

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY SINCE THE WAR (II)

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If criticism, like charity, begins at home, both virtues are probably served best by examining not the manifest faults, but the hidden ones. If Britain's official position to-day is that a lead was given to the world and not followed, and that rearmament is a justified and overdue result, it is important to be sure whether or not such is the historical truth. If it is, then the new British policy of 1939 can command the resolute and unreserved support of everyone except a complete pacifist. But if it is not, then the new policy is unsound for lack of a moral certitude, and has none of the easy convenience of unavailability. And the matter can only be clarified by examining British policy in two ways—our record at key-points, and our greatest post-war achievements as judged by ourselves.

The first key-point occurred very early: in 1919. During the Peace Conference, Britain and the United States had agreed jointly (on June 28th) to strengthen the League system by guaranteeing the territorial integrity of France, backed by force. When the United States Government rejected the Covenant and withdrew from the guarantee, the British Government withdrew also, feeling unable to guarantee the frontiers of France single-handed. But, six years later, we did give precisely such a guarantee, in the Treaty of Locarno. And there is real tragedy in the sequence of events. For, in virtue of the principle that a guarantor can influence the party guaranteed, we have been able since Locarno to influence and to moderate French policy. Had we given the guarantee in 1919 we should have had that power from the start. That means that, as a guarantor of France in 1923, calling to some extent the tune, we could have prevented the disastrous invasion of the Ruhr (at which, in point of fact, we protested with complete futi-

lity). The value of the British guarantee would have been a good price for French forbearance. Had that happened, then without the occupation of the Ruhr and the passive resistance with which the German people met it, there would probably have been no such collapse of German economy as occurred in 1924—and, but for that collapse, the whole basis of helplessness and bitter resentment on which the Nazi party thrived might have been absent. When the harm had been done, we gave the guarantee. By then, much of the virtue had gone out of it. Nor is this argument vitiated by the fact that Italy also furnished a guarantee; for Great Britain would have had to do so in any case, single-handed if necessary.

The second key-point occurred in 1924, with the negotiation of the Geneva Protocol by the French and British Labour Governments. The theoretical merits of the Protocol were attractive. It ruled out the right of private war altogether. Under the Covenant there had been three sets of circumstances in which a Government had the right to declare war to settle a dispute. This, the famous 'Gap in the Covenant,' the Protocol now closed. The means chosen was altogether new in international intercourse: compulsory arbitration. In the past there had been obligatory arbitration, but never compulsory. The procedure now adopted was to declare that for the future *all* disputes, without any exception whatever, must be settled by arbitration or by conciliation. There would thus be an "automatic test" of aggression; an aggressor was that country which refused to arbitrate; and against such aggressor the full force of Sanctions would be put into effect.

Such was the Geneva Protocol. The incoming Conservative Government in England rejected it. At the time a cry was raised in England that the Protocol would put the British Navy at the disposal of the League. This was one of the grounds for the rejection. The other ground was that the Protocol would pledge the country to 'definite action in indefinite circumstances,' and that action by the

Navy might fall foul of the United States' insistence on the freedom of the seas. But neither of these arguments was coherent. As to the first, the British Navy was already at the disposal of the League, by the obligations of the Covenant. As to the second, hypothetical commitments and the danger from the United States, the Protocol was to come into force only after the holding of a Disarmament Conference at which the United States were represented; while the commitments under the Covenant were no less 'definite in indefinite circumstances' than those of the Protocol. In short, the Protocol stood or fell with the Covenant. To reject the one and maintain the other, on one and the same argument, was illogical and misleading. Moreover, the argument on commitments in indefinite circumstances reflected little faith in the rule of law to which the country was pledged. Much of the penal legislation on the English Statute Book might be described in just those terms—as definite commitments in indefinite circumstances. But to uphold those laws, and the sanctity of Law on which alone they rest, the country has in the past been ready to accept even a Sidney Street. The contrast is indeed devastating for the internationalist; the rule of International Law, fettered by a rampant doctrine of full national sovereignty, is a mere aspiration. But that only strengthens the conclusion that the aspiration should have been either brought nearer (by increasing the tendency towards international federation), or abandoned. The British rejection did neither.

Accordingly, since the Covenant was vague, and since (as Lord Grey declared), 'We cannot simply reject the Protocol and do nothing else,' Great Britain gave instead the Locarno guarantee. And here a further new element was introduced. The Locarno Treaties became the model for many later agreements, all on the new principle of 'regional pacts'; a principle whereby, in each of the world's danger spots, the countries in the immediate neighbourhood guaranteed the dangerous frontiers. In this case the

frontier was the Rhine, and the guarantee, against French and German violation impartially, was given by Great Britain and Italy. This treaty has always been deemed the greatest achievements of British statesmanship since the War.

