

THE ANGLO-FRENCH MILITARY AND NAVAL  
STAFF CONVERSATIONS, 1906-1914

by

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## INDEX OF PERSONS

(Being an alphabetical list of personages diplomatic, political or military, whose role in the Conversations is prominent or important.)

H. H. Asquith (Lord Oxford and Asquith): Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1905-1908; Prime Minister, 1908-1916.

Sir Francis Bertie: British Ambassador at Paris, 1905-1919.

Joseph Caillaux: President of the (French) Council, 1911-1912.

Jules Cambon: French Ambassador to Germany, 1906-1914.

Paul Cambon: French Ambassador to the Court of Saint James, 1898-1920.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman: Prime Minister, 1905-1908.

Winston S. Churchill: President of the Board of Trade, 1908-1910; Home Secretary, 1910-1911; First Lord of the Admiralty, 1911-1915.

George Clémenceau: President of the Council, 1906-1909.

M. Cruppi: French Foreign Minister (under M. Monis), in the spring 1911.

Théophile Delcassé: French Foreign Minister, 1898-1905; Minister of the Marine (under Poincaré), 1912-1913.

M. Doumergue: President of the Council/Foreign Minister, 1914.

Général Dubail: French Chief of General Staff, 1911.

General Spencer Ewart: Director of Military Operations, 1906-1910.

Admiral Sir John A. Fisher: First Sea Lord, 1904-1910.

Général Foch: Director of the "Ecole Supérieure de la Guerre", 1911; Commander of the (French) VIIIth Corps.

Sir Edward Goschen: British Ambassador at Berlin, 1905-1914.

Sir Edward Grey (Lord Grey of Fallodon): British Foreign Secretary, 1905-1916.

General James Grierson: Director of Military Operations, 1904-1906.

R. B. (Lord) Haldane: Secretary of State for War, 1905-1912; Lord Chancellor, 1912-1915.

Sir Charles Hardinge : Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 1906-1910.

Colonel (later: General) A. Huguet: Military Attaché to the French Embassy in London, 1904-1912.

The Marquess of Lansdowne: British Foreign Secretary 1900-1905.

General Sir Neville Lyttleton: British Chief of General Staff, 1904-1908.

R. McKenna: First Lord of the Admiralty, 1908-1911.

General Sir W. Nicholson: Chief of Imperial General Staff, 1908-1912.

Sir Arthur Nicolson (Lord Carnock): Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1910-1916.

Général Vicomte de Panouse: Military Attaché to the French Embassy in London, 1912-1914.

Raymond Poincaré: French President of the Council, 1912-1913; President of the Republic, 1913-1920.

M. Rouvier: French President of the Council, 1904-1906; also Foreign Minister from June 1905 to March 1906.

Capitaine de Saint-Seine: Naval Attaché to the French Embassy in London.

Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson: First Sea Lord, 1910-1912.

General Sir Henry Wilson: Director of Military Operations, 1910-1914.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis has for its subject the Anglo-French Military and Naval Staff Conversations. These "Conversations" consisted of direct verbal and written communications between the British and French War Offices and Admiralties, for the purpose of elaborating joint plans for possible armed co-operation both on land and on the seas, against an eventual German aggression.

These Anglo-French Staff Conversations began in January, 1906, and continued right up to July, 1914. They were conducted under a veil of secrecy, and were formally revealed to the public only one day before Britain went to war. From the very start to the very end, they were held - by both the British and the French Governments - to be "purely hypothetical and absolutely non-committal."

The purpose of this thesis is to trace and to study the history of the Conversations, from their political aspect. The technical nature and development of the Conversations (the military segment of which has<sup>1</sup> already been studied<sup>1</sup>,) will be dealt with, only in their broad outline and in their more general and pertinent features, according to the requirements of our political account, and for the sake of intelligibility. For, as we have said, this thesis is concerned, not with the military or naval history, as such, of the conversations, but with the political and diplomatic developments impinging upon, and attending, them.

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1

For the technical history of the Military Conversations, we have J. E. Tyler's book, The British Army and the Continent, 1904-1914. Unfortunately, the naval Conversations have received no similar treatment.

The main questions we shall seek to answer, then, are, basically, four in number: (1) How did the Conversations come about, in the first place? (2) What were the role and the importance of the Conversations, in Anglo-French diplomatic relations? (3) Did the Conversations give rise to any commitments or obligations on the part of either country? (4) To what extent - and if so, in what manner - did they contribute to Britain's ultimate decision to join France against Germany, in August 1914?

To answer these questions, we have found it advisable to divide the thesis into three parts. Part I is an attempt to bring to light those international forces, diplomatic circumstances and personal efforts, which finally brought about the Conversations. In Part II, the Conversations are followed, from their inception, right up to the eve of the war. The emphasis (as we have already made clear) is not upon the technical evolution of the Staff Talks and joint plans, but upon the international and national developments (e.g. the Agadir crisis, in 1911, and the British naval redistribution of 1912) which occasioned this evolution, and particularly upon the Anglo-French diplomatic relations which attended it. Finally, Part III recounts the role of the Conversations in the British deliberations during that crucial week of July 31 - August 5, 1914, which culminated in Britain's decision to join France in the war. This closing chapter provides us with a clear definition of the diplomatic nature and significance of the Staff Conversations, and a definitive appraisal of the nature and extent of the obligations and commitments to which the Conversations gave rise.



