The road to 1945 3

In their satirical survey of English history, *1066 and All That*, Walter Sellar and Robert Yeatman explained that since the US was '100% victorious' in the First World War, it was now 'clearly top nation, and History came to a .' (Sellar and Yeatman, 1930, 113–15). The authors meant that a particular *kind* of history had ended, i.e. the subject as it had been taught in British schools and universities for many decades. 'History', in this sense, had presented the British experience as one in which the hero (the British, but especially the *English* nation) was initially prey to other imperial forces, like the Romans and the Normans, but ended up being so potent that it was able to acquire an Empire of its own without really wanting one.

When *1066 and All That* was published, in 1930, Britons scarcely needed reminding of America's preponderant position in world affairs; it was already clear that they would be among the worst sufferers from the worldwide economic depression triggered by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. To acute observers, indeed, the brutal verdict of Sellar and Yeatman could only be faulted because their fatal full-stop was inserted too late. Britain had ceased to be 'top nation' long before its involvement in the First World War. But for most Britons the message was very slow to sink in. Even in 1945, after another world war in which the US had been '100% victorious', there were plenty of people who clung on to the old story: indeed, the idea that Britain was (or ought to be) 'top nation' could still find supporters in the highest government circles.

Britain's situation in 1914

If, as the historian JR Seeley put it, the British 'seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind', the nineteenth

century saw their most spectacular displays of amnesia. It is estimated that Britain's Empire expanded by 10 million square miles between 1815 and 1914, and around 400 million people came under British rule of one form or another. Thanks partly to Seeley's writings – notably, *The Expansion of England* (1883) – the British elite gradually became conscious of the potential advantages which could arise from a more coherent approach to their sprawling Empire. Thus in Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee year of 1887 an Imperial Institute was established to promote research which might benefit the Empire. Ten years later Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was a celebration of Empire, reflecting the fact that in the preceding quarter-century Britain had taken control of Zanzibar, Fiji, Cyprus, Bechuanaland, Somaliland, Kenya, the New Hebrides, Rhodesia and Uganda. In 1902 AC Benson celebrated the nation's status by setting words to Edward Elgar's stirring march *Pomp and Circumstance No 1*. In the year that Britain's war against the Boer Republics of South Africa reached a conclusion, which ultimately led to the creation of a self-governing Union of South Africa within the Empire, Benson seemed on safe ground when he wrote of Britain as a 'Land of Hope and Glory' which God had made 'mighty' and intended to make 'mightier yet', so that its boundaries would be stretched 'wider still and wider'.

Timeline of domestic political developments

1900 General election: Conservative victory with overall majority of 135
1906 General election: Liberal victory with overall majority of 129
1910 General elections (January and December): Liberals command overall majorities thanks to support from Irish Nationalists (Conservatives win the greatest number of votes in both contests)
1915 Formation of wartime coalition government, including Liberal, Conservative and Labour ministers, with the Liberal HH Asquith as Prime Minister
1916 Resignation of Asquith; replaced by fellow Liberal David Lloyd George
1918 Overwhelming electoral victory for coalition, led by Lloyd George but dominated by Conservative MPs
1922 Deposition of Lloyd George as Prime Minister; succeeded by Conservative Andrew Bonar Law until 1923, then Stanley Baldwin
1923 Inconclusive general election: Ramsay Macdonald becomes first Labour Prime Minister, dependent upon Liberal support
1924 General election: Conservative victory with overall majority of 210; Baldwin back as Prime Minister
1929 General election: inconclusive verdict; Labour's Ramsay Macdonald forms a second minority administration

1931 Labour government resigns amid global economic crisis; formation of National Government, with Macdonald as Prime Minister but dependent on Conservatives
1935 Re-election of National Government, now headed by Stanley Baldwin, with overwhelming majority dominated by Conservatives
1937 Baldwin retires; replaced by Neville Chamberlain
1940 Resignation of Chamberlain; replaced by Winston Churchill, heading a new coalition government

While Seeley wrote of absent-mindedness, and Benson (as befitted the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury) preferred to perceive the hand of God, it would be more realistic to attribute the creation of Britain's Empire to a mixture of geographical good fortune, the inventiveness of its people and an ability to exploit opportunities which, for various reasons, other nations neglected. As an island nation, Britain had a long history of maritime exploration, and (unlike other sea-faring states) despite being close to the European mainland it was separated from it by sea. In addition to this obstacle to annexation by any European power, it lacked any of the attractions which had made a country like Italy such an alluring target for military adventurers. But while its climate was indifferent at best, it did enjoy significant mineral wealth (especially coal), and, despite occasional outbursts of xenophobia and religious intolerance, its political culture was sufficiently moderate to attract talented individuals who had fled from more repressive states.

With its fortunes founded on international trade rather than the vagaries of overseas acquisitions, Britain was above all a pioneer of financial institutions; the Bank of England was established in 1694. Thanks to its privileged position, Britain was able to subsidise the war efforts of other nations as well as sending its sons to fight on its own behalf. London's Great Exhibition of 1851 had reflected supreme national self-confidence; other nations were welcome to emulate British inventiveness, but by implication they were destined to fail if they tried. While economic statistics – even those of contemporary collation – are always suspect, it has been estimated that in 1880 the UK accounted for nearly 23 per cent of the world's output of manufactured goods; its nearest competitors (the US, with 14.7 per cent, and Germany, with 8.5 per cent) were agreeably distant.

By 1900, however, there had been a dramatic transformation. In terms of manufactured goods, the US had overtaken Britain, producing 23.6 per cent of the world's output compared to 18.5 per cent, while Germany (13.2 per cent) seemed to be gaining fast. Even allowing for a generous margin of error, these figures conveyed an ominous message for the world's 'top nation'. By the outbreak of war in 1914 Britain, having produced far more steel than the US and Germany combined in 1871, was trailing badly behind both countries in

this respect. In the 1870s the US had provided a major market for British steel; by the beginning of the twentieth century it was selling steel to Britain. There were obvious explanations for these statistical reversals; once the US had begun to exploit its massive natural resources, and Germany had established political unity (in 1871), these two nations were bound to rival Britain's economic pre-eminence.

In part, the new prosperity of German and US manufacturing arose from the policy of economic protection pursued by both countries, ensuring that their domestic industries could prosper behind tariff barriers. On the face of it, Britain could have taken a similar course. Indeed, it could be argued that its only chance of fending off economic competition from its emerging rivals was to create a protected zone of free trade within its extensive Empire. Those who embraced this vision – notably, Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914), a dynamic Liberal politician who subsequently defected to the Conservatives and exercised a strong influence over imperial policy as Colonial Secretary (1895–1903) – identified numerous benefits for Britain, since a system of 'imperial preference' promised to forge the Empire into a source of military strength as well as ensuring beneficial terms of trade for the metropolis (Britain would supply the Empire with high-value manufactured goods in return for primary produce).

However, this approach ran counter to the liberal economic doctrine which exerted considerable influence over British economic debates in the second half of the nineteenth century. From this perspective, the Empire was an unnecessary and costly encumbrance – a distraction from the peaceful promotion of prosperity, which was the proper business of humankind. For the Liberal orator John Bright (1811–89), 'there is no permanent greatness to a nation except it be based upon morality'; on this account, the gratitude of satisfied customers was worth far more than the enforced obedience of any number of captive peoples (Porter, 2008, 14). Far from being a reason for regret, the loss of Britain's manufacturing pre-eminence merely reflected the inexorable operation of market forces. The best response was for the country to exploit its position at the hub of world trade, providing various financial services which, although less 'visible' than manufactured goods, were no less profitable. In the years before the First World War there was a noticeable upsurge in the level of British overseas investment, suggesting (in keeping with liberal economic assumptions) that, rather than trying to 'beggar its neighbours', the country should promote productivity in other countries in order to advance the cause of general prosperity and peace.

On paper, the debate between British imperialists and free-trade liberals seemed to be polarised, with no room for compromise. Apart from their disagreement about the best guarantee of economic prosperity, the rival camps were at odds over the true nature of international power. Believing that conflict between nations was inevitable, imperialists tended to regard any kind of overseas expansion as a good thing. Even if new colonies brought neither obvious

strategic advantage nor the potential for economic exploitation, they were worth having as expressions of Britain's military prowess. For their part, liberals regarded armed conflict as deeply immoral and looked forward to a time when rational individuals from every land could exchange goods and services without fearing physical violence or having to pay taxes to finance wars which (by their very nature) arose from irrational impulses.

Thankfully, though, a kind of middle way between these positions was available – that the British could accept an imperial role as a kind of divinely ordained obligation while remaining true to the principle of free trade. This compromise proved persuasive for many aspiring British politicians of the late nineteenth century – notably, Winston Churchill (1874–1965) – not least because of its electoral potency. The position allowed the British to regard themselves as reluctant imperialists, who were prepared to relinquish direct control over any part of the Empire which showed itself capable of self-government. Most liberals could be satisfied with this view, on the assumption that the process of liberation for the colonies would not be protracted; once the period of tutelage had ended, the nations would trade freely with each other to mutual advantage. For their part, imperialists could be reconciled in the expectation that, in the majority of cases, decolonisation would be subjected to indefinite delay. The compromise resulted in policy decisions which varied according to the ethnic balance of power within the colonies in question; thus a considerable degree of self-government had been granted to Canada in the 1840s, and similar arrangements were later made in respect of Australia, New Zealand and (after the Boer War) South Africa, making up what came to be known as the White Dominions. This idea – that Britain would conquer people with a view to making them fit for liberation at an unspecified later date – inspired a multitude of adventurers, Christian missionaries, slave-emancipators and people who were a mix of all three. Where their explorations led, annexation of territory to the British Empire was rarely very far behind.

Thanks to the racial stereotyping of the time, the expansion of British territory in Africa was regarded as far less problematic than the country's imperialist activities in India. The latter was probably the most 'absent minded' of all Britain's imperial ventures, starting as a private, profit-seeking venture under the voracious East India Company until the British state took on its responsibilities in 1858. However British imperial expansion was rationalised, its emotional appeal was obvious. India evoked the most overt displays of imperialistic ritual and sentiment after 1876, when Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. However, the British 'Raj' was always something of a conjuring trick, almost entirely dependent on the ability of a small contingent of British-born administrators and soldiers to retain the goodwill of the Crown's new subjects. Once the British had started playing their trick, they quickly found that it could not be made to look remotely convincing unless they took serious steps to convince the

audience that they were in earnest. Thus, for example, in the year before he flattered Victoria with a new imperial title, Benjamin Disraeli had arranged the investment of £4 million in a bloc of shares which gave Britain a significant (though not a controlling) interest in the new Suez Canal. This waterway provided a much more rapid route between Britain and India. Even before the East India Company had ceased trading, British interests in Asia had helped to inspire what must otherwise seem to be one of the nation's most incomprehensible conflicts, the Crimean War (1853–6). As Sellar and Yeatman put it in the hope of raising a laugh among the initiated, one of the primary causes of this war was that 'Russia was too big and was pointing in the direction of India' (Sellar and Yeatman, 1930, 102).

The one factor which united all three possible policies – complete free trade, some form of economic union within the Empire and the Churchilian 'third way' – was the importance of avoiding serious friction (let alone conflict) with any state or combination of states which might disrupt trade or endanger any important part of the Empire. This perspective depended heavily on British diplomacy and entailed that the country throw its weight behind amicable resolutions of global problems without committing itself to any new treaty obligations – an approach enunciated by the Foreign Secretary Lord Derby in 1866 and which came to be known as 'splendid isolation' (although it could also be called 'appeasement' and linked to the fear that the decision to incorporate India within the British Empire meant that the country's overseas commitments had begun to overstretch its resources (Kennedy, 1981)).

The Boer War (1899–1902) confirmed the impression of overstretch. Despite considerable military support from Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the British only repelled an attack from independent South African republics after a prolonged and bitter conflict. In the face of the Boers' effective guerilla tactics, a nation already prone to priding itself on the moral rectitude of its foreign policy had resorted to a system of 'concentration camps', in which more than 25,000 women and children died from malnutrition and disease. Before the end of the war the British government had descended from its isolationist pedestal and accepted the need for allies, negotiating a defensive alliance with Japan. The signatories of the treaty agreed that they would remain neutral if either party became embroiled in a war with another state; either Britain or Japan would come to the other's assistance if it became involved in a conflict with more than one other state. From Britain's point of view, the treaty provided psychological insurance against Russia, which, despite the Crimean War, continued to be 'pointing in the direction of India' and was progressing swiftly with a railway-building programme, which indicated a desire to do more than just 'point'. In the short term, at least, the arrangement worked to the benefit of Japan, which after provocative Russian moves in Manchuria opened hostilities in 1904 and scored decisive victories on land and at sea.

At least Britain still remained free from diplomatic entanglements with other European powers. But the Boer War had shown that the country's isolation in this respect was something less than 'splendid'. Britain and France had been allies against Russia during the Crimean War, but this rare coincidence of interests did not foreshadow a sudden end to their traditional hostility. In 1898, indeed, a small French expedition in Sudan was greeted by more considerable British forces at the village of Fashoda (now Kodak). French *amour propre* had been slighted by Britain's dominance of Egypt since 1882, and the unsuccessful Fashoda intrusion was intended to disrupt the old enemy's conquest of Sudan in a way which might lead to some territorial compensation. The British government's new sense of vulnerability inspired a wider-ranging settlement of colonial disputes with France, known as the Entente Cordiale. In 1907 a similar agreement was negotiated with Russia, mainly in respect of differences over colonial policy in the Middle East.

The unsettling implications of the Boer War meant that by 1907 Britain had 'appeased' three of the world's most powerful states. There was, though, unfinished business concerning relations with Germany and the US. With regard to the latter, Britain's policy of 'appeasement' was particularly appropriate, since the formerly dominant colonial power in North America had accepted long before 1900 that any conflict over Canada would result in a disastrous defeat. Residual territorial disputes with the US were accordingly settled in a manner which was least likely to arouse American resentment. There was no Anglo-American treaty to replicate the 1902 deal with Japan, but this was not felt necessary on the British side and, in any case, the US, set on its own version of 'isolationism', would not have wanted a formal arrangement.

Germany, though, was a different matter. British politicians (especially Joseph Chamberlain) put out feelers for some kind of defensive agreement, but nothing was ever signed. In retrospect it might seem odd that one reason for this was that, unlike in the cases of France and Russia, there were no tangible Anglo-German disputes which demanded resolution (Clark, 2013, 158). Germany was clearly an 'expansionary' state, thanks to its late arrival at the colonial banquet; but France, Russia and (especially) Japan also had expansionist ambitions, and this factor had not deterred Britain from bargaining with them when other considerations seemed to make this necessary. However, German strategists suspected (with good reason) that British policy makers would only seriously seek an alliance with their country if they were feeling particularly jittery about the prospect of war with France and Russia. Understandably, while the German government was willing to reach agreement with Britain, it was only prepared to do so on its own terms, and these were not acceptable to the British.

While this desultory diplomatic flirtation continued, the relationship between Britain and Germany began to be affected by increasingly serious sources of irritation. The German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, showed an 'undiplomatic'

degree of sympathy with the Boers during their conflict with the British. In 1906 a Franco-German dispute over the status of Morocco led to the Algeciras conference, at which Britain cemented its new friendship with France by helping to ensure that its case prevailed. This was a clear sign that, by settling their differences with France, British policy makers (whether they liked it or not) were becoming parties to a toxic dispute dating back to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, which had ended in the German annexation of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. In 1908 Germany adopted an ambitious programme of naval expansion, designed to match advances in British shipbuilding. For AJP Taylor, 'In the summer of 1908 estrangement between Great Britain and Germany was clear for all the world to see' (Taylor, 1954, 447–8). In 1911 the Germans responded to an intrusion by French forces into Morocco by despatching a gunboat to the port of Agadir. Although the British government had warned the French against provocative actions in Morocco, it again decided to support its new ally against Germany and sent naval forces of its own to the area. The result was another German climbdown, followed by the establishment of a French 'protectorate' over Morocco and an agreement between Britain and France over a division of naval responsibilities in the event of war.

The Agadir crisis certainly increased the expectation of war among well-informed British (and German) observers. For example, when the journalist Norman Angell wrote *The Great Illusion*, his powerful counter-thrust against the advocates of war within Europe, he focused on recent articles and published correspondence which identified the growing likelihood of a conflict in which Britain and Germany would fight on opposite sides (Angell, 1910, 13–24). Negative emotions towards Germany were also present within the British Foreign Office: Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary since December 1905, was receptive to alarmist analyses, particularly a famous memorandum written by the German-born official Eyre Crowe in January 1907, which warned of the country's atavistic expansionary tendencies (Clark, 2013, 159–67). Yet none of this made war inevitable; although Britain's naval agreement with France followed years of discussions between the respective military staffs, all of these were precautionary in nature and fell short of concrete commitments.

After the First World War the question of moral responsibility was widely canvassed; and, unsurprisingly, the victors blamed the vanquished. For the present purpose, rather than rehearsing the endlessly fascinating and often discussed causes of the war, it is sufficient to examine the more contentious aspects of Britain's role. In recent years 'revisionist' historians have sought to restate the old adage which was so easily forgotten in the immediate aftermath of the Great War – namely, that it takes two (and in this case rather more than two) to make a quarrel. However well intentioned, of their very nature revisionist accounts run the risk of replacing an initial mistake with a different one, so that the attempt to see nothing but premeditated evil in the decisions of German policy

makers tends to be superseded by an unduly critical interpretation of the thought processes of their adversaries in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war. Britain, it can be argued, had ample motive for war with Germany, based on the hope of forestalling a challenge from a potent and seemingly rapacious challenger. However, if the anti-German faction within the British governmental machine had wanted to provoke a 'pre-emptive' war, it would have been much more vigorous in its attempts to turn its ententes with France and Russia into concrete defensive alliances, which would have been interpreted by Germany as deliberate acts of military encirclement. This did not happen, and Britain ended up taking sides with France and Russia without any formal treaty agreements.

The official reason for Britain's declaration of war in August 1914 was Germany's refusal to respect Belgian neutrality, which was guaranteed by the London Treaty of 1839. German military strategy (based on the 'Schlieffen plan') required that its assault on France should be launched *via* Belgian territory. This consideration was certainly an important influence over elements of British opinion, including some members of the Cabinet. However, a fortnight before the British government delivered its ultimatum to Germany, *The Times* newspaper had argued that British intervention in any war resulting from the current crisis in the Balkans would be dictated by 'an elementary duty of self-preservation' (quoted in Kennedy, 1981, 139). From this perspective, the true objective of armed intervention was not the territorial integrity of Belgium but rather (in *The Times'* words) an attempt to ensure that war did not result in 'a Europe dominated by any single power'.

For British policy makers since the time of Elizabeth I, the dominance of the European mainland 'by any single power' had been a dreadful prospect, and the fear had increased in tandem with Britain's rise to 'top nation', since a European hegemon was almost certain to take a hostile stance towards the offshore imperialists. However, from the mid nineteenth century onwards the threat had taken a different and more tangible form – of a Europe without a single dominant power, but whose leading nations were united in antagonism towards Britain. For understandable reasons, British policy makers preferred a scenario which was often characterised as a 'balance of power' in Europe, but which is better described as a condition of disunity and mutual suspicion among the country's neighbours. This was a state of affairs which had been extremely helpful to Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – it had, one might say, made possible the world view expressed in the words of *Land of Hope and Glory*. Although AC Benson had suggested that the boundaries of that nation should be pushed 'wider still and wider', in 1914 Britain was essentially a 'satisfied power', anxious to avoid any incidents that might disturb the advantages it had gained. In reality, to observers like Eyre Crowe of the Foreign Office, it seemed to be Germany which wanted to extend its boundaries both within Europe and beyond; it certainly expected that God would make it 'mightier yet'.

In terms of IR theory (Chapter 1), Britain's participation in the First World War looks like an example of 'defensive Realism'. However, this practical example also provides an early warning that Realism – broadly understood as a calculation of the 'national interest' in advance of any response to dilemmas in international politics – can arise from an assessment of a nation's situation which is heavily coloured by emotion rather than cold 'reason'. When *The Times* alluded to 'national self-preservation' its editorial team was thinking not of the literal defence of Britain as an independent country but rather of the *continuation* of its previous role (in Sellar and Yeatman's words, that of 'top nation'). In short, when the British Cabinet decided that peaceful coexistence with Germany was no longer possible and reversed its previous inclination to stay out of the impending conflict, it did so feeling that the country had no alternative if it wanted to conserve the vision of itself enshrined in the words of *Land of Hope and Glory*. At the same time, those who did not delude themselves with the assumption that this war could be concluded in a few victorious months had good reason to suspect that, whatever the outcome, the conflict was likely to confirm and even accelerate the existing process of relative British decline.

The consequences of conflict

The consequences of the 1914–18 war are difficult to exaggerate and defy concise analysis. For the purposes of this book, four major implications for British foreign policy can be identified, on the understanding that this approach cannot hope to present an adequate summary of a conflict which, in Zara Steiner's words, 'was like a terrible volcanic eruption that left immeasurable destruction in its wake' (Steiner, 2005, 1).

Developments in weaponry

A war on this scale, taking place in an era of considerable technological innovation, was always likely to revolutionise the resources at the disposal of armed forces. From the British perspective, the most ominous developments concerned submarine warfare and aerial bombardment. The first of these presented a continuous threat to Britain's trading routes, and when Germany embarked upon a policy of indiscriminate submarine attack in January 1917 the country which boasted of 'ruling the waves' seemed in danger of defeat from a foe lurking beneath them. Ultimately, unrestricted submarine warfare was highly damaging to the Germans, since it helped to bring the US into the war after the sinking of several of its vessels. The British also adopted improved defensive tactics, notably the convoy system, to protect merchant shipping. Nevertheless, the experience

opened up the possibility that Britain, which had prided itself on an ability to starve its enemies of vital supplies through a naval blockade, could now be treated to a taste of its own medicine.

In terms of aerial bombardment, technological innovations during the war were particularly dramatic, starting with small bombs thrown out of light aircraft and ending with purpose-built craft whose crews could deliver explosives more precisely, thanks to visual aids. Although bombing raids had a limited effect on the overall fortunes of war, their psychological impact was understandably considerable; and although defensive techniques were developed to meet the threat, it was natural to suppose that, as Stanley Baldwin put it in 1932, 'the bomber will always get through' to devastate its selected target, since 'aerial warfare is still in its infancy, and its potentialities are incalculable and inconceivable'. On this view, another war among the major combatants of 1914–18 could spell the end of European civilisation (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 10 November 1932, Vol. 270, cols 630–40).

Developments in domestic politics

The new weaponry helped to ensure a heavy death toll among civilians – possibly more than 2 million as a direct result of conflict, leaving aside the additional losses inflicted by associated famines and diseases. In Britain itself the tally among civilians and members of the merchant navy (many of whom were killed by submarine action) was probably less than 17,000. Nevertheless, this meant that between 1914 and 1918 British non-combatants had been at greater risk of death or injury than at any time since the seventeenth-century civil war. Yet this was only one indication that Europe had entered an era of 'total war'. Conscription for military service was introduced in 1916, initially for single men aged 18–41 but later extended to married male civilians. This remedy for the drastic shortage of voluntary military recruits had an obvious knock-on effect among the domestic workforce, not least in key areas like the manufacturing of munitions. To fill the gap women were recruited; almost a million were working in government-controlled munitions factories by the end of the war. Rationing of certain foodstuffs was also introduced from the beginning of 1918 in response to shortages resulting from unrestricted submarine warfare.

With so much of the population either actively involved in the British war effort, or facing death or bereavement as a result of the struggle, it was increasingly difficult to defend an electoral system which, despite successive reforms in the nineteenth century, still excluded a majority of adults on the basis of economic status or gender. The 1918 Representation of the People Act was an attempt to redress this obvious democratic deficit (while refusing to accept gender equality, thus giving the vote only to women aged over 30, compared to the

21-year qualification for men). Even so, in numerical terms the effects of the act were spectacular: a British electorate of 7.7 million had expanded to 21.4 million.

While this measure was bound to have repercussions of some kind throughout British politics, the field of foreign policy presented unique challenges. Traditionally, this area had been regarded as one in which duly qualified specialists were authorised to act in what they considered to be the national interest without having to wait for the verdict of imperfectly informed public opinion (Chapter 2). In the nineteenth century, indeed, British governments had tended to take advantage of the imperfection of public opinion by whipping up patriotic emotions (or, in William Gladstone's case, moral indignation) in favour of their preferred causes. After the 1918 franchise reform even Foreign Secretaries had to admit that the balance of domestic power had changed, and that they, along with other government ministers, had to regard themselves at least to some extent as 'servants of the people'. In the first century after the First World War foreign policy was rarely a decisive or even a serious factor in determining the outcome of general elections; but decision-makers could never afford to be complacent, so some attempt had to be made to gauge 'the public mood' before significant steps were taken.

How, though, should public opinion be interpreted in the days before regular surveys were conducted on a 'scientific' basis? The most convenient litmus test was to consult the coverage of foreign affairs in widely circulating newspapers. In this respect, the years leading up to the First World War had also seen significant developments with the emergence of a 'popular press' catering for the tastes of people who were now literate (thanks to educational reforms since 1870) but not necessarily equipped for sophisticated analysis of contemporary affairs, whether domestic or foreign. Of one of these new papers, the *Daily Mail* (founded in 1896), Lord Salisbury disdainfully remarked that it was 'written by office boys for office boys'. Salisbury held the post of Foreign Secretary during more than 13 of the years between 1878 and 1900, combining the job with that of Prime Minister for most of his stint; and if there was any doubt concerning the longevity of his influence over policy making, his equally elitist nephew Arthur Balfour succeeded Salisbury as Prime Minister (1902–5) before taking over from Grey at the Foreign Office (1916–19). For people like Salisbury and Balfour, the best understanding of 'public opinion' could be derived from a reading of the editorials (and the correspondence pages) of *The Times* newspaper; but even that august publication could not be immune from the voice of the 'office boys' as expressed by their favourite newspapers.

The first concrete test of public opinion after the extension of the franchise was the 1918 general election, resulting in a victory for the wartime coalition which won 449 of the 707 seats. These figures, however, concealed a major change in the British party system. The Liberal Party, previously the main competitor against the Conservatives, divided during the war into rival factions led

by Herbert Asquith (Prime Minister from 1908 to 1916) and his supplanter in the top job, David Lloyd George. In the election Asquith's group won almost the same number of votes (1.39 million) as Lloyd George's Liberal supporters, but only 36 compared to 127 seats, thanks to an agreement between Lloyd George and the Conservatives not to run candidates against each other. As a result, Lloyd George continued as Prime Minister but was effectively the prisoner of 332 Conservative MPs. Meanwhile, the Labour Party won more than 2 million votes and 57 seats. Since Labour had also suffered serious divisions, between pro- and anti-war factions, the outcome strongly suggested that when peacetime conditions were re-established the main contestants for office under Britain's disproportional first-past-the-post voting system would be Labour and the best organised of the two formerly dominant parties; and since the Liberals were unable to resolve their differences until Asquith's death in 1928, they effectively handed that role to the Conservatives.

The Versailles settlement

At the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), which attempted to settle European affairs after Napoleon Bonaparte's meteoric career, British policy makers were generally able to exercise a dominant influence, thanks to their diplomatic dexterity as well as the country's pivotal role in Napoleon's defeat. The discussions which led to the 1919 Treaty of Versailles were very different. Although the Americans only declared war on Germany in April 1917, the main effect of which was not felt until the following year, their position in the peace talks which led to the Treaty of Versailles was similar to that of the British back in 1815. The chief difference was that the American contribution to the First World War represented only a foretaste of what that nation could achieve if it entered any future conflict without reservation. To that extent, Sellar and Yeatman were right to identify the end of the First World War as the point at which US supremacy became evident to anyone capable of discarding the *Land of Hope and Glory* narrative; and British negotiators were acutely conscious of a change in the global batting order, which had been foreshadowed 20 years earlier in Rudyard Kipling's controversial poem *The White Man's Burden*.

During the negotiations at Versailles US President Woodrow Wilson ostensibly stood by the Fourteen Points – statements of principle (see Box 1.2, Chapter 1), both general and specific, which he had unveiled in a speech of January 1918. As well as asserting the need for 'open' diplomacy and a reduction of armaments, Wilson advocated the removal of all barriers to free trade and 'absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas'. Although German policy since 1870 did not escape criticism in some of Wilson's specific points, Britain seemed to be the main target of his generalities. Complete free trade would destroy the dreams of British

imperialists who wanted to develop the Empire as an economic asset; complete freedom of navigation would mean that Britannia no longer ruled the waves, which raised doubts about the preservation of the Empire in any form and threatened to undermine the essential basis of Britain's influence within Europe, let alone its status as a significant global power. Wilson followed up his Fourteen Points with a speech asserting the right of peoples to determine their own future. If Wilson's overall vision was to be taken literally in an overall settlement after the war, the resulting treaty would potentially be at least as detrimental to Britain and its Empire as any conceivable terms that might have been dictated by a victorious Germany. Indeed, a literal interpretation raised doubts about the future of the UK itself, in view of the growing agitation for Irish independence.

Assailed on one flank by Wilsonian idealism, Lloyd George also had to contend with the attitude of the French, who sought the redress of historic grievances against Germany, full compensation for the damage wrought by the war and additional measures which would enhance the country's future security. The first of these objectives was accepted even by Wilson, and Alsace and Lorraine were duly restored to France. The second and third requirements, however, proved to be contradictory. In combination, the French demand for direct financial 'reparations' and the attempt to strip Germany of key strategic and economic assets helped to create the context for an eventual renewal of hostilities. Although Britain had suffered far less direct war damage than France, Lloyd George was sensitive to the vengeful mood among many British voters and initially seconded the French demand for reparations, on the grounds that Germany should contribute to the support of war widows and pensioners. Later he recognised that the imposition of a crippling financial burden on Germany would do little to help Europe's economic recovery, but by that time the principle of reparations had been accepted. The remaining question was the level of German payments; this was not finalised until 1921, when a sum of 132 billion marks was named. By that time Germany had already fallen behind the schedule of interim payments stipulated at Versailles, and its currency had depreciated to an extent which undermined any calculation of the 'true' war debt. The resulting inflation also undermined Germany's new democratic 'Weimar' constitution.

France had also demanded the annexation of the coal-rich Saar Valley region, on its north-east border, but the Americans and the British preferred a compromise under which the area would be governed by an international commission for 15 years, after which the local people could determine their own national allegiance through a plebiscite. In the meantime the French took control of the Saar's coal mines. Also, the industrial Rhineland area of Germany was to be occupied by allied forces for up to 15 years; no German fortifications could be established within 50 kilometres of the Rhine's eastern bank. Again, this settlement was a suboptimal compromise with the French, who had wanted to separate the Rhineland from Germany (and to control its government).

In short, the position that France adopted at the peace conference, hosted on its own territory, implied a continuing antagonism between itself and Germany, and that it could only feel safe if its hostile neighbour was made even weaker than itself. But France had only been able to emerge on the winning side of the First World War because of its allies; and since those allies had a different vision of Germany's future, the final settlement at Versailles fell a long way short of France's hopes. Even so, despite the likelihood that the loss of the Saar and the occupation of the Rhineland would only be temporary, these clauses were humiliating enough for most Germans, whose representatives were excluded from the negotiations. The punishment did not end there. The German provinces of West Prussia and Posen were awarded to a resuscitated Polish nation state. Lloyd George managed to insist that the mainly German coastal city of Danzig should come under the authority of a newly created League of Nations (see below), rather than being awarded to Poland, but this still meant that the German territory of East Prussia was physically separated from the remainder of the country. After a 1921 plebiscite, Upper Silesia was divided between Germany and Poland. Another new state, Czechoslovakia, emerged from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; it, rather than Germany, absorbed the predominantly German Sudetenland. Meanwhile, the new boundaries of Austria were drawn to coincide with the main German-speaking region of the old Habsburg Empire; in the most remarkable of their many contraventions of the principle of self-determination, instead of allotting this area to Germany the peacemakers of Versailles explicitly prohibited a union (or *Anschluss*) between the two countries, whatever their inhabitants might want.

In hindsight it is easy enough to say that since the French were not in a position to destroy Germany entirely, their best option was to extinguish the perceived threat through acts of generosity. However, given the unprecedented level of slaughter and destruction, it is unsurprising that magnanimity was in short supply in 1918–19, and that Lloyd George, on behalf of Britain, was disinclined to emphasise his own misgivings during the negotiations. The war had also robbed France of a key ally, since Russia had made a separate peace with Germany after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Of course, the prospect of having to fight a war on two fronts had not inhibited Germany in 1914; but it was natural for the French to expect that even a weakened Germany would feel less reluctance about embarking on war in the west if it felt secure on its eastern borders. For this buffer zone to have any deterrent effect, Poland and Czechoslovakia would have to be viable (and, of course, friendly towards France). Even then, the buffer zone would only be useful to France in the event that it became embroiled in a direct conflict with a resurgent Germany. As it was, Hitler's Germany turned east rather than west, and instead of providing useful assistance Czechoslovakia and Poland merely underlined the extent of French weakness.

The League of Nations

While hindsight suggests that French attempts to insure itself against future German aggression were self-defeating, even at the time it was possible to regard them as unnecessary. Among his Fourteen Points, President Wilson had suggested the establishment of an international organisation for the peaceful resolution of disputes. A 'League of Nations' – the term was originally coined by the British political scientist Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932) – would provide arbitration on any disputes between member states and apply sanctions against states which defied its rulings. The League would also oblige its members to reduce their armaments 'to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations'. Initially, the main difficulty with the League reflected a difference of interpretation between Britain and France; the former wanted it to be a forum in which disputes could be resolved before the eruption of hostilities, whereas the latter hoped that it would bring the united force of the international community (including military action) to bear against any power (i.e. Germany) which had already embarked on aggressive action.

Although the idea of such an organisation violated the traditional British reliance on the balance of power as a preserver (or, more accurately, a long-term restorative) of international peace, one can appreciate why it seemed attractive in 1919. With the defeat of Germany, and the apparent neutralisation of Russia as a potential disrupter of the status quo, it was difficult for the British to anticipate any future source of disturbance to peace and prosperity. Despite (or perhaps because of) the slaughter of land-based armies between 1914 and 1918, the British were entitled to look positively on the prospect of a permanent peace which was policed by navies; and since the German fleet of warships and mercantile vessels had either passed into friendly hands or been scuttled by their crews at the end of the war, Britannia and its friends (France, Japan and the US) 'ruled the waves' to an extent which James Thomson and Thomas Arne could not have anticipated when their combined efforts created that patriotic song back in 1740. If the arbitration procedure of the League proved unavailing and conflicts broke out, Britain would obviously be called upon to help restore order, but the task would be shared with other states of comparable potency. More likely, while Britain was agreeing to be one of 'the world's policemen', the deterrent effect of this powerful posse would mean that it would never have to wield a truncheon in anger. Lobby groups in Britain – indeed, within Parliament – had been pressing for the formation of such an international body. More importantly, the idea of the League chimed with a more general demand among the newly expanded electorate that this should be 'a war to end all wars'.

This beatific vision might have come to pass if the new 'top nation', the US, had ratified the Treaty of Versailles and thus committed itself to membership of the League. However, Woodrow Wilson's efforts to muster Congressional support only succeeded in undermining his health, and the treaty was rejected by the Senate. This decision had an understandably dampening effect on initial enthusiasm for the League. The Senate debates on ratification of the treaty also exposed continuing American antipathy towards the British Empire; one of the arguments against the League was that member states like Australia, South Africa and Canada would constitute a formidable voting bloc which could ensure that Britain's interests were always preferred to those of the US (Doerr, 1998, 50). In declining to ratify Versailles, the US Senate also nullified a proposed agreement which committed Britain and America to defend France's frontiers against future German aggression. The prospect of such a guarantee had persuaded Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, to drop his insistence that the German Rhineland should be made into a separate state. Britain had accepted this arrangement on condition that it was also ratified by the US, so the Senate's rejection of Versailles aborted the whole enterprise.

Thus within a few months of the Versailles conference the supposedly victorious allies were at least partially estranged from each other. Italy, which had joined the war against Germany in 1915, was also aggrieved because its territorial aspirations had not been fulfilled in the 1919 settlement. On this ground, at least, British imperialists had few reasons for dissatisfaction. Germany's defeat meant the loss of its colonies, and while Britain acquired several territories in Africa – parts of Cameroon, Togo and Tanganyika – Australia, South Africa and New Zealand became imperialists in their own right, mopping up German New Guinea, South West Africa (now Namibia) and Western Samoa respectively. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which marked the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, gave Britain authority over Transjordan, Palestine (Controversy 3.1) and Mesopotamia (Iraq); by 1926 Britain had succeeded in its aim of extending the territory of the latter to include the oil-rich Mosul area. Overall, the treaties subsequent to the First World War brought almost 2 million square miles of additional territory – and 13 million more people – under British control. Rather than outright annexations, these new acquisitions were characterised as 'mandates' authorised by the League of Nations, to underline the expectation (of Wilson and others) that the British would interpret their role in terms of 'trusteeship' rather than exploitation. In reality, the determination to take control of Iraqi oilfields was symptomatic of a new British emphasis on the economic (and strategic) potential of its overseas territories; Persia (Iran) was another target of Britain's oil-extracting interest. It seemed that the country's imperialist impetus had been stripped of its theoretical benevolence – let alone its imputed absent-mindedness – and that its policy makers were unwittingly validating the criticisms of anti-imperialist authors such as Lenin and JA Hobson. Certainly, they were belatedly recognising

Controversy 3.1 Palestine and the Balfour Declaration (1917)

On 2 November 1917 the British Foreign Secretary and former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour sent a letter to Lord Rothschild, which was subsequently published. With the War Cabinet's authority, Balfour wrote that 'His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a natural home for the Jewish people, and will use its best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object'.

There were three motives behind Balfour's notorious 'Declaration'. First, although Balfour himself took a detached and sceptical view in theological matters, he had been impressed, while Leader of the Opposition in 1906, by a private conversation with the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, who refused to be fobbed off by the suggestion of a Jewish homeland in Uganda. Second, Balfour calculated that a pro-Zionist statement of intent might have a galvanising effect on opinion in Russia, where anti-war sentiment had precipitated the deposition of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917. Third, while British policy makers saw limited economic potential in Palestine, the Middle East as a whole was sure to assume more geopolitical importance after the war, and it would do no harm to long-term national interests if a part of that area was populated by people who felt a strong sense of obligation to Britain.

In relation to one of its objectives, Balfour's declaration was made to look futile even before it was published; the letter to Rothschild was sent just a few days before the Bolsheviks took control of Russia, leading inevitably to that country's withdrawal from the conflict. In other respects, however, the document can only be seen as a self-inflicted disaster, produced by highly intelligent ministers who were being 'too clever by half'. Balfour and his colleagues evidently thought that Zionists would be so heartened by the commitment to a 'natural home' in such an emotive place as Palestine that they would continue to feel gladdened even when they had digested the small print. After all, there was no commitment to a Jewish *state* – merely to a 'home' within Palestine. Furthermore, the final version of the text (though not the original draft) contained the proviso 'that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine'. As soon as Balfour's letter was published it became evident that the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was unacceptable to Arab opinion; and, far from being hypothetical prospective allies, the Arabs (thanks to protracted negotiations) were already providing invaluable assistance to the British war effort in the Middle East.

Subsequent attempts to rationalise the Balfour Declaration – not least those of Balfour himself – have been wholly unconvincing. It was an avoidable mistake with terrible and lasting consequences for the Middle East and for Britain itself.

the need for Britain to maximise its resources, since 'the war to end wars' had evidently ushered in a period of uncertainty and insecurity.

Between the wars

In fact, the phrase 'war to end wars' was coined by HG Wells in 1914, rather than being inspired by the efforts of the Versailles peacemakers. Their deliberations took place while a murderous civil war was raging in Russia, with thousands of British troops joining a multinational effort to assist anti-Bolshevik forces. Before the end of this unsuccessful intervention, in 1920, the British were engaged in a brutal campaign of repression in Ireland and had killed hundreds of non-violent protestors in the Jallianwala Bagh garden at Amritsar in north-west India. These episodes set the tone for Britain's overseas activities between the wars, which featured precious few shafts of light to contrast with the general gloom which also prevailed in domestic politics.

Economic background

Despite initial hopes of national resurgence on the back of a hard-fought military victory – encapsulated by Lloyd George's promise of making 'a country fit for heroes to live in' – Britain experienced a brief economic boom before entering a period of stagnation, followed by a slump at the end of the 1920s. Once the victory celebrations were over, it was clear that the negative trends which had affected Britain before 1914 had only been accentuated by the conflict. Previous trading partnerships had been disrupted, and the US (in particular) had been ideally placed to establish new links which the British were unable to sustain. Elsewhere, countries which had previously absorbed exports of British goods developed manufacturing capacity of their own (e.g. India's textile industry).

Even before 1914 Britain's relative decline as a manufacturing nation had increased the importance of the financial sector, based in the City of London. Once formed, the notion that the benefit of the doubt in any policy decision should be awarded to those who made money out of other people's money, rather than those who actually made *things*, proved very difficult to contest.

In the inter-war period this outlook gave rise to a determination that the value of sterling in relation to gold should be forced back (up) to its pre-1914 level, so that international financiers could have renewed confidence in Britain's financial reliability, regardless of the cost to individuals engaged in the manufacturing process. This goal was achieved in 1925, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, announced in his budget speech that Britain would return to the gold standard. The measure was applauded in the House of Commons and by much of the press, though the newspaper proprietor Lord Beaverbrook privately commented that he knew his friend Churchill 'would give in to the bankers' (Gilbert, 1990, 117–18).