But it is open to two very damaging criticisms, one as to its head and the other as to its heart. In the first place, the wording was slipshod. Article IV, concerning the guarantee against aggression, proclaims that 'each of the other contracting parties hereby undertakes to come immediately to the help of the party against whom such a violation or breach has been directed, as soon as *the said Power* has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression.' But neither the French nor the English text makes clear whether 'the said Power' is the attacked State or the guarantor. Here, then, in a vital point, is that imprecision which has ever been the curse of diplomacy. Cynics pointed out, moreover, that the vagueness here left a convenient loophole for the guarantor Powers to evade their obligations, should they see fit, in the 'indefinite circumstances' of a future difficulty.

The other objection to the Locarno Treaties concerns their very principle, regional pacts. If the *general* commitments under the Covenant were still entirely accepted, was there the necessity for regional commitments? If, that is, the British obligation to defend *all* the frontiers of France (under Article X of the Covenant) were still accepted as staunchly as ever, why stipulate now a particular obligation for the Rhine frontier? The new commitment was certainly 'within the framework of the Covenant,' and the Locarno Treaties were 'registered at Geneva'; but the stressing of one obligation cast doubt on the others. So much so, that Great Britain later saw fit to re-affirm the *Locarno* obligation. And all this quite apart from the fact that, when the *casus foederis* did arise, with the German occupation of the Rhineland, the Locarno Treaty might

never have existed. This keystone of Western security, then, suffered from an imprecision and a doubtful regionalism that made it fundamentally a reactionary step.

The peak of all, the Kellogg Pact of 1928, is, so far as Great Britain is concerned, equally vulnerable. The essence of the Pact was admirable: a renunciation by all signatories of 'war as an instrument of national policy,' and a warning, to any Power that should go to war, against counting on the neutrality of the others. How far this, with its mere hint of collective action, was in harmony with the cast-iron system of Sanctions under the Covenant, is not important here. What matters is the reservation contained in the British reply to Mr. Kellogg accepting the Pact. The British note of May 19th (para. 10) contained this passage: 'I should remind Your Excellency that there are certain regions of the world the welfare and integrity of which constitute a special and vital interest for our peace and safety. His Majesty's Government have been at pains to make it clear in the past that interference with these regions cannot be suffered . . . His Majesty's Government accept the new treaty upon the distinct understanding that it does not prejudice their freedom of action in this respect' The point of this reservation was, obviously, Egypt: a territory outside the Empire but on a British lifeline. But the note did not specify Egypt, nor anywhere else. Here again was that lamentable imprecision that prompted friends to doubt and foes to scoff: the possible loophole, not (this time) to forswear pledged help, but to take military or naval action anywhere in the world and still keep the letter of the Paris Pact. The fact that other Powers made reservations is immaterial, and does not mitigate the charge. In matters touching the future of international goodwill the possible loopholes of others are to be stopped up rather than (however unwittingly) imitated.

The same danger, of lowering the prestige of international morality, is to be seen in the highly controversial

episode of the British War Debt to the United States in 1932. The total and the payments of this debt had been agreed upon in 1923 as a private transaction between the British and the American Governments, irrespective of Inter-Allied debts in Europe. When the half-yearly instalment fell due in November-December 1932, the British Government asked for a suspension until the end of the discussions on European debts that were in progress at the Lausanne Conference. The United States replied that the British debt was in no way dependent upon European debts, and that no factors had arisen in Anglo-American relations to change the existing situation. Loyal payment on December 15th would, therefore, give increased confidence of a 'satisfactory approach to the whole question.' The British reply to this amplified the original note, and the payment made on December 15th was declared to be 'not a resumption of the annual payments.' This was indeed the last full instalment paid. When the next one fell due, in June 1933, the British note said that 'the payment of a further instalment of the debt at this juncture would inevitably be judged to mean that no progress whatever had been made towards a settlement [of *all* debts], and would therefore deal a damaging blow at the confidence of the delegates.' To this the United States replied that 'debts should be considered on their merits, and separate from other international economic questions.' And there the matter rests. Controversy has raged over it. Defenders of the British action have stressed an inequity in paying our creditors when our own debtors had defaulted or been let off. They have declared also that in the economic blizzard of 1932 it was impossible to pay. But the default was not based on inability to pay; and the debt had not been settled upon with reference to any other debt or to any other Power's generosity. On these terms, debt defaulters inside any country are subjected to the full rigour of the law. To judge otherwise in international private debts is to be guilty of applying a double moral standard: