservative party and had accumulated an impressive degree of experience in foreign affairs having been parliamentary private secretary to foreign secretary Austen Chamberlain between 1926 and 1929, under secretary of state for foreign affairs from September 1931 until January 1934 when he became lord privy seal, and then in June 1935 minister of league of nations affairs (without portfolio). In comparison, Delbos was far less experienced, as Robert Young has observed:

Yvon Delbos went to the Quai d'Orsay in his early fifties, equipped with a respectable if unspectacular reputation as a competent member of the Chamber and as a journalist with special interest in foreign affairs. A quiet, moderate man of modest political ambitions...Significantly, in a political world renowned for its gastronomic and alcoholic excesses, here was one, a curiosity, who did not suffer from liver complaints. But he was not the sort of man from whom one could expect either brilliance or novelty in foreign policy.¹

Yet, the two foreign ministers developed a good working relationship and contributed much to the improvement in Anglo-French relations after the Abyssinian debacle and the mutual recrimination of the Rhineland crisis. In his memoirs Eden recollected on this relationship: 'For me a new and much happier era of relations with France now opened up. From this moment [the victory of the French Popular Front Government] until my resignation in February 1938, French Ministers and I worked together without even a momentary breach of an understanding which grew increasingly confident'.² His first impression of Delbos, having met him at Geneva on 25 June 1936, was that he was 'rather voluble, and not very sure of his facts'.³ But he soon came to respect the French foreign minister and in his memoirs praised Delbos specifically for his 'many acts of friendship'; not least in using his influence to restrain the French press at the time of the Abdication Crisis in late 1936.⁴

¹ Robert Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.132. Both Delbos and Eden served in the First World War when the former was wounded twice and the latter won the Military Cross.

² Lord Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), p.372.

³ Eden to the Foreign Office, 26 June 1936. Avon Papers, FO 954 (located at the Library of the University of Birmingham), FR/36/13.

⁴ Avon, *Facing the Dictators*, p.430.

The feeling was certainly mutual. Delbos made the revival of a close diplomatic relationship with the British the centrepiece of his foreign policy which accorded with the aims of his prime ministers, the Socialist Léon Blum and the Radical Camille Chautemps. Blum, for example, told the Chamber on 5 December 1936 that: 'Yvon Delbos has given first priority to the close cordiality of our relations with England, and he is right. For our other friends are unanimous in recognizing and declaring that the Franco-English accord affects the whole realm of international affairs.'⁵ So close had the relationship become between the two foreign ministers that when Eden resigned in February 1938 Delbos was so personally affected that, according to Phipps, he offered his resignation to Chautemps several times.⁶ John Dreifort has noted in this context:

Eden's resignation came as a shocking personal blow to Delbos. His relationship with the pro-French Eden had become quite cordial during the previous twenty months. Their frequent correspondence, their meetings, and their common recognition of the need for a revitalized *Entente Cordiale* had led to an increased understanding between the two men.⁷

The question for the historian is to ask whether this mutual admiration actually translated itself into close cooperation in the diplomatic field. How far, in other words, did British and French foreign policy converge in the period when Eden and Delbos were responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs in their respective countries? To answer this question it is intended to focus on four key issues which impacted on the relationship: French discussions with the Soviets respecting a military convention in the aftermath of the Franco-Soviet Pact which was ratified by the French Senate at the end of February 1936; the outbreak and development of the Spanish Civil War from July 1936 onwards; the respective attitudes of Delbos and Eden towards the appeasement of fascist Italy; and the respective attitudes of both towards the appeasement of Nazi Germany.

Prior to the making of the Franco-Soviet Pact in 1933, Delbos published a book, *L'Expérience Rouge*, in which he predicted that 'the progress of the fascist leprosy' would bring France and Soviet Russia together. He had welcomed Soviet Russia's entry into the League of Nations in 1934 and was a firm supporter of Edouard Herriot and Louis Barthou and eventually Pierre Laval in their efforts to conclude the Franco-Soviet Pact.⁸ Eden, meanwhile, had visited Moscow, as lord privy seal, in late March 1935 and had spoken personally with the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, his foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, and Vyacheslav Molotov, chairman of the Council of Commissars. The Soviet dictator had stressed the need for strong collective security by 'some scheme of pacts' to counter German aggression while Eden had emphasized Britain's world wide interests which would have to be considered before she came to any decision on European policy. Stalin had agreed and he left an impression on Eden and his officials, the British ambassador at Moscow, Viscount Chilston, and William Strang, Foreign Office adviser on League of Nations

⁵ John Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos and the Quai d'Orsay: French Foreign Policy during the Popular Front, 1936-1938* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 1973), p.84.

⁶ Ibid., p.187.

⁷ Ibid., p.101.

⁸ Ibid., pp.105-7. See also Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe: The Dilemmas of French Impotence, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.29-31, 36-40.

affairs, who had accompanied him, of 'a man of strong oriental traits of character with unshakeable assurance and control whose courtesy in no way hid from us an implacable ruthlessness'.⁹ While, according to Robert Manne, the Eden-Stalin talks had marked 'the moment of greatest cordiality since the October Revolution', there was no substantive improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations.¹⁰ Indeed, the Foreign Office rejected the case for providing a loan to the Soviets in February 1936 following the intervention of the Soviet ambassador, Ivan Maiskii, who had proposed the idea. Eden, now foreign secretary, having initially favoured the idea of a loan, agreed with his officials. While 'I want good relations with the bear', he wrote, 'I don't want to hug him too close. I don't trust him, and am sure there is hatred in his heart for all we stand for'.¹¹ His disdain for the Franco-Soviet Pact was revealed at a meeting of the Cabinet on 12 February 1936 when he informed his colleagues that according to Sir George Clerk, the British ambassador at Paris, the French ambassador at London, Charles Corbin, would probably call to consult him as to the desirability of French ratification of the pact. He proposed 'to express no opinion. We had not been consulted before the signature of the pact and there appeared no reason why we should express any opinion now, although unfortunately it might be impossible for us to remain outside the consequences of the pact'. Following a brief discussion, in which it was suggested that 'it would be a distinct advantage to be able to tell Germany that we had nothing to do with the matter', the Cabinet approved Eden's proposed approach to the French ambassador.¹²

Although the Pact had become a reality by the time Delbos became foreign minister in May, having been ratified by the French Senate on 28 February 1936 and having provided Hitler with a pretext to remilitarize the Rhineland, the Soviets were anxious to strengthen it with the signing of a military convention and, accordingly, discussions took place between the Popular Front government and the Soviets during 1936 and 1937. However, there was no question of the French engaging in close military cooperation with Soviet Russia, not only because of ideological hostility on the part of the French general staff which Delbos and other ministers shared – the French generals genuinely feared, and the Spanish Civil War accentuated that fear,¹³ that too close contact with the Soviets could encourage subversion in the army and the spread of communism in France – but also because of reservations about the quality of the Soviet armed forces whose military capacity was, in the words of General

⁹ Viscount Chilston, British ambassador at Moscow, to Sir John Simon, secretary of state for foreign affairs, 30 March 1935. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, 2nd series, vol. XII, nos. 669, 670, pp.766-9. Hereafter DBFP. See also Avon, *Facing the Dictators*, pp.152-3.

¹⁰ Robert Manne, 'The Foreign Office and the Failure of Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16/4 (1981), p.743.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 749. See also Michael Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934-1937* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1997), pp.105-7.

¹² The National Archives, Kew, London (formerly the Public Record Office). Hereafter TNA (PRO). CAB 23/83 CM 6(36). Eden told his Cabinet colleagues that during his recent visit to attend King George V's funeral the French prime minister, Pierre Etienne Flandin, had informed him of the French intention to ratify the Franco-Soviet Pact and he had declined to give an opinion.

¹³ See Peter Jackson, 'French Strategy and the Spanish Civil War' in Christian Leitz and David Dunthorn (eds), *Spain in an International Context, 1936-1959* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), pp.60-1 and Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe*, pp.208-9.

Victor-Henri Schweisguth who had attended Soviet manoeuvres in September 1936, 'a great sham'.¹⁴ These reservations were shared to some extent by the British military authorities.¹⁵

On the political side, both the Quai d'Orsay and the Foreign Office were increasingly anxious and critical of Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War which gathered momentum in the autumn of 1936 with the despatch of large consignments of weapons for the Spanish Republican forces and the arrival of Soviet technical staff and the tens of thousands of volunteers of the international brigades organized by the Comintern.¹⁶ Prompted by Delbos, the secretary general of the Quai D'Orsay, Alexis Léger, went so far as to advise Moscow in October 1936 that relations would suffer if the Soviet Union did not pursue a less aggressive policy in Spain. In London, Eden and his permanent under secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, remained wedded to their policy of non-intervention in the civil war in Spain and deplored Soviet intervention.¹⁷ On 19 November Eden went so far as to accuse the Soviets in the House of Commons of being more to blame than the Germans and Italians of breaches of the Non-Intervention Agreement to which all of the European great powers had adhered in August 1936.¹⁸ In the longer term, the commitment to non-intervention in both countries undermined Soviet attempts to use the Spanish conflict as a means of achieving collective security against German and Italian fascism and instead enhanced the suspicion of Soviet motives.

For Delbos and his officials at the Quai d'Orsay the value of the Franco-Soviet Pact lay in the fact that its existence made a Soviet-German rapprochement much less likely. As Phipps noted while still ambassador at Berlin on 7 April 1937, shortly before he became ambassador at Paris: 'If Russia after copiously watering her red wine were ready to abandon France and wished to fall into the German arms, those arms would probably be very willing to receive her'.¹⁹ Eden and his officials, took the same view but believed that was no reason to turn the Pact into a military alliance. He need not have worried. On 15 May 1937, when he told Delbos personally that he regarded any improvement in Franco-Soviet solidarity as inopportune at that time, the

¹⁴ Young, *In Command of France*, pp.145-7. Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.292-3. Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), p.208. Patrice Buffotot, 'The French High Command and the Franco-Soviet Alliance, 1933-1939', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5/4 (1982), pp.549-51. Michael Carley, 'Prelude to Defeat: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1919-1939' in Joel Blatt (ed.), *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1998), p.193.

¹⁵ James Herndon, 'British Perceptions of Soviet Military Capability, 1935-1939' in Wolfgang Mommsen and Lothar Kettenacker (eds), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), p.302.

¹⁶ For details of Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War see Glyn Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers, 1931-1941* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp 40-50.

¹⁷ Carley, 'Prelude to Defeat', p.95. Glyn Stone, 'Sir Robert Vansittart and Spain, 1931-1941' in Thomas Otte and Constantine Pagedas (eds), *Personalities, War and Diplomacy: Essays in International History* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), pp.137-8.

¹⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, HC, vol. 317, c.1923.

¹⁹ Foreign Office Memorandum: Summary of Recent Correspondence on the Value of the Franco-Soviet Pact, 27 May 1937. TNA (PRO), FO 371/21095, N3129/45/38.

foreign minister clarified his position on the issue and confided that the French had no intention of entering into any military agreement with Soviet Russia. The most the French intended to do, when confronted by further Soviet pressure, was to permit the exchange of information between French and Soviet military attachés. However, even this limited development worried Eden. He told Delbos that he much regretted this decision because ‘he foresaw that such collaboration between the French and Russian governments would be bound to become public’ and might easily have the ‘most serious psychological effects both in England and in the lesser countries of Europe’.²⁰

The whole question of military concessions to the Soviets was rendered academic, however, when, at the end of May 1937, Stalin commenced his purge of the Red Army high command and provided a clear reason for ending negotiations, so that even the proposed exchange of information by the French and Soviet military attachés was abandoned. In any case, even without the purges, the question mark over Soviet military credibility, the ideological concerns of the French governing elite and British opposition, the prospects for concluding a Franco-Soviet military alliance were never high because as in August 1939 so in the spring of 1937 the Russians made it clear that their assistance was contingent on the full cooperation of France’s eastern allies, Poland and Romania, which was extremely unlikely.²¹

The alienation of France from Soviet Russia was complete when in December 1937 Moscow was deliberately excluded from Delbos’ itinerary of his tour of eastern European capitals. Moreover, at the end of January 1938 the foreign minister, in terms which would have been understood and appreciated by Eden and prime minister Neville Chamberlain, expressed his suspicion that the Soviets were determined to undermine French efforts, and those of their ‘friends and allies’, to achieve a détente with Germany and reach a general European settlement by perpetuating Franco-German tension.²² In addition, a few days before Eden’s resignation, Delbos told Phipps that ‘Chautemps and he would far sooner resign than consent to serve in the same Cabinet as a Communist, excepting in a War Cabinet’ and he added, in confidence, that ‘even Blum, who had tried to form a Cabinet of this kind, had confessed to him great relief at that attempt having failed’.²³

²⁰ Conclusions of an exchange of views between Delbos and Eden, 15 May 1937. *Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939*, 2nd series, vol. V, no. 429, p. 427. Hereafter DDF. ‘Extract from a record of conversation at a lunch given by the Secretary of State to M.M. Delbos and Léger, 15 May 1937’. TNA (PRO) FO 371/20702, C3685/532/62. Incomplete memorandum relating to a discussion between Eden and Delbos with regard to the Franco-Soviet Pact, n.d. The Avon Papers, FO 954 FR/37/23. See also John Dreifort, ‘The French Popular Front and the Franco-Soviet Pact’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11/2 and 3 (1976), pp.222-5.