By 1929 the outlook had improved to some extent. Although the traditional labour-intensive heavy industries were still depressed, the City had recovered and industries exploiting new technologies were emerging. But in October 1929 a stock-market slump in New York triggered a sharp decline in world commodity prices; two years later the withdrawal of overseas investments from London forced the Bank of England to request American loans. In September 1931 Britain abandoned the gold standard, and this time there would be no return. With many nations – notably, the supposedly free-trading US – raising tariffs to protect domestic producers, world trade declined by two thirds between 1929 and 1934. A World Economic Conference held in London in the summer of 1933 failed to resolve the situation. In such circumstances the system of war reparations and debt repayments collapsed; Britain remitted a last token sum to its US creditors in December 1933, with $265 million still outstanding.

As early as August 1919 Britain's weak economic situation had affected its defence expenditure, with obvious foreign policy repercussions. At that time Lloyd George's Cabinet adopted the guiding principle that estimated defence spending should be based 'on the assumption that Great Britain will not be involved in any great war during the next ten years'. Whether or not this reflected a calculation of the length of time which Germany would need to rebuild its military strength in order to renew hostilities in Europe, in 1928 Chancellor Churchill persuaded his colleagues that the 'Ten Years' Rule' should continue to govern defence estimates unless it was explicitly revoked. The revocation occurred in March 1932, four months before Hitler's Nazis became the largest party in the German Reichstag. By that time the British defence budget had fallen from £766 million in 1919–20 to just over £100 million.

The British government's abandonment of the Ten Years' Rule coincided with the opening of a World Disarmament Conference, under League of Nations auspices, after several years of preparation. It was, of course, possible to support disarmament from two contrasting positions. On the first (moral) position, the chain of reasoning was 'armaments lead to war: war is wrong: therefore Britain must disarm to set a moral example'. The second argument was 'armaments lead to war: war is expensive: therefore Britain will have to disarm and hope that

potential enemies will see things the same way'. In either case, the British government (whose circumstances inclined it towards the second view) was probably sincere in its hope that the conference would be successful. However, from the outset the event was dogged by disagreements between France and Germany (which had been admitted as a member of the League of Nations in 1926). In October 1933, after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, Germany withdrew from the Conference and also gave up its membership of the League (following the example of Japan earlier in the year).

This development provoked the British government into a serious re-examination of its defensive deficiencies, and a slow process of rearmament commenced in the following year. In sharp contrast to the situation before the First World War, when vote-hungry politicians found it difficult to resist public demands for naval expansion, the British were now seriously concerned by the economic implications of an 'arms race'. As early as the Washington Conference of 1922 Britain had abandoned any thought of outbuilding its main nautical rivals and accepted parity with the US in relation to battlecruisers and destroyers; it retained an advantage over Japan, but only in the ratio 10:7.

The Empire

Superficially, it might seem that the First World War, which had consumed so many empires, had reaffirmed the strength and solidarity of the British variant. The British declaration of war had also committed the Empire to the conflict, without consultation. The response was invaluable to Britain's war effort; eventually more than 600,000 Canadians enlisted, along with 400,000 Australians, and nearly 150,000 South Africans. Including nurses, more than 100,000 New Zealanders (out of a total population of 1 million) were involved. The death toll among Canadians and Australians was roughly equal at around 60,000; more than 17,000 New Zealanders died, along with nearly 7,000 South Africans. Soldiers from these self-governing Dominions were involved in some of the most infamous slaughters of the war, on the Western Front and in the ill-starred Gallipoli campaign against the Ottoman Empire.

Sacrifice on this scale could only result in a revision of the relationship between Britain and its Dominions which had already been changing from one of central direction to one in which the metropolitan power was more 'first among equals'. Given their contribution, it seemed appropriate that the Dominions should be represented at the Paris peace talks. General Jan Smuts, so recently a Boer War opponent, became a member of the British War Cabinet in 1917. In the same year, Smuts used the term 'Commonwealth of Nations' to characterise the future relationship between Britain and its Dominions. In 1922, when Britain's support for Greece against Turkey in the Chanak crisis took the country

to the brink of war, the refusal of Dominion governments to offer automatic support was crucial to the subsequent British climbdown. Four years later another (and more statesmanlike) 'Balfour Declaration', at the 1926 Imperial Conference, affirmed that this was now a free association of autonomous states, 'though united by common allegiance to the Crown'. The 1931 Statute of Westminster gave formal legislative recognition to the revised relationships.

Although imperial idealists continued to cherish the vision of an Empire-wide free-trade area in which business would be conducted to Britain's advantage, the Statute of Westminster merely confirmed that this was no longer a realistic vision. The Dominions were free to develop their own trading networks and to construct their own tariff arrangements. As a result, when in 1932 the Chancellor Neville Chamberlain announced a system of tariffs which included more lenient terms for imports from the Empire/Commonwealth, the subject only caused serious agitation among the most dogmatic free traders; even Churchill was unruffled. At the ensuring Imperial Conference at Ottawa Chamberlain was taken aback by the extent to which the Dominions were now prepared to act on economic interests of their own. Far from realising the visions of his father, Joseph, the Ottawa conference had merely halted a process in which the countries of the old Empire were 'drifting apart pretty rapidly' (quoted in Self, 2006, 174).

From the narrow perspective of British foreign and defence policy, these developments were not entirely unwelcome; if the Dominions were ready to utilise their economic autonomy in full, the British moral responsibility to provide for their protection could be reduced to a similar degree. By the same token, however, it was not realistic for Britain to expect the Dominions to respond to any new international crisis by backing Britain with the enthusiasm they had shown in 1914. Since Neville Chamberlain was the minister who received a direct foretaste of the likely Dominion response to a future war in Europe, the morale-shredding Ottawa Conference must be regarded as a significant contributory factor in his later attempt to appease Adolf Hitler's Germany.

At least Britain's relations with the Dominions were altered without confrontation and bloodshed. In other territories, where Britain had either seen no need for amicable arrangements or failed to negotiate satisfactory settlements, the ominous outlook should have been apparent even for those enthusiasts (like King George V) who celebrated the expansion of British rule after Versailles. The most spectacular development was uncomfortably close to home – in Ireland, which after centuries of antagonistic relations had been coaxed (or coerced) into a political union with Britain in 1800. From the British perspective, the main reason for this unsentimental union was strategic – the fear that an invading force could use Ireland as a springboard. The union was widely resented from the outset, leading to frequent outbreaks of violence in Ireland. In 1886

and 1893 William Gladstone's Liberal government introduced bills to give Ireland Home Rule within the Empire, but these attempts at a compromise solution foundered in the House of Lords. Even the liberal ideologue John Bright, so sceptical of imperial adventures far from home, recoiled from the notion that Ireland should be allowed to govern itself.

In 1914 another Home Rule bill received the Royal assent, since the House of Lords had been stripped of its power of veto. However, this legislation was fiercely opposed by the Protestant majority in the six counties of the north of Ireland, whose cultural identity (underpinned by religious allegiance) was vehemently 'British' rather than 'Irish'. The Parliamentary process was completed after the outbreak of war; and since it would have been difficult to implement even in peacetime, the legislation was suspended for the duration. In 1916 an armed rising of around 1,200 Irish nationalists resulted in the seizure of strategic buildings in Dublin and the proclamation of an Irish Republic. As AJP Taylor noted, 'This was the only national rebellion in any European country during the First World War – an ironical comment on the British claim to be fighting for freedom' (Taylor, 1963, 56). Vastly superior British forces quickly quashed the insurrection, but the execution of the leaders predictably inflamed feeling among Irish nationalists who had not initially supported the 'Easter Rising'. In January 1919 a further declaration of Irish independence led to more than two years of conflict between Britain and Irish Republicans, which ended with an agreement that Ireland should be granted Home Rule at last, but that the island should be partitioned; the northern counties would remain within the UK, while the South (the Irish Free State) became a self-governing Dominion within the British Empire.

Ireland was far from being the only venue for armed resistance to British rule between 1918 and 1939. In 1920 there was an uprising in that unstable and artificial British creation Iraq, in which up to 10,000 Iraqis lost their lives along with almost 500 British troops. Iraq became independent in 1932, but not before a British-based company had negotiated a long-term monopoly over oil extraction. In Palestine British attempts to square the circular logic of the first Balfour Declaration led to alienation on all sides, and although armed Arab resistance was delayed until 1936, the British government was forced to allocate 20,000 troops to this mandated territory just a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War.

The wind of change had even reached India, Britain's 'Jewel in the Crown'. In 1919 the British government granted limited powers of self-government to a country which had provided around 1.5 million people for the war effort in varying capacities and almost £150 million in financial contributions. Far from appeasing the demand for self-government, the measures of 1919 merely exposed the patronising assumptions behind Britain's continuing role in India. A further Government of India Act, creating a federation and ensuring the representation

of minority groups, followed in 1935, after bitter resistance by Conservative backbenchers led by Winston Churchill. There were some violent disturbances, notably in Peshawar during a general strike in 1930, and in the same year Mahatma Gandhi led his supporters on a 240-mile march in protest against a salt tax first imposed in the 1880s. Gandhi, whose Congress Party had issued a declaration of independence in January 1930, was famously committed to non-violent methods, but his repeated arrests by the British authorities ran the risk of precipitating a violent reaction. As it was, a 200,000-strong police force and an army of almost equal size somehow ensured that British rule survived the strains of the 1930s (James, 1994, 422).

Even without the benefit of hindsight it was obvious that the British 'Raj' had a limited shelf life. The colonial power was now in the situation of an individual who has managed to reach the centre of a maze by luck rather than judgement and now faces the task of finding a way out. The task was complicated by imperialist diehards, like Churchill, who were desperate to avoid the necessity of leaving, but also by growing evidence of schisms within the society of India itself – the sort which had previously been exploited to British advantage. While British prestige could just about sustain a negotiated withdrawal, a forcible ejection of any kind was deeply unpalatable. The defence of India from external threats therefore remained a priority, though after the Bolshevik Revolution the Russian threat seemed to have subsided.

India, of course, was not the only source of British concern in Asia. As noted above, Britain had concluded a defensive alliance with Japan in 1902, and this was renewed in 1905 and 1911. In 1910 an Anglo-Japanese exhibition had been held in London to augment cultural and economic ties between the two countries. Despite such tokens of mutual goodwill, and Japan's pivotal role in protecting British assets during the First World War, Japan took the opportunity to expand its own Empire between 1914 and 1918. Its growing power raised the possibility of future conflict with the US, in which Britain would have to be neutral at best. While other Commonwealth countries advocated a continuation of the Japanese alliance, Canada was understandably alarmed by any possibility of conflict between America and the British Empire. Such considerations ensured that the Anglo-Japanese alliance was not renewed; in December 1921 it was superseded by a 'Four-Power Treaty' between Britain, France, Japan and the US, which guaranteed the existing overseas possessions of all the contracting parties and provided for consultation if any disputes should arise in future.

The ending of the Anglo-Japanese alliance was as momentous as its commencement had been. The original treaty had been a tacit acceptance that Britain could not defend its imperial interests in south-east Asia unaided. It needed a partner, and initially Japan fitted the bill admirably. However, the Anglo-Japanese alliance could only camouflage British weakness: it did nothing to remove the underlying problem – namely, that Britain was no longer able to

defend the most distant territories within its Empire. The events of the First World War suggested that America, rather than Japan, was the right horse to back; if tensions between Japan and the US erupted into conflict there could only be one winner. However, while Japan was dynamic and acquisitive, the US was a somewhat hesitant horse – reluctant to exert its potential power when the going seemed good, and disinclined to enter the race at all unless it was forced to do so or could be certain of a relatively cost-free victory. British misgivings about the preference for the US over Japan is suggested by the fact that in 1923 – the year in which the treaty with Japan was formally terminated – the British announced their intention to construct a massive naval base in Singapore. Development of the base was painfully slow, and it was only completed in 1939; three years later it was captured by Japanese forces, just a few weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor had brought America into the war on the British side.

Europe

From the British perspective, the priority in the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles was to ensure a lasting peace by rehabilitating Germany without making France feel insecure. Unfortunately for the British, the French took the view that a rehabilitated Germany would automatically pose a threat to their security. The concept of a League of Nations briefly offered a solution to this dilemma; under its auspices, France would (or *should*) gradually feel more relaxed about a more prosperous Germany, with its territory restored within more realistic borders, so long as any future misconduct would incur the collective wrath of the fledgling international community. When this prospect – along with a specific Anglo-American guarantee against future German attack – was swept away by the US Senate it was not surprising that French policy should revert to the idea of exploiting Germany's supine condition in a way which might prevent its antagonist from posing a threat in the future. Deprived of its Russian alliance, France also began to put out feelers of friendship towards states on Germany's eastern borders – notably, Versailles creations, like Poland and Czechoslovakia. These initiatives meant that France was committing itself to the Versailles settlement as a whole and not just those aspects of the treaty which affected its border with Germany. In 1922 attempts to negotiate a defensive alliance against Germany succumbed largely because Britain refused to expand its terms into an Anglo-French guarantee of Versailles, backed by discussions between senior military planners. Friction between the erstwhile allies increased in 1923, when French and Belgian troops occupied the German mining district of the Ruhr to enforce the delivery of coal and other industrial materials. Britain also protested against fruitless French attempts to stir up separatist sentiment in the occupied Rhineland.

In 1925 a potential escape route from this diplomatic impasse was offered by the German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann. His initiative resulted in the Locarno Treaties, the most important of which was an agreement between Germany, France and Belgium not to attack each other. Britain and Italy also joined this pact, guaranteeing to defend any of the other signatories which might come under attack in a 'flagrant violation' of the Versailles settlement (including the terms relating to the Rhineland). Although a 'flagrant violation' was not defined in the treaties, the effect of Locarno was to reaffirm the 1919 settlement in Western Europe. However, there was no such system of mutual guarantees for Germany's eastern neighbours, although the Weimar Republic agreed to submit any disputes to international arbitration.

Having accepted at Locarno the kind of peaceful procedures characteristic of the League of Nations, the logical step was for Germany to join that organisation, which it did in 1926. In the same year the foreign ministers of Germany and France (Stresemann and Briand) were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, their British counterpart Austen Chamberlain (not to be confused with his more abrasive half-brother, Neville) had pre-empted them, scooping the 1925 award; and of the trio he had the surest grounds to be satisfied with Locarno. Despite his emotional preference for France over Germany, Chamberlain had established equally cordial personal relations with Stresemann and Briand. While France and Germany had accepted that Locarno was the best deal that they could achieve in the circumstances, for Britain it was almost the perfect solution to the problems bequeathed by Versailles – almost good enough, one might say, to make the adoption of the Ten Years' Rule on defence spending seem rational. Chamberlain proclaimed Locarno as 'the real dividing-line between the years of the war and years of peace' (quoted in Carr, 1937, 97). In reality, the signature of the treaties almost marked the halfway point between the beginning of the First World War and the resumption of hostilities in 1939.

Stresemann died, still in office, in 1929; Briand followed in 1932. By the latter date the Locarno Treaties still existed on paper, but their spirit had been undermined by the Great Depression. Austen Chamberlain, by contrast, lived just long enough to see the final destruction of his prize-winning exploits. In March 1936 Hitler, whose rise to power in Germany owed much to the Great Depression, ordered the reoccupation of the Rhineland and openly repudiated Locarno on the same day. The pretext was the recent revival of the fateful Franco-Russian alliance. His actions, however, would have satisfied any reasonable person's understanding of the term 'flagrant violation'. Chamberlain, certainly, felt that way; now a backbencher increasingly disillusioned with the Baldwin government, in which his half-brother Neville was serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he favoured the establishment of a unified Ministry of Defence headed by Winston Churchill, the most outspoken critic of the administration's foreign policy

(Dutton, 1985, 319). Austen Chamberlain died suddenly in March 1937; his half-brother became Prime Minister ten weeks later.

Whatever Austen Chamberlain might have thought, the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland met a muted official response in London and Paris. The French, having almost completed a fortified barrier against a German invasion (the Maginot line), were less concerned about the Rhineland by 1936. Any aggressive reaction to Hitler's dramatic move would have to be coordinated with Britain; and (probably to the French government's relief) the British government offered words of sympathy but no material support. In fact, while AJP Taylor was exaggerating when he described Hitler's reabsorption of the Rhineland as 'a success for British policy', it was not entirely unwelcome to the Baldwin government (Taylor, 1964, 132). After all, in the previous year that government had signed a naval treaty with Germany, which gave a comfortable margin of superiority to British vessels but nevertheless allowed German naval rearmament to levels which clearly breached the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. In answer to the argument that 1936 marked the last chance for Britain and France to stop the process which led to the Second World War, Taylor points out that even if French troops had succeeded in throwing their armed enemies out of the Rhineland, Germany would have continued to exist, harbouring redoubled resentments and merely awaiting a better opportunity to strike back. However, Taylor himself presents Hitler as a gambler whose dominant position in German politics depended on the success of his calculations; and if this throw of the dice had proved unsuccessful, it might have been his last, since at this stage there were still plenty of highly placed German officers who wanted to revert to Stresemann's measured approach to the revision of Versailles and Locarno. By sharp contrast, the political leaders of Britain and France felt that they enjoyed public trust precisely because of their refusal to take risks with the lives of their fellow citizens; as a result of their inaction, Hitler's successive gambles could be made to look like the strategic masterstrokes of an inspired leader.

The role of public opinion

As we have seen, although British politicians had to acknowledge the importance of public support for their policy in the era of total war and universal suffrage, this factor was difficult to evaluate, and it was understandable that they tended to draw concrete conclusions from questionable evidence. Historians of the inter-war period – even eminent ones – also have to resort to generalisations. For example, EH Carr wrote that after an initial thirst for vengeance against Germany at the end of the First World War, 'passions on the British side abated rapidly'. Indeed, Carr felt confident enough to explain the changing mood: 'Time-honoured British

conceptions of fair play and chivalry' caused a reaction in Germany's favour. All that was missing from Carr's analysis was an allusion to the equally traditional British preference for the 'underdog'. This might have been true, but it also could just be a rationalisation of the changing attitude of the British government and leading newspapers (Carr, 1937, 50).

A fascinating (and famous) example of perceptions of public opinion influencing foreign and defence policy was Stanley Baldwin's attempt to defend his coalition (more usually known by the misnomer 'National') government's record on rearmament in a Parliamentary debate of November 1936. Baldwin's case was that he and his colleagues had become alarmed by developments in Europe three years earlier; in fact, he would have been justified in dating the end of complacency to March 1932, when the Ten Year's Rule was dropped. However, a by-election at East Fulham in October 1933 had resulted in a surprising defeat for the Conservative candidate, who was criticised strongly for supporting British rearmament. Baldwin could also have alluded to the notorious decision of the Oxford Union in February 1933, by 275 votes to 153, to oppose the idea of fighting for 'King and Country'; or the rather more substantial snapshot of public opinion provided by the National Declaration, or 'Peace Ballot', organised by the League of Nations Union and held between November 1934 and June 1935. Eleven million people – nearly two fifths of Britain's adult population – cast a vote, but only 60 per cent endorsed the use of military action to resolve international disputes if all else failed. On this evidence, Baldwin argued, he could not have asked the voters to back a full-scale programme of rearmament in a general election; his government had won an overwhelming majority in 1935, and he chose to interpret this as a 'mandate' for a more tentative rearmament (*Hansard, House of Commons Debates*, 12 November 1936, Vol. 317, col. 1144).

To some critics, what Baldwin called his 'appalling frankness' on that occasion was, frankly, appalling. Churchill was not alone in thinking that the Prime Minister had confessed openly to putting the electoral interests of his party before the security of his country. Baldwin could also be accused of having deliberately misled the public during the 1935 election campaign about the gravity of European threats. Whatever the merits of these arguments, Baldwin certainly gave the impression that while he and his colleagues had been aware of growing dangers in 1933, the public was too bovine to understand – and (for whatever reason) the government had not even bothered trying to enlighten them. In case the implications of his remarks offended some voters, Baldwin made sure that his 1936 speech included some flattery of a public who 'may come a little late, but my word, they come with a certainty when they do come'. Yet his avowal that 'I shall always trust the instincts of our democratic people' came hard on the heels of eloquent testimony which suggested that, in 1933 at least, those 'instincts' had been entirely untrustworthy. On his own account, Baldwin had often rehearsed a theory 'that a democracy is always two years behind the dictator'. If true, this

suggested that the leaders of a democracy had a duty to be at least two years *ahead* of their own voters, leading public opinion rather than pandering to it. Ironically, while 'East Fulham frightened the government out of what senses they had', AJP Taylor thought that this reaction merely exemplified the common tendency of politicians to exaggerate the electoral importance of foreign affairs. Domestic issues certainly played a major role in a by-election result which in any case coincided with a more general Labour recovery from a disastrous showing in the 1931 general election (Taylor, 1965, 367).

