
URL: http://tiny.cc/AR784

Review by Peter Neville, Westminster University

No-one knows more about British diplomacy in the twentieth century than Zara Steiner. Nor indeed about the origins and consequences of the two world wars. This emerges from her two magisterial volumes, The Lights that Failed (2005), and The Triumph of the Dark (2011). In addition, Steiner has written a multitude of articles, of which this is the latest. It combines both strength in analysis of the roles and attitudes of individual British diplomats and officials and usage of a very important documentary source hitherto undiscovered in Foreign Office archives.

The men concerned are Sir Robert Vansittart, who was Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office from 1930 to 1937, Sir Eric Phipps, his brother-in-law, who was ambassador in Berlin from 1933 to 1937, and Sir Owen O’Malley, sometime ambassador to the wartime Polish government in exile, and ambassador to Portugal.

The last named is less well-known to international historians, but nonetheless is a figure of some stature, who, while serving in the Central Department, belonged to the group of officials in the F.O. which gave enthusiastic support to the appeasement of Nazi Germany. In O’Malley’s case, this enthusiasm caused him to submit a seventeen page memorandum in 1933 to Vansittart, asking that Phipps, the incoming Berlin ambassador to Berlin, who would replace Sir Horace Rumbold, should be issued specific instructions about how to conduct diplomacy in Berlin. In the event, Vansittart refused to pass on his memorandum to the Secretary of State Sir John Simon.

A reading of the memorandum explains why. As even the Germans conceded, Sir Robert was not the dyed in the wool anti-Teuton of legend, at least until the latter stages of World War Two, when he wrote his anti-

---

German polemic 'Black Record' (1941). As permanent Under-Secretary indeed, Vansittart contested his image of being anti-German, and there is evidence of this in his marginal comments (sometimes acerbic), on O’Malley’s memorandum. O’Malley, like many Foreign Office officials, thought the 1919 Versailles Treaty “a dictated treaty and a penal treaty” (566) which was in urgent need of revision. In his marginal comment Vansittart wrote “That has also long been my view,” but he also pointed out that “Germany has now put the clock back” (567).

Vansittart was accused, not always fairly, of being too pro-French. O’Malley certainly appears, like some other officials, to have been overly critical of France, which is accused of seeking the ‘perpetuation’ of Versailles. His memorandum is structured around numerous numbered points, which focus on Britain’s choice in having a closer relationship with France, which would effectively coerce Germany into obedience, or in extremis “virtually acquiescence in German rearmament.” In this instance, Vansittart slapped him down, writing that “No British government will do this” (569). O’Malley then offered other options such as a defensive Franco-German alliance, or a European Congress to revise the 1919 settlement. It is doubtful whether Phipps, to whom O’Malley sent his memorandum in the first instance, would have been especially impressed by such kite flying. While in Berlin, he was to be celebrated for his caustic anti-Nazi remarks.

This internal Foreign Office debate goes on for seventeen pages, with the Permanent Under-Secretary’s doubts about O’Malley’s proposal becoming more and more evident. It mirrors, in microcosm, the wider debate between officials in London and diplomats abroad, over appeasement in the 1930s. Thus, the rather unusual device of incorporating a lengthy memorandum into Steiner’s accompanying commentary works very well in this article. She is not, like this reviewer, a revisionist where appeasement is concerned, but her judgements in the article are never less than fair. We are warned, quite rightly, of the difficulty of drawing “sharp lines between those arguing for and against an agreement with Hitler to contain his territorial ambitions” (582).

This point is underlined when one looks at the careers of O’Malley and Vansittart. The first man, an avowed supporter of appeasement, wanted the Suez Canal to be closed in 1935, as a response to Italian leader Benito Mussolini’s aggression in Abyssinia. Vansittart, by contrast, as the author of the notorious Hoare-Laval pact, wanted to buy Mussolini off. The same point could be made about politicians like Leo Amery, who favored appeasement of Italy, or even Winston Churchill, an early admirer of the Duce, but not of Nazi Germany. O’Malley was more of a natural defender of autocracy though, than Vansittart. He managed to get on well with Admiral Miklos Horthy, as minister in Budapest between 1938 and 1941, and also with António de Oliveira Salazar. This tendency to provide excuses for authoritarian rulers shows up strongly in O’Malley’s autobiography The Phantom Caravan (1954)³, and Zara Steiner could perhaps have made more of this tendency in her fascinating, and well-informed analysis.

This being said, it is remarkable how the historiography of appeasement has moved on from the dogmatism of anti-appeasement as shown in Gilbert and Gott’s The Appeasers (1963), and the audacious heresy of A.J.P.

---


Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961), which shocked the historical establishment. The phenomenon of appeasement is now recognised to have been far more heavily nuanced than was recognised in these confrontational studies. This is something Zara Steiner fully recognises, in this valuable contribution to the historiography of the subject. Historians, she tells us, need “to learn to appreciate the much more ragged contours of foreign policy decision-making in the 1930s” (583). The perils of hindsight are laid bare which “explain many of the errors and misjudgements that some historians… have so strongly denounced” (583). Few would disagree.


© 2018 The Authors | Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License

---