²¹ René Girault and Robert Frank, *Turbulente Europe et Nouveaux Mondes: Histoire des Relations Internationales Contemporaines Vol. II: 1914-1941* (Paris: Masson, 1988), pp. 214-15.

²² Delbos to Robert Coulondre, French Ambassador at Moscow, 22 Jan. 1938. DDF, 2nd series, vol. VIII, no. 19, pp.38-9. See also, John Herman, *The Paris Embassy of Sir Eric Phipps: Anglo-French Relations and the Foreign Office, 1937-1939* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998), p.67. In addition, see Chamberlain’s admonishment to his sister on 20 March 1938 of ‘the Russians [who were] stealthily and cunningly pulling all the strings behind the scenes to get us involved in war with Germany (our Secret Service doesn’t spend all its time looking out of windows)’. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 20 March 1938. Neville Chamberlain Papers (located at Birmingham University Library), NC18/1/1042.

²³ Phipps to Eden, 16 Feb. 1938. Avon Papers, FO 954 FR/38/5.

Just as Delbos and Eden and their respective governments were largely in accord in their relations with Soviet Russia, there was a considerable degree of agreement with regard to their respective responses to the Spanish Civil War. Throughout the conflict, which began in July 1936 and lasted until the end of March 1939, the British government adhered to a policy of strict non-intervention in the political and military spheres, though not the economic. The French government for the most part maintained non-intervention while selling a number of largely obsolete aircraft to the Spanish Republicans, occasionally opening the Pyrenees frontier to enable the transit of Soviet and Czech arms to their forces and facilitating a number of financial transactions on their behalf, including the export of gold from the Bank of Madrid.²⁴ The British and French responses contrasted starkly with Germany, Italy and Soviet Russia who intervened on a substantial scale, the first two on the side of the rebellious Spanish Nationalists, led by General Francisco Franco, the latter on the side of the democratically elected Spanish Popular Front Republican Government.

Eden and Delbos viewed the civil war in Spain and the prospects of foreign intervention in it, as threatening to European peace and both were appalled by the thought that the Spanish conflict might provoke a European conflagration, possibly along ideological lines.²⁵ Delbos also shared the fears of his ministerial colleagues, including Blum, that by intervening in the war in Spain in support of the Spanish Popular Front Government they would provoke a civil war or alternatively a military coup in France and also jeopardize the social reform programme of the Popular Front.²⁶ As a result, having agreed initially to provide support for the Spanish Republicans, the French government on 25 July decided not to intervene in Spain.²⁷ Delbos was a leading advocate of non-intervention partly because he had been persuaded that Britain had no intention of intervening in the civil war in Spain. Eden, taking his cue from prime minister Stanley Baldwin's stricture that 'on no account, French or other, must he bring them into the fight on the side of the Russians',²⁸ was resolved to ensure British neutrality in the Spanish conflict. Delbos and his officials at the Quai d'Orsay were equally determined not to get involved but they were concerned at reports that both Germany and Italy intended to intervene. As a result, Delbos backed the secretary general of the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger, when he

²⁴ Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers*, pp.51-2.

²⁵ Glyn Stone, 'Britain, France and the Spanish Problem, 1936-1939' in Dick Richardson and Glyn Stone (eds), *Decisions and Diplomacy: Essays in Twentieth Century International History* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.131.

²⁶ For a discussion see Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe*, pp.208-9; Young, *In Command of France*, pp.139-41; Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp.38-43; David Carlton, 'Eden, Blum and the Origins of Non-Intervention', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6/3 (1971), pp.46-7; and Haywood Hunt, 'The French Radicals, Spain and the Emergence of Appeasement' in Martin Alexander and Helen Graham (eds), *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts: Comparative Perspectives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.38-49.

²⁷ Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp.40-1. Jean Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932-1939: Politique Étrangère de la France* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1979), pp. 302, 304.

²⁸ Thomas Jones, *A Diary with Letters, 1931-1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), diary entry, 27 July 1936, p.231. Jones was a former high civil servant and close confidant of leading politicians including four prime ministers: David Lloyd George, Andrew Bonar Law, Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald.

proposed a non-intervention agreement by which all the European powers would desist from intervening in the Spanish struggle.²⁹

During the next few weeks Delbos worked closely with Lord Halifax, lord president of the council, who during the first fortnight of August acted as foreign secretary, and then with Eden on his return from a short break in Yorkshire, to make the Non-Intervention Agreement a reality.³⁰ By the end of August 1936 all the European powers had adhered to this agreement though Germany, Italy, Portugal and later Soviet Russia consistently undermined its intention to prohibit intervention of any kind in Spain. Within France there was strong opposition to non-intervention within the Popular Front, which demanded arms for Republican Spain, and it was only with British support, which he and his officials consistently solicited and which was readily reciprocated, that Delbos was able to establish the non-intervention policy and persuade a reluctant Blum to go along with it.³¹

Delbos also succeeded in persuading Eden to agree to the establishment of a non-intervention committee to supervise the Non-Intervention Agreement and to locate it in London rather than Paris.³² In this connection, Delbos told the British ambassador, Sir George Clerk, that his government were most grateful for Eden's agreement to hold the meetings of the Committee in London.³³ This was a perceptive move on the part of Delbos and his colleagues because by locating the Committee in London rather than Paris it enabled them to avoid inevitable protests and recrimination from those elements within the broader Popular Front movement who were opposed to non-intervention and who were agitating for armed intervention on the side of the Spanish Republic. Moreover, in accepting the Committee's location in London, Eden saddled the British government before history with the burden of its failures and enabled the French to escape this fate.

Within the Non-Intervention Committee Britain and France sought to make the Non-Intervention Agreement more effective in containing foreign intervention in the civil war. To this end, Delbos and Eden cooperated closely in making a number of proposals in the late autumn of 1936 and the winter of 1936-1937, including attempts to curtail the passage of arms and 'foreign volunteers' into the Spanish arena and also to mediate between the two belligerents – Nationalist and Republican Spain. Delbos succeeded in convincing Eden not to grant belligerent rights to General Franco's forces or to grant *de facto* recognition to his regime, though most of the British

²⁹ Delbos to Diplomatic Representatives in London, Rome and Brussels, 2 Aug. 1936. DDF, 2nd series, vol. III, no. 59, pp.100-1. Elizabeth Cameron, 'Alexis Saint-Léger Léger' in Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds), *The Diplomats, 1919-1939: Volume 2: The Thirties* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p.391.

³⁰ See Glyn Stone, 'Britain. Non-Intervention and the Spanish Civil War', *European Studies Review*, 9/1 (1979), pp.138-41. Before departing for Yorkshire Eden arranged for all important papers on Spain to be sent to him and he kept in touch with the Foreign Office by telephone while away. Avon, *Facing the Dictators*, p.401.

³¹ Stone, 'Britain, Non-Intervention and the Spanish Civil War', pp.139-41.

³² Charles Corbin, French ambassador at London, to Delbos, 24 August 1936. DDF, 2nd series, vol. III, no. 197, p. 276. Eden to Sir George Clerk, British Ambassador at Paris, 24 Aug. 1936. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVII, no. 128, p.161. According to Eden, the French government attached great importance to the Committee's location in London because 'to be frank, they felt that our capital was more neutral than the capitals of any of the other great Powers in this difficult business'.

³³ Clerk to the Foreign Office, 28 Aug. 1936. TNA (PRO), FO 371/20573 W9986/9549/41.

cabinet would have done so had Madrid fallen to the Nationalists as expected in November 1936.³⁴ After several months of diplomatic interchange Delbos and Eden succeeded in March 1937 in establishing a naval patrol scheme – involving the British, French, German and Italian navies – around the coast of Spain to prevent illegal arms deliveries to the Republican and Nationalist forces and also a land observation scheme on the Franco-Spanish and Portuguese-Spanish frontiers.³⁵ Unfortunately, the naval patrol scheme broke down three months later as a result of the *Deutschland* and *Leipzig* incidents – the first a real attack by Spanish Republican aircraft on the German battleship *Deutschland* engaged in the naval patrol, and the second, a supposed torpedo attack by a Republican submarine on the German cruiser *Leipzig*, also engaged in the naval patrol, but which was never properly verified.³⁶

The subsequent withdrawal of the German and Italian navies from the patrol and the suspension of international observation on the Portuguese-Spanish frontier threatened to undermine the whole non-intervention policy of Britain and France. In these circumstances, Eden and his officials proposed a revised ‘British Plan’ which aimed to explicitly link the control scheme with plans to remove foreign ‘volunteers’ from both sides in Spain and the grant of belligerent rights to Franco’s forces as well as the Republicans.³⁷ Delbos was not enthusiastic but his opposition to the ‘British Plan’ was soon overshadowed by events in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1937, namely the sinking of Russian, Spanish and other merchant ships bound for Republican Spain by Italian submarines³⁸ which eventually led the French foreign minister to urge a conference to deal with these ‘acts of piracy’. He was convinced that only common action by France and Britain would ‘serve to bring about a modification in the Italian attitude’.³⁹ Eden agreed immediately and succeeded in persuading the British Cabinet, Chamberlain included, that such a conference was necessary, though with Italy included.⁴⁰ As a result of the Nyon Conference, a full

³⁴ Jill Edwards, *The British Government and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp.184-6. Duroselle, *La Décadence*, pp.318-20.

³⁵ See Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers*, pp.78-9.

³⁶ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Penguin, 3rd edition, 1977), p.685. Baron Constantin von Neurath, German foreign minister, to the German embassies at London, Paris and Rome, 19 June 1937. *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, series D, vol. III, no. 339, pp. 354-6. Hereafter DGFP. The permanent under secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, told the Labour MP, Hugh Dalton, on 24 June that he was extremely doubtful whether any torpedo had been fired at the *Leipzig* and the Admiralty shared his opinion. Dalton Diaries (located at the Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science), 1.18, diary entry, 24 June 1937.

³⁷ Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers*, pp.81-3.

³⁸ For details of the Italian submarine attacks see John Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975, pp.306-8, 311-13 and Reynolds Salerno, ‘Britain, France and the Emerging Italian Threat’ in Martin Alexander and William Philpott (eds), *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp.79-81. See also Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano’s Hidden Diary, 1937-1938* (New York: Dutton, 1953), diary entries 23 and 31 Aug., 2 and 4 Sept. 1937, pp.3, 6-9.

³⁹ Note communicated by the French chargé d’affaires [Roger Cambon] at London, 30 Aug. 1937. TNA (PRO), CAB 24/271 CP 208(37).

⁴⁰ ‘Comments made by Eden on the Note communicated by the French chargé d’affaires on 30 August 1937’, 1 Sept. 1937. ‘Record by Eden of a [telephone] conversation with Chamberlain’, 1 Sept. 1937.

naval patrol was re-established, consisting almost entirely of French and British ships patrolling the Atlantic coastline of Spain, the western Mediterranean and the Aegean. The Soviet navy was excluded from the naval patrol in the Aegean in deference to the wishes of Greece and Turkey while the Germans and Italians refused to participate at Nyon though Mussolini eventually accepted an Italian zone in the Tyrrhenian Sea.⁴¹ The French Pyrenees frontier was closed once more.

The Nyon Conference has been referred to as one of the few occasions during the inter-war period when the western powers made a firm and resolute stand against totalitarian aggression. According to AJP Taylor, 'here was a demonstration, never repeated, that Mussolini would respect a show of strength'. The American foreign correspondent, Louis Fischer, put it another way: 'Mussolini understood the smoke of British cruisers better than the perfumed notes of the British Foreign Office. Mussolini saw that the British meant business and that the French, at last, were playing ball with the British'.⁴² These glowing testimonials are a little wide of the mark. Unfortunately for Delbos and Eden, the impact of Nyon was lessened by the British Admiralty's categorical rejection of the French suggestion that the Mediterranean patrol should be extended to hostile surface ships and aircraft threatening merchant ships as well as taking action against submerged submarines.⁴³ Moreover, after Nyon the Italians changed their tactics and Italian submarines were handed over to Franco's forces and Italian aircraft on Majorca flew with Spanish markings. As a result, the bombing of all Republican ports and cargo ships bound for them could be carried out with virtual impunity for the rest of the civil war.⁴⁴

For Eden and Vansittart, Nyon, and the cooperation they shared throughout with their French counterparts, brought a change in their view of the Spanish Civil War. Henceforth, both wished for a Republican victory, not for ideological reasons, but because it would be a considerable setback to the ambitions of the Axis powers.⁴⁵ Accordingly, when in late September and early October 1937 Delbos insisted on French participation in tripartite talks relating to Spain with Italy and Britain instead of simple Anglo-Italian bilateral talks, Eden gave his full support and persuaded a reluctant Chamberlain to agree.⁴⁶ Previously, the French foreign minister had gone so far as to call for the abandonment of non-intervention by Britain and France,

'Extracts from draft notes of a meeting of Ministers', 2 Sept. 1937. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, nos. 110, 111, 114, pp.203-6, 211-18. See also TNA (PRO) CAB 24/271 CP 208(37).