Neville Chamberlain had wanted to take a more robust line on rearmament in the 1935 general election campaign, albeit for narrowly partisan reasons (Self, 2006, 253). But when he took over the premiership from Baldwin in May 1937, Chamberlain was far more proactive than his predecessor in pursuing appeasement of Britain's potential enemies (Controversy 3.2). Chamberlain wanted to *mould* public opinion rather than to trail behind it, which would have been a laudable intention had he not wanted to lead opinion in the wrong direction. He took considerable pains to influence the press, with the help of shadowy assistants well versed in the dark arts of manipulation. When challenged about this practice in the House of Commons the Prime Minister blithely denied that it was happening (Price, 2010, 104–5). In this respect, at least, Chamberlain was doing his best to make up some ground on the dictators.

Final steps to war

The main problem with Chamberlain was not his novice status in the field of foreign policy but rather an excessive confidence in his own capacity. He disliked Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary he had inherited when he succeeded Baldwin as Prime Minister in 1937; and although his subsequent defenders have pointed out that the policy differences between the two men were relatively trivial, these were bound to be magnified in Eden's mind by the Prime Minister's tendency to embark on important initiatives without consulting him. Like many interventionist premiers, Chamberlain also disliked the Foreign Office, and it was certainly true that the department housed several powerful officials (notably the Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Robert Vansittart) who loathed Germany. Some Prime Ministers might have seen this as a reason to pause and reflect whether their policy was really in the national interest, but Chamberlain was not made from such flexible materials.

After the remilitarisation of the Rhineland the course of events allowed little opportunity for anyone to pause for reflection. In July 1936 – just before the opening of the Olympic Games, which had been awarded to Germany in the pre-Hitler days of 1931 – civil war broke out in Spain. German troops and aircraft were involved from an early stage, although Italy played a more prominent

role in the conflict, which ended in 1939 with the toppling of the democratically elected Popular Front government. In March 1938 Hitler skilfully exploited disorder in Austria to establish an unopposed union of that country with Germany – the *Anschluss* which the Treaty of Versailles had explicitly prohibited. This latest of many breaches in the peace terms was particularly ominous, since it raised the possibility that Woodrow Wilson's principle of 'self-determination' could now be utilised against the victorious peacemakers. The significant German-speaking minority living in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia – now incorporated within Czechoslovakia – were 'stirred to ungovernable excitement' by the *Anschluss* (Taylor, 1964, 191). Czechoslovakia was an ally of Soviet Russia (since 1935) as well as France, but the Soviet commitment to go to war over Czechoslovakia would not take effect unless France acted first, and France did not want to act. In effect, Chamberlain rescued France from its moral dilemma by taking charge of this stage of appeasement, leading to the Munich conference of September 1938 at which – in the absence of the Czechs and the Russians – Britain, France and Italy agreed to the German annexation of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia.

If history had really come to a '.' at this point, the British policy of appeasing Germany might have been judged at least a partial success. What seemed in hindsight like abject national humiliations – Chamberlain taking repeated flights across Europe to hear Hitler's latest demands and then bullying other states into compliance – might have seemed excusable, since it could be squared with the logic of Locarno and the procedure (if not the active participation) of the League of Nations. Germany had made no move to revise its western borders; and its expansion in Central and Eastern Europe had been negotiated (after a fashion) rather than imposed after armed conflict. Chamberlain's idea that Hitler should sign a document committing his country to peaceable methods in future, and hinting that relations between Germany and Britain should be cooperative, might look sensible; waving the document around in triumph on his arrival back in Britain could be excused; and even his appearance at the window of 10 Downing Street to claim that he had brought back 'peace with honour' would not seriously have been held against him. Significantly, the deal had been struck without any help from the US, whose Congress had passed a Neutrality Act in 1935 and whose President, Roosevelt, had been rebuffed by Chamberlain in January 1938 when he floated the idea of an international conference. If, for better or worse, Britain was asserting a leadership role in global affairs, Chamberlain's personal responsibility for the policy had been cemented in February 1938 when Anthony Eden resigned from the Foreign Office.

Unfortunately for Chamberlain and those who continued to hope for a peaceful end to the nightmare that the advent of Hitler had triggered, historical events continued to happen. On 9 November 1938 the murder of a German official of the embassy in Paris gave Hitler a pretext to turn petty persecution into more

draconian action. *Kristallnacht* unleashed a wave of retribution against German Jews, whose homes, shops and synagogues were attacked and looted, and thousands were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. At least *Kristallnacht* proved that Hitler could be regarded as a man of his word, when he issued threats rather than promises and felt sufficiently strong to fulfil them. Those who had studied Hitler's profession of faith, *Mein Kampf* (1925), might have been surprised that he had postponed a concerted campaign of violence against German Jews for so long after his seizure of dictatorial powers in 1933.

In March 1939 – just a few days before the Spanish Civil War ended in another defeat for democracy – Hitler took advantage of unrest in the remaining parts of Czechoslovakia and sent his troops into the capital, Prague. According to AJP Taylor, in Britain '[t]here followed an underground explosion of public opinion such as the historian cannot trace in precise terms' (Taylor, 1964, 251). Certainly, Chamberlain was shaken by an increased level of criticism among Conservative backbenchers, and newspaper editors, who had previously seemed reliable purveyors of the government's message. The Prime Minister finally realised that something would have to be done – not to tell Hitler that he had gone too far but to signal that there might be trouble ahead if he went any further. Assuming that Poland would be the next Nazi objective, at the end of March Britain and France agreed to guarantee its independence. By that time the predominantly German city of Memel, absorbed by Lithuania after the First World War, had been annexed by Hitler's Reich. On 7 April Italian troops invaded Albania. This prompted another British guarantee, this time to Greece and Romania. In practice – despite London's lingering hopes – this also marked the parting of the ways between Chamberlain and the Italian dictator, Mussolini, who had been regarded as a potential restraining influence on Hitler, even after his conquest of Abyssinia (1935–6), which destroyed any of the credibility the League of Nations retained following Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Using Mussolini as a potential brake on German expansion was like asking a fox cub to impose limits on its parents' hunting activities; only now, however, did Chamberlain confide privately that Mussolini was no better than 'a sneak and a cad' (Self, 2006, 359). In May 1939 Hitler and Mussolini signed a 'Pact of Steel' – an economic and military alliance to which Japan might also have adhered if it had not so obviously been directed against Britain and France rather than the Soviet Union.

As a practical proposition, the Polish guarantee was obviously futile – if Germany did choose to attack, there was no way that an effective Anglo-French force could be assembled in time, even if those countries had been determined (and sufficiently equipped) to fulfil their pledge. Since Britain and France had failed to act even against Hitler's infringement of the Munich agreement to respect what remained of Czechoslovakia, the German dictator had every reason to regard the Polish guarantee as yet another bluff which he could call without undue risk. After all, the British and the French had tacitly

accepted the German case in relation to the Sudetenland, and the moral argument about the status of Danzig seemed very similar. One might conclude that having done his best to appease the Germans and the Italians, Chamberlain had suddenly realised the necessity of some domestic appeasement to placate the 'resurgent determination to resist Hitler that had swept over the public, the opposition, the government backbenches and even members of his own cabinet' (Doerr, 1998, 245). Privately he continued to dangle inducements in the hope of satisfying Hitler's lust for *lebensraum*, and he dropped hints that the guarantee of Polish *independence* did not rule out revisions of its territorial boundaries.

There was one context in which the Polish guarantee *might* have made some sense – if the Soviet Union was also a party to the agreement. However, this presupposed that the Poles and the Soviets were on good terms, whereas recent evidence demonstrated that, of the predatory dictators on their eastern and western doorsteps, the Polish government preferred Hitler to Stalin. There is also ample evidence that Chamberlain shared this preference; in common with many Conservatives, he regarded 'Bolshevism' as something akin to a plague which could sweep across the whole of Europe, whereas even in 1939 he could still regard Nazi ideology as a malady which only afflicted people (mainly German) whose reasoning powers had been disturbed by the injustices of Versailles. Grudging respect for the Red Army might have persuaded Chamberlain to soften his view of the Soviet Union, but, in view of Stalin's recent murderous purges of senior officers, it was widely believed to be far weaker than its Tsarist counterpart had been back in 1914 – and even then it had not been able to sustain its initial attack on Germany's eastern flank. Even in April 1939 Chamberlain clung to the hope that war could be avoided, which meant that he could regard an alliance with the 'contagious' Soviets as a very last resort. When, in that month, the Soviet Union proposed a treaty of mutual assistance with Britain and France, complete with guarantees of the states on the Soviet border, Chamberlain procrastinated before suggesting a revised agreement under which the Soviets would offer help to the Western powers without receiving any guarantee in return. Naturally this one-sided deal was rejected by Stalin.

In May 1939 the British government authorised more serious talks with the Soviet Union, and eventually a deputation was despatched to discuss military cooperation. However, Stalin had already opened clandestine conversations with the Germans. On 17 August 1939 the Soviet talks with Britain and France broke down because of the reiterated Polish refusal to allow the Red Army to infiltrate their territory in order to fight the Germans. Less than a week later the Nazi and Soviet regimes signed a non-aggression pact. Despite repeated warnings that something like this might happen, the deal came as a disagreeable surprise to Chamberlain, who could now add Stalin (and, at last, Hitler) to his 'sneak and cad' list alongside Mussolini. His official response was that the pact made no difference to the Polish guarantee, but the Soviets saw things the other way round.

By guaranteeing Poland (however ineffectually) the British had tacitly interposed themselves between Hitler and Russia. At worst, when Hitler finally decided to tear up the pact with Stalin and invade the Soviet Union through Poland, he would now be faced with a war on two flanks; and since the deal with Hitler allowed the Soviets to annex slightly more than half of Polish territory, their own country would be furnished with an extensive buffer zone to buy some time for defensive preparations.

Whatever the motives behind Britain's lame attempt to include the Soviet Union within an anti-German alliance, its failure, and the subsequent Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, can only have made Adolf Hitler feel that the gamble he had already decided upon – a full-scale invasion of Poland – was more likely to be a winning one. Whether or not its armed forces prevailed in the ensuing struggle, in crucial respects Britain was bound to be a loser.

Conclusions: Liberalism, Realism or a mixture of both?

The foregoing discussion of British foreign policy in the decades before 1945 is necessary and useful, not just as 'background' to the post-1945 period, but also because it allows us to engage critically with the theoretical framework of IR (Chapter 1).