⁴¹ The Italian foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, was jubilant at the eventual outcome of the conference: 'From suspected pirates to policemen of the Mediterranean and the Russians whose ships we were sinking, excluded'. Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938*, diary entry, 21 Sept. 1937, p.17.

⁴² Alan John Patrick Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2nd edition, 1963), p.163. Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), p.421.

⁴³ Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2002) pp.28-9.

⁴⁴ Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p.145.

⁴⁵ See Stone, 'Sir Robert Vansittart and Spain', pp.144-5.

⁴⁶ TNA (PRO) CAB 23/89 CM 35(37), 29 Sept. 1937.

including the reopening of the French Pyrenees frontier for the transit of arms to the Spanish Republic, unless the Italians ceased to send 'volunteers' to Spain and cooperate with Britain and France in the Non-Intervention Committee in progressing the 'British Plan' of the summer. Eden and his senior advisers, and even more so Chamberlain and the rest of the British Cabinet, were not prepared to go so far and in the face of opposition to such action by his own officials, including Léger and René Massigli, and also of prime minister Camille Chautemps, Delbos retreated.⁴⁷

In the event, Mussolini rejected the tripartite talks and the 'British Plan' became stalled in the Non-Intervention Committee and it remained more or less in this condition when Eden resigned in February 1938 and Delbos followed suit in March; at which point the new second short lived Blum Ministry reopened the French frontier for the transit of arms to the Spanish Republic, which remained open until the summer of 1938. In view of all the difficulties confronting the British and French governments with regard to the Spanish Civil War since its outbreak, the degree of cooperation between Delbos and Eden was quite remarkable. Moreover, in terms of their original fears and concerns in the summer of 1936 about a European war based on ideological divisions, Delbos and Eden had succeeded in their aim of containing the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, at a meeting of British and French ministers in London in late November 1937, Chautemps insisted that their two countries 'could congratulate themselves that the Spanish [non-intervention] policy had undoubtedly helped them to pass a very difficult year without a breach of the peace'.⁴⁸ An uneasy peace in Europe was maintained but ultimately at the price of Spanish democracy and strategic dangers for both countries as the shared experience in Spain of Germany and Italy gradually consolidated the Rome-Berlin Axis.

It is somewhat surprising that Britain should seek to appease Mussolini's Italy during most of Eden's tenure at the Foreign Office. Even Chamberlain was moved to remark in July 1937 that 'if only we could get on terms with the Germans I would not care a rap for Musso'.⁴⁹ Eden may have set out with some hopes that appeasing the Italian dictator would prove beneficial to British interests but the abortive Gentleman's Agreement of January 1937 soon disillusioned him. Delbos had absolutely no time for Mussolini. He told the American ambassador at Paris, William Bullitt, in August 1937 that while 'every effort should be made to reach conciliation with Germany' Italy 'should be treated with contempt and disdain as a relatively unimportant jackal'.⁵⁰ While they ended sanctions against Italy in July 1936, following Britain's lead, there is no doubt that Mussolini's continuing disregard of the Spanish Non-Intervention Agreement, despite Italy's adhesion in August 1936, made Delbos and Blum less and less inclined to pursue an Italian rapprochement. Delbos

⁴⁷ TNA (PRO), CAB23/89 CM 37(37), 13 Oct. 1937. Unpublished [Sir Alexander] Cadogan Diaries (located at the Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge), entries 22 and 28 Sept. 1937. Minute by Sir Orme Sargent, 12 Oct. 1937 and Phipps to Eden, 20 Oct. 1937, Phipps Papers (located at the Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge), PHPP 1/19. John Harvey (ed.), *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-1940* (London: Collins, 1970), diary entry, 5 Oct. 1937, pp. 49-50. Oliver Harvey was private secretary to Eden and his successor, Lord Halifax.

⁴⁸ Record of conversations between British and French Ministers, 29-30 Nov. 1937. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 354, p.614.

⁴⁹ Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 4 July 1937. Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1010.

⁵⁰ William Bullitt to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, 26 Aug. 1937. *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1937, vol. I, p.118.

shared Eden's grave concern at the growth of Italian influence in the Balearic Islands from the last months of 1936 onwards. Eden had presented a memorandum to his Cabinet colleagues in mid December 1936 drawing attention to the extent of Italian activities in the Balearics, notably on Majorca.⁵¹ The French were even more concerned because it was clearly understood that the establishment of permanent Italian air bases on the islands, particularly Majorca, would seriously threaten French lines of communication with their North African empire.⁵² In this connection, Eden and Vansittart returned from talks with Delbos and Chautemps at Geneva and Paris (20-21 September 1937), convinced that all classes of Frenchmen, including the General Staff, were united in holding that 'the Italians must be got out of Spain at once and especially out of the Balearic Islands'.⁵³ The Quai d'Orsay was apparently prepared to contemplate the occupation of Minorca as a *gage*.⁵⁴ To the surprise and dismay of Vansittart and Eden, the British Chiefs of Staff were less concerned about Italian activities in the Balearics, including their use of Majorca as an air base to attack the cities and towns of Republican Spain.⁵⁵

As part of their growing animosity towards Italy, Delbos and Blum took the decision in October 1936 not to replace the retiring French ambassador at Rome, Count Charles de Chambrun, with René Doynel de Saint-Quentin because Mussolini had decided that his credentials must be addressed to Victor Emmanuel III not only as 'King of Italy' but also as 'Emperor of Ethiopia' which would imply French recognition of the Italian annexation of Ethiopia. For the remainder of Delbos' tenure at the Quai d'Orsay France was represented at Rome by the chargé d'affaires, Jules Blondel.⁵⁶ The issue was symbolic of the poor relations which existed between Rome and Paris and those relations continued to deteriorate as Italy intervened further in Spain, did nothing about preventing the annexation of Austria and drew closer and closer to Hitler's Germany. When Mussolini sent Delbos a special message in January 1937 hinting at rapprochement Delbos backed Blum when he replied that the best way

⁵¹ Memorandum by Eden on Spain and the Balearic Islands, 14 Dec. 1936. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVII, no. 471, pp.677-84.

⁵² Young, *In Command of France*, pp.137-8. Young also stresses that Italian and German air bases on the Balearics and Canaries respectively would severely impair 'the ease with which Britain and France could coordinate the operations of the Mediterranean and Atlantic fleets'.

⁵³ Sir Orme Sargent, assistant under secretary at the Foreign Office, to Phipps, 15 Oct. 1937. Phipps Papers, PHPP II 2/1. See also Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p.218.

⁵⁴ Minute by Orme Sargent of his meeting with Roger Cambon, French chargé d'affaires at London, 12 Oct. 1937. Phipps Papers, PHPP I/19. According to Oliver Harvey, the 'idea of a temporary occupation of Minorca in conjunction with the French coupled with an offer of international neutralisation' appealed to Eden. Harvey (ed.), *Diplomatic Diaries*, diary entry, 15 Oct. 1937, p.51.

⁵⁵ In early October 1937 Vansittart commented on a report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee on Anglo-Italian Relations, 29 Sept. 1937 that: 'I have always regarded it as a minimum that we should get the Italians out of the Balearic Islands. The Chiefs of Staff dismiss the necessity. I stand corrected but unrepentant. It is the Chiefs of Staff who will one day be repentant if we don't... If we are ever engaged in a struggle for existence, it will almost certainly be on the same side as France. What weakens France therefore impairs our own chances of survival... If therefore France's position is endangered by our failure to get the Italians out of the Balearic Islands or the Spanish mainland, we stand to lose'. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 209, pp.350-1.

⁵⁶ Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp.154-5.

for Italy to improve Franco-Italian relations would be to honour the Non-Intervention Agreement.⁵⁷ The French government continued to oppose *de jure* recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia and Delbos' attitude in this matter hardened considerably during the summer of 1937.⁵⁸ The Nyon conference and its aftermath further highlighted his animosity towards Italy and it was hardly surprising that anti-French feeling should grow in Italy. The British ambassador at Rome, Lord Perth, was moved to observe in October 1937 that 'mutual distrust and dislike are an almost constant factor in Franco-Italian relations'.⁵⁹ When Delbos and Chautemps visited London at the end of November 1937 they showed, according to Eden, 'more signs of irritation' over Italy 'than on any other subject'.⁶⁰

Eden's perception of Mussolini's Italy was no less critical than Delbos'. At the beginning of the negotiations for what became the Gentlemen's Agreement between Britain and Italy Eden asked a pertinent question: 'Does anyone in the Foreign Office really believe that Italy's foreign policy will at any time be other than opportunist? Any agreement with Italy will be kept as long as it suits Italy. Surely nobody can now place any faith in her promise'. However, at this stage, the foreign secretary believed it was still worth pursuing an improvement in Anglo-Italian relations but he counselled against 'placing an exaggerated valuation on any such improvement if and when we get it'.⁶¹ This was wise advice and Italy's further intervention in Spain – in contravention of the Non-Intervention Agreement 15,000 Italian troops were sent to assist Franco in late December 1936 and early January 1937 and by the end of February there were some 50,000 in Spain⁶² – put the Gentleman's Agreement, signed on 2 January 1937, into perspective. In contrast to Italian perfidy, the French government, according to Eden, had 'behaved very well, and I have been repaid for keeping Delbos informed...by an excellent message of goodwill which Delbos gave the French Press'.⁶³

Henceforth, Eden demonstrated no particular hurry to improve Anglo-Italian relations to the chagrin of Chamberlain who within two months of becoming prime minister in May 1937 took the extraordinary step of writing to Mussolini without first consulting his foreign secretary and using his sister-in-law, Austen Chamberlain's widow, as an intermediary in Rome.⁶⁴ Unfortunately for Chamberlain, Italy's actions in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1937 and the resulting Nyon Conference set back his initiative and made starting conversations between London and Rome much more problematic for several months. By the autumn of 1937, Eden was openly

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.155-6.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*, p.214.

⁵⁹ Perth to Eden, 22 Oct. 1937. TNA (PRO), FO 371/21182, R7066/2143/22.

⁶⁰ TNA (PRO), CAB 23/90A CM 45(37), 1 Dec. 1937.

⁶¹ Minute by Eden, 5 Nov. 1936. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVII, no. 352, pp.513-14.

⁶² Stone, *Spain, Portugal and the Great Powers*, p.39.

⁶³ Avon Papers, diary entry, 4 Jan. 1937, AP20/1/1-17.

⁶⁴ Chamberlain to Mussolini, 27 July 1937. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 65, pp.119-20. The prime minister's letter was a response to a message from Mussolini, conveyed by the Italian ambassador at London, Dino Grandi, the same day. See DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 64, pp.118-19.

disagreeing with the prime minister and other senior colleagues, including his predecessor as foreign secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, who were prepared to turn a blind eye to Italy's activities in the Mediterranean and Spain, so anxious were they to get conversations started.⁶⁵ Eden was clearly bemused by this attitude. He told his private secretary, Oliver Harvey, that he believed Chamberlain '*au fond* had a certain sympathy for dictators whose efficiency appealed to him' and that the prime minister 'really believed it would be possible to get an agreement with Muss[olini] by running after him'.⁶⁶

Italy's adhesion to the Anti-Comintern Pact and her exit from the League of Nations in late 1937 reinforced Eden's scepticism. He continued to maintain his view of the limited value of an Anglo-Italian rapprochement into the New Year and it was only reinforced when Chamberlain finally lost patience in February 1938 and insisted on opening conversations with the Italians, accusing Eden and the Foreign Office along the way of missing chance after chance to secure an agreement with Italy. Eden believed that the timing was wrong and countered that the Italians had to make prior concessions as an act of good faith, such as the withdrawal of Italian 'volunteers' from Spain and clarifying their passive attitude with regard to events developing in Austria, before conceding conversations, which everyone involved knew would inevitably result in an agreement under which Britain would have to recognize the Italian annexation of Ethiopia. Chamberlain was not prepared to ask for prior concessions and wanted conversations to begin immediately. As a result, Eden resigned.⁶⁷

Delbos, as noted previously, was shocked by the foreign secretary's exit. While he did not wish to take the initiative for a rapprochement with Italy he did not oppose Chamberlain's efforts or those of Eden's successor, Lord Halifax. On 25 February 1938, five days after Eden's resignation, he told the Chamber of Deputies that he agreed with Chamberlain's approach but he also declared, echoing Eden, that a final liquidation of the Abyssinian question would be possible only if an end was put to the despatch of Italian men and arms to Spain and anti-French propaganda ceased.⁶⁸ The French foreign minister clearly had not altered his position which was in tune with Eden's thinking prior to his resignation. The congruence of Delbos' and Eden's views on Mussolini's Italy did not, of course, result in a convergence of French and British policy. France showed no inclination to follow the British lead after the Anglo-Italian Agreement was signed in April 1938. Indeed, when Alfred Duff Cooper, the British first lord of the admiralty, visited Paris during Easter he found great scepticism among French ministers as to the value of the agreement in view of Italy's past betrayal of agreements and allies. Edouard Daladier, who had just become prime minister, went so far as to argue that the British government had saved Mussolini from disaster following his passive response to the German annexation of Austria in March.⁶⁹ As predicted by Eden, the Anglo-Italian Agreement proved of little value to British

⁶⁵ See, for example, TNA (PRO), CAB 23/89 CM 37(37), 13 Oct. 1937.

⁶⁶ Harvey (ed.), *Diplomatic Diaries*, diary entry, 22 Sept. 1937, p.48.

⁶⁷ See Avon Papers, AP 20/1/18 diary entry, 17 Feb. 1938; Harvey (ed.), *Diplomatic Diaries*, diary entries, 17-20 Feb. 1938, pp.92-7; TNA (PRO), CAB 23/92 CM 6-7(38), 19-20 Feb. 1938.

⁶⁸ Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, p.158.

⁶⁹ Alfred Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London: Hart Davis, 1953), p.219.

interests. Italy's Pact of Steel with Germany of May 1939 meant far more to Mussolini than did the Anglo-Italian Agreement.

Both Delbos and Eden viewed the appeasement of Germany far more seriously than they did the appeasement of Italy. Chautemps told Eden at Geneva in January 1938 that while the one question mark with regard to the European situation generally was Mussolini, Germany was the real problem and he and Delbos both stressed that no effort 'should be spared to improve relations with Berlin'.⁷⁰ In their respective foreign policy statements on 23 June 1936 Delbos told the Chamber and Blum told the Senate that 'the *Rassemblement populaire* have always fought for a Franco-German entente'.⁷¹ Eden had been more than ready to make the concession of recognizing Hitler's 'illegal' rearmament and of permitting the remilitarization of the Rhineland prior to the Führer's decision to pre-empt the latter on 7 March 1936.⁷² From the inception of the Popular Front government, Delbos and Eden worked closely to persuade Germany and Italy to enter a five power pact (to also include Belgium) to replace the Rhineland pact of Locarno; unfortunately with no success.⁷³ At the same time, Blum and Delbos readily entered talks with the German economics minister, Hjalmar Schacht, in August 1936 and, assured that he was acting with Hitler's authority, conceded further talks on the subject of colonial restitution to the Third Reich provided colonial concessions were part of a wider European settlement.⁷⁴ Eden, who had publicly disclaimed in the House of Commons in late July 1936 any intention to discuss the colonial question, was not best pleased.⁷⁵ He told Blum on 20 September that Britain's position on colonial appeasement remained as stated in his July speech and he reiterated his belief to Delbos on 23 September that a five power conference was the most suitable instrument for achieving a European settlement.⁷⁶ Confronted with this British reluctance to disturb the diplomatic process surrounding the five power initiative and disturbed by increasing German intervention in Spain, Delbos and Blum decided not to pursue discussions on the Schacht initiative. Indeed, when he saw Eden in Paris on 9 October, Delbos concurred in his view that 'there were moments when to show a certain stiffness was the best way to promote agreement'.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Mr Edmond, Geneva, to the Foreign Office, 26 Jan. 1938. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 473, p. 819.

⁷¹ Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp. 159-60.

⁷² Anthony Peters, *Anthony Eden and the Foreign Office, 1931-1938* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986), pp. 173-7.

⁷³ See William Norton Medlicott, *Britain and Germany: The Search for Agreement, 1931-1937*, London: Athlone Press, 1969, pp. 25-32.

⁷⁴ André François-Poncet, French ambassador at Berlin, to Delbos, 24 August 1936. Meeting between Léon Blum and Hjalmar Schacht at the Hotel Matignon, 28 August 1936. DDF, 2nd series, vol. III, nos. 196, 213, pp. 275, 307-11.

⁷⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, HC, vol. 315, cc. 1131-2.

⁷⁶ Sir George Clerk, British ambassador at Paris, to the Foreign Office, 20 Sept. 1936. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVII, nos. 210, 211, pp. 286-90. Eden to Delbos, 23 Sept. 1936. Avon Papers, FO 954, FR/36/25.

⁷⁷ Minute by Eden, 10 Oct. 1936. Avon Papers FO 954 FR/36/34. See also Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp. 168-9.

The Foreign Office remained ambivalent about colonial appeasement but by February 1937, with discussions on the five power conference permanently stalled, Eden wished to pursue the alternative of negotiations for a general settlement based on the Schacht initiative. Moreover, he was anxious to forestall a French suggestion for a Franco-British-American initiative, which included colonial restitution, to meet Germany's economic difficulties.⁷⁸ For the next four months Eden and the Cabinet Foreign Policy Committee discussed at great length how they might appease Germany by means of colonial concessions.⁷⁹ Eventually, they concluded that colonial revision was possible provided Britain herself and her Dominions were not required to make any territorial sacrifices. They did not expect Belgium or Portugal to make any either, only France. Unsurprisingly, Delbos and Blum were less than keen to consider the cession of the French colonial mandates (Cameroons and Togoland) because, as Delbos surmised, it would 'raise a storm in French public opinion and cause an outburst against Great Britain'. He was also opposed to the transfer on strategic grounds as it would place 'French North Africa, from the air, between Germany and the Cameroons'. Delbos and Blum were only willing to consider the cession of the Cameroons and Togoland to Germany as part of a final general settlement, but they would only do so if the British made at least as great a territorial sacrifice.⁸⁰ As this was not possible the prospects for colonial appeasement on the basis of the Schacht initiative were eventually extinguished.

None the less, colonial restitution remained the best means of reaching a general settlement with Germany, particularly after Lord Halifax's visit to Berlin in November 1937. When Delbos and Chautemps met Eden and Chamberlain in London at the end of the month it was clear that the British ministers saw colonies as the way forward. Eden and Chamberlain agreed with Delbos that no negotiations on colonies would take place before a discussion of the other elements of a general settlement – disarmament, Germany's return to the League of Nations and the conclusion of a western pact. Directly following the conversations it was announced publicly for the first time that the British and French governments were prepared to study the colonial question.⁸¹

By the end of 1937, in contrast to Delbos and the Quai d'Orsay, Eden and his officials had developed a sense of urgency. The foreign secretary stressed to the Foreign Policy Committee on 1 January 1938 that a long delay should be avoided 'to prevent the hopes created by the recent conversations from evaporating'.⁸²

⁷⁸ Record by Orme Sargent of a Meeting on 18 Jan. 1937. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVIII, no. 86, pp. 112-14. See also Andrew Crozier, 'Prelude to Munich: British Foreign Policy and Germany, 1935-1938', *European Studies Review*, 6/3 (1976), p. 366.

⁷⁹ See the 7th, 8th, 10th and 11th meetings of the Foreign Policy Committee, 18 March 1937, 6 April 1937, 10 May 1937, 19 May 1937. TNA (PRO), CAB 27/622.