Marxist observers would emphasise the economic aspects of European disputes; and, as we have seen, these factors were of enormous underlying importance. However, in respect to relations between Britain and Germany this explanatory framework seems inadequate. From 1919 onwards British policy makers were anxious to restore Germany's status as a prosperous trading partner, and as a new war approached they were even willing to contemplate German colonial expansion. The most effective Marxist card in this game is the British reluctance to forge an alliance with the Soviet Union as war approached in 1939. However, although Chamberlain and his political allies might have preferred Hitler's brand of tyranny to the Stalinist regime, there were plenty of British anti-communists (like Churchill) who favoured a deal with the Soviets; and although in hindsight Hitler's Reich posed the more potent threat to the capitalist order, even from the Marxist perspective it must be difficult to decide whether Stalin or Hitler was a greater friend to the interests of the European proletariat.

Of the mainstream theories which can be brought to bear on British foreign policy, this leaves Liberalism and Realism. It would be wrong to underestimate the extent to which British imperialists of the nineteenth century had been actuated by a self-adopted mission to elevate the human condition, however much their efforts might be execrated today; equally, those who believed that global free trade would eventually lift all boats way above their existing level were often (if not

always) sincere. One scholar has argued that a key reason for Britain's failure to prevent the Second World War was its 'pursuit of conciliation and tolerance to the point of failure to recognize [Nazi] evil, and in evil danger' (Reynolds, 1954, 167). On this view, British policy makers seem to stand accused of being too saintly for their own good, putting moral values above the kind of cynical calculation which, if backed by timely actions, might have kept their country out of war. As we have seen, public opinion was a significant factor in British foreign policy between the wars, even if it could not be measured with precision and often acted as a pretext for decisions which would have been taken anyway. The League of Nations Union, which at its peak attracted around 400,000 members, constituted a force which no government could entirely have ignored; and it seems clear that Stanley Baldwin, at least, was strongly affected by a general revulsion against a possible recurrence of total war fought with even more destructive weapons.

However, British policy between the wars is susceptible to a different construction. 'Conciliation and tolerance' sounds like a motto for the League of Nations, and senior British politicians certainly endorsed the idea of collective security in theory. Yet when the League's system of economic sanctions against recalcitrant states came into conflict with perceived national interests – as it did over Italy's aggression against Abyssinia in 1935 – Britain (and France) made only token efforts to implement the measures before abandoning them entirely in the summer of 1936 (after Neville Chamberlain had described the policy as 'the very midsummer of madness' and attacked the concept of sanctions because they could easily lead to war (Northedge, 1966, 424–5)). On the face of it, Britain had taken a constructively conciliatory role in the negotiations which led to the Treaties of Locarno; but even this prize-winning effort featured an element of 'cynical calculation', because it left open the possibility that if Germany revived it could expand its borders eastwards rather than directly threatening Britain's key interests.

Insofar as Britain was forced to take a 'conciliatory' role in Europe, this ultimately arose from the infringements of the principle of national self-determination included in the Treaty of Versailles – in the shaping of which Britain had played a leading role. In other elements of the post-1918 settlement Britain had taken control of territories without consultation of their inhabitants – indeed, in 1917 its politicians had even promised a homeland for the Jewish people without paying the slightest heed to Arab opinion. After the war these champions of 'tolerance and conciliation' tried to repress independence movements in longer-established imperial 'possessions', like Ireland and India. In this context one need only consider Neville Chamberlain's bleat of incredulity in September 1938 at the thought that Britons were preparing for war 'because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing'. At the same time that Germany was preparing to attack Czechoslovakia individuals who had never heard the name Balfour were being killed in Palestine because 20 years earlier the British Cabinet had authorised a declaration which concerned another area 'of which it knew nothing'.

This is not, of course, to endorse a swing to the opposite extreme and claim that British policy between the world wars was uniquely wicked. Rather, the irresistible conclusion on the basis of concrete evidence – as opposed to the subsequent rationalisations of historians who liked to think that Britain had declined gracefully from its former status of 'top nation' – is that the statesmen and officials who took decisions on the country's behalf were actuated throughout the period by an overriding concern for its own perceived interests. If this priority prompted actions which were satisfactory from the moral point of view, so much the better – especially since decisions of that kind were easier to sell to the voters of a newly democratised country. But if the nation's perceived interests lay in a different direction – say, in the 'toleration' of German and Italian involvement in the uprising against the elected Spanish government – that direction was invariably taken.

Britain's foreign policy in these years is thus best understood under the category of Realism. However, Realism never reflects an *objective* 'reality', for the good reason that no such standpoint exists. When British policy makers sought to pursue the national interest they had a particular vision of the 'nation' in mind. Moral values – particularly those which assumed the guidance of farsighted, incorruptible governments – had been integrated into that vision from the beginning of Britain's overseas expansion. As an Anglophile German writer put it in 1922, 'England is the single country in the world that, in looking after its own interest with meticulous care, has at the same time something to give to others' (Dibelius, 1930, 108). However, when the British acted in accordance with this approach, they tended to rely on the idea that their rule would bring incorruptible government in the long run – and in the long run, as John Maynard Keynes might have remarked, a lot of the country's colonial subjects met violent deaths. Some moral purpose could be salvaged after 1918 from the argument that Britain's role was to guide its colonies towards self-government; but the behaviour of the Dominions after 1918 showed that self-government led to the development of interests that differed from those of the 'mother country', let alone those of other Dominions. Although idealistic British intellectuals were inspired by the emergence of the Commonwealth to speculate about the eventual creation of a world government which would eradicate war, the legacy of Empire was just too complex for policy makers to resolve into a coherent policy approach in the relatively brief period between 1918 and 1939. As a result, patriotic politicians like Churchill felt instinctively that another world war was worth fighting in order to preserve Britain's global destiny, without having any clear idea of what Britain's position might look like after another full-scale conflict. All that was certain was that if Britain was to defeat Germany and its allies for a second time, the US would have to lend effective support – and however much people like Churchill might hope to persuade themselves and others that the US shared the British vision, a clear-sighted 'Realist' of 1939 would have been fairly certain that such was not the case.

Controversy 3.2 Neville Chamberlain – for and against

After decades of vilification as the 'man of Munich', who pulled out all the stops to appease Hitler – and who spoke publicly about the collapse of his policy as if it had been a tragedy for himself rather than for the British people as a whole (let alone the victims of Hitler's attempted extermination of the Jews) – Neville Chamberlain has found some doughty defenders since the 1980s. In 1989 John Charmley's forensic examination of Chamberlain's policy of 'appeasement' managed to imply that his opponents – Churchill and particularly Anthony Eden – were the real villains. Robert Self's magnificent biography of Chamberlain (2006) guides the reader to a sympathetic understanding of the terrible dilemmas he faced, while criticising the Prime Minister for obvious errors of judgement.

Chamberlain is an ideal candidate for posthumous rehabilitation, since he wrote frequently to his sisters in a way which allows biographers and revisionist historians a unique insight into the development of his policy towards the dictators. The main 'revisionist' points are:

- While 'appeasement' has become a dirty word in diplomacy since the Munich conference of 1938, there is nothing shameful about the attempt to avoid war, and Britain had been pursuing a policy of that kind even before the First World War.
- Chamberlain's version of appeasement bought Britain valuable time in which to prepare for war.
- Chamberlain inherited the indefensible Versailles settlement and took over from Baldwin as Prime Minister when it was clear that the League of Nations could not resolve the problems that were arising in central Europe.

It is reasonable to suggest that this defence of Chamberlain is the product of hindsight; since Hitler's Germany was eventually defeated, no one can ever know the full extent of the brutality that Nazi forces could have visited on conquered European peoples, whereas the revisionist historians can cite concrete evidence of the sufferings which were inflicted by Stalin's Soviet Union on the inhabitants of the territories which it occupied before and after 1945. Indeed, by the late 1980s, when Chamberlain's champions decided that it was safe to ride out in his defence, the Soviet Union itself was in terminal decline; it could appear that Churchill had been equally guilty of pointless 'appeasement' of a merciless dictator when he strained every sinew to get on good terms with Stalin.

However, none of this should have any bearing on an objective assessment of Chamberlain's record as a practitioner of foreign policy in the years during which he exercised a decisive influence. Against the positive points mentioned above one could argue that:

- Chamberlain *made* appeasement into a dirty word by continuing to conciliate Hitler (and Mussolini) after those dictators had shown themselves to be unreliable (at best). He met both Hitler and Mussolini and persisted in placing the most positive construction on their pronouncements to the end, whereas his lack of personal acquaintance with Stalin and Roosevelt did not prevent him from regarding the Soviet Union with profound suspicion and the US with contempt.
- The 'buying time for Britain' argument was used by Chamberlain himself before his death as a rationalisation of his conduct. Yet Chamberlain's diplomacy arose from desperation to preserve peace at all costs, rather than a desire to defer the outbreak to a more convenient time. His attitude was exposed all too obviously in his willingness to fly to Germany to talk with Hitler and his anxiety to bring back from Munich some evidence that Germany would rather not go to war with Britain. It is true that the resulting 'piece of paper' made Chamberlain seem like the chosen apostle of peace at home and in many other countries; but the leader of the country that really mattered could only draw the conclusion that Britain was so afraid of war that it would allow him a completely free hand outside Western Europe. From that perspective, far from buying time for Britain, Chamberlain's interventions merely ensured that the money it had started to spend on rearmament was not entirely wasted.
- While revisionists have a tendency to overreact against Chamberlain's dismal reputation by implying that he was in fact an infallible oracle of wisdom in the field of foreign policy, they would have done better to focus on his inheritance. When he became Prime Minister in 1937 Chamberlain had to find a way to resolve differences arising from the Treaty of Versailles in a political context which had been reshaped to his further disadvantage by the repercussions of the Great Depression. As one scholar of the period has put it, since Chamberlain had been 'dealt a near-impossible hand' by Versailles, the economic crisis which followed so soon after the promising Locarno Treaties gave rise to consequences which were 'well beyond the control of any diplomat' (Doerr, 1998, 272). The circumstances after 1937, in short, required a miracle worker. Unfortunately for revisionists, who want their readers to sympathise

with Chamberlain's personality as well as his policy, there is ample evidence that their hero deluded himself into thinking that he was indeed capable of diplomatic miracles – and his self-evaluation, rather than his decisions in themselves, leave him open to adverse historical judgements.

If nothing else, the controversy over Chamberlain's conduct and decisions in the last months of the 'fragile peace' suggests that the role of individuals should not be overlooked in studies of foreign policy. It is important not to draw general conclusions from a period of intense and continuous crisis like 1937–9. The British Foreign Office was still a very powerful institution at home and abroad, and the Secretary of State at any time was regarded as one of the most powerful members of the Cabinet, ranking alongside (if not slightly above) the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the extent to which Chamberlain succeeded in imposing his personal policy on the Foreign Office was an ominous precedent for the politics of a country which, having failed to prevent a Second World War, seemed certain to face plenty of serious problems in future, whatever the outcome of the new conflict.