⁸⁰ Phipps to Eden, 4 May 1937. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XVIII, no. 462, pp. 701-3. See also Phipps to Orme Sargent, 6 May 1937. TNA (PRO), FO 800/274.

⁸¹ 'Visit of the French Ministers to London, 29-30 Nov. 1937: Memorandum by Eden', 6 Dec. 1937. TNA (PRO), CAB 27/626 FP (36) 40. DDF, 2nd series, vol. VII, nos. 287, 291, 297, pp. 518-45, 554, 573-4. See also Andrew Crozier, 'Imperial Decline and the Colonial Question in Anglo-German Relations, 1919-1939', *European Studies Review*, 11/2 (1981), pp. 231-2.

⁸² 'The Next Steps towards a General Settlement with Germany: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 1 Jan. 1938. TNA (PRO), CAB 27/626 FP (36) 41.

Chamberlain was in complete agreement with Eden and both recognized the importance of connecting colonial revision to general appeasement in Europe. They also agreed that exploratory talks with the German government should precede concrete proposals. Eden and the Foreign Office prepared instructions for the British ambassador at Berlin, Sir Nevile Henderson.⁸³ Delbos was informed on 17 February of the British intention to begin exploratory talks with Hitler and Eden reassured him that no proposals would be put forward which did not involve an equivalent contribution from Britain to any made by the French. In view of developing crisis in Austria, Delbos was unimpressed and warned that by merely taking soundings on the colonial question Germany would be given the impression that 'Great Britain and France were unduly weak and unduly impressed by German violence'.⁸⁴ Three days later, Eden resigned as foreign secretary and when Henderson saw Hitler two weeks after on 3 March 1938 the Führer explicitly expressed his disinterest in colonial appeasement in the short term.⁸⁵ Hitler's attitude came as no surprise to Delbos who by the end of 1937, unlike Eden, had reached the conclusion that Germany had no intention of agreeing to a general settlement. He had been helped in reaching this conclusion by a conversation he had had with the German foreign minister, Constantin von Neurath, while travelling through Berlin by train as part of his eastern tour. Delbos asked a pertinent question. Why did Germany always seem to resent any suggestion of a general settlement? Neurath's reply that 'the right method was to settle matters bit by bit' confirmed the French foreign minister in his belief that a general settlement with Germany was unattainable. As a result, he also concluded that faced with the threat of Germany's increasing power it was essential for France to revitalize its security system in eastern Europe.⁸⁶ The annexation of Austria just days before Delbos' own resignation and the subsequent crises over Czechoslovakia made that task virtually impossible.

The Anglo-French search for a general European settlement with Germany was, of course, doomed to fail because of Hitler's hegemonic ambitions. As Delbos recognized, there was a risk in entering conversations with Hitler without close cooperation between London and Paris and he warned Phipps in late April 1937 that even with such cooperation 'any far reaching tête-à-tête with Berlin would be certainly dangerous and might be fatal'.⁸⁷ In view of the growing fascist challenge, it

⁸³ TNA (PRO), CAB 27/623 FP (36) 21st meeting, 24 Jan. 1938 and 22nd meeting, 3 Feb. 1938. CAB 23/92 CM 4 (38), 9 Feb. 1938. Eden to Henderson, 12 Feb. 1938. DBFP 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 512, pp. 890-2.

⁸⁴ Eden to Phipps, 14 Feb. 1938 and Phipps to Eden, 17 Feb. 1938. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, nos. 515, 541, pp. 894, 914-15.

⁸⁵ Joachim von Ribbentrop, German foreign minister, to Nevile Henderson, 4 March 1938. DGFP, series D, vol. I, no. 138, pp. 240-9.

⁸⁶ Phipps to Eden, 20 December 1937. Phipps Papers, PHPP 1/19. See also Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp. 141-2. According to Georges Bonnet, writing in retrospect, Delbos, contrary to his intentions, was not prepared to make any firm commitments to Czechoslovakia during his last weeks as foreign minister. Indeed, following a hearing of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee of 2 March 1938, Delbos refused to include in his communiqué a reaffirmation that France would be loyal to its commitments. See Georges Bonnet, *Quai D'Orsay* (Isle of Man: Times Press, 1965), p. 159. See also Girault and Frank, *Turbulente Europe II*, p. 231.

⁸⁷ Phipps to Eden, 2 May 1937. Phipps Papers, PHPP 1/19.

was fortunate that there was much improvement in Anglo-French relations during the Delbos-Eden period despite British concerns about domestic developments within France, the weakness of the French economy, as shown by the flight of capital and the devaluation of the franc, and the retardation of French rearmament.⁸⁸ In July 1937, for example, Eden was moved to declare in the House of Commons that ‘one of the facts which have enabled us to pass through the last twelve months without the major disaster of a European War has been the steadily growing confidence and intimacy of the relations between our two countries’.⁸⁹ Yet, there remained no prospect of the Anglo-French entente becoming a fully developed alliance. The British defence review completed during the last three months of 1937 placed the continental commitment last in order of priority, well behind the defence of the United Kingdom, defence of trade routes and imperial lines of communication and defence of the British empire. While Delbos would not have disputed these priorities, he still expected British support for French security. In December 1936 in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies he had declared that France would come to the assistance of Britain and Belgium if they were the victims of unprovoked aggression.⁹⁰ But there was an expectation of reciprocity so that in January 1937 at Geneva he told Eden that what France looked for from Great Britain, apart from the Navy, was a large and imposing air force as a deterrent and that as far as the army was concerned the contribution that would be most useful would be a ‘small but powerful and highly mechanised force, even if there were only two divisions of it’. What was required was ‘concentrated striking power rather than mass’.⁹¹ For his part, Eden agreed with Vansittart in December 1937 that while the air defence of the United Kingdom was the first priority, if France (and the Low Countries) were overrun Britain’s position would be impossible ‘no matter how densely we had packed this country with anti-aircraft guns and no matter how many Fighter Squadrons we had constructed’.⁹² The prospects of a British expeditionary force, no matter how small, were extremely unlikely during the period that Eden and Delbos remained at their posts. By the time the British alliance was secured by France in February-March 1939 with its promise of an expeditionary force, Eden and Delbos no longer wielded influence on the respective policies of their governments.

⁸⁸ See Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France, 1936-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) pp.69-76.

⁸⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5th series, HC, vol. 326, c.1805.

⁹⁰ Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives*, p.49.

⁹¹ Eden to the Foreign Office, 22 Jan. 1937. Avon Papers, FO 954 FR/37/3. See also Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives*, p.58.

⁹² Vansittart to Eden, 17 Dec. 1937. Avon Papers, FO 954 FP/37/20.