## P A R T   I

### THE GENESIS OF THE CONVERSATIONS

To relate the Genesis of the Conversations is,  
basically, to answer the question -

"How is it that the Anglo-French  
Entente, which was nothing more,  
in April, 1904, than a grand set-  
tlement of colonial disputes,  
came to embrace, in January 1906,  
direct military conversations be-  
tween the Staffs of the two  
countries?"

## CHAPTER I

The birth of the Entente - Germany's displeasure -  
The "Coup de Tanger" - Lansdowne's reaction - The  
British proposal - Delcassé's error - The French  
Cabinet show-down - Delcassé's fall - Rouvier's  
disillusionment and reaction - Growing Franco-  
German tension.

On April 8, 1904, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, and the French Ambassador to London, M. Paul Cambon, signed an agreement that was in substance nothing more nor less than a grand settlement of all existing Colonial disputes between France and the United Kingdom.

Except for a few "secret" clauses, this Agreement was immediately made public.

The news of this grand settlement between these two great Powers was received, in most quarters of the world, with considerable enthusiasm - and perhaps no small relief. More than once, in the past few decades, had Anglo-French bickering over Colonial matters threatened to erupt in armed conflict: and Fashoda, perhaps the greatest of these clashes and only six years past, must still have been vivid in many a memory. Nowhere, however, did the Agreement receive a warmer welcome than in France and Great Britain themselves: with one voice the two nations proclaimed a new era - the Era of the Entente cordiale.

Naturally, the Anglo-French Agreement could not but make itself felt on the ultra-sensitive scales of European international relations. Prior to this Settlement, a certain "Continental order" had been established that excluded Great Britain altogether: on the one hand there had been the Triple Alliance, on the other, the Dual Alliance. Now Britain, often rebuffed by Germany and traditionally at odds with France, threatened to intrude upon this "Continental order"; for, having settled her differences with France, Britain had thereby provided for herself a "door" through which she might emerge from her "splendid isolation" - an isolation which, of late, had been more forced upon her than chosen.

No one was more aware than the Kaiser and his advisors of the possibilities inherent in this new Entente cordiale. True, the German Govern-

ment did pay lip service to the general chorus of "congratulations" attending the conclusion of the Settlement; but it did not view the Entente with relish. Anglo-French "good feelings" might well pave the way to an alliance: to the Germans this seemed more than likely - and was, therefore, an eventuality to be contended with promptly and at any cost.

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If the Germans desired an occasion and a pretext for "preventative measures" against a possible Anglo-French "alliance", they did not have far to look. The Moroccan question was on hand; and as it happened, Britain was, according to the terms of the 1904 Agreement, "committed" to France in the matter. Were the British required to make good their "commitment" to France, or France obliged to drop all her aspirations regarding Morocco, as a result of a Franco-German clash over Morocco, the Entente might well prove hollow....

Indeed, the Anglo-French Agreement of April 1904 included among its many points of settlement a clause (Article IX of Part I) according to which Britain, in return for a cessation of French hinderance in Egypt, promised France fullest diplomatic support in the latter's pursuit of her aspirations in Morocco.

It was upon this "link" in the Anglo-French bond that the Germans concentrated their efforts of disruption. - On March 31, 1905, (scarcely three weeks after the Russian "defeat" at Moukden,) the Kaiser made his first overt move - the "coup de Tanger". Weighing anchor in this Moroccan port, the Emperor paid tribute "to the sultan, as an independent sovereign",

trusting that "under His Sherifian Majesty's sovereignty, Morocco would remain free, and open to the peaceful competition of all nations without monopolies or exclusion."<sup>1</sup>

Was the main purpose of the Kaiser's visit to Tangier really "to do all that lay in his power to officially safeguard German interest in Morocco?"<sup>2</sup> - In view of the facts - of the extent of German interests in Morocco, and of the real French aspirations as defined to Britain, Spain and Italy - the Kaiser's formal pretext was mere nonsense. Both the British and French Governments saw in his gesture one sole purpose: to break up the Anglo-French Entente.

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The story of Britain's and France's reaction to this German disruptive pressure is in great part the story of the "diplomatic" genesis of the military and naval "conversations". Between April, 1905, and January 1906, Anglo-French reaction went through two phases (from the view-point of Anglo-French relations): the Delcassé-Lansdowne phase, and the Rouvier phase.

## II

The Lansdowne-Delcassé attempt to find a suitable "form" for Anglo-French cooperation, that would enable the two Governments effectively to cope with Germany's efforts of disruption, is of no small importance to our study. True, the attempt itself was to end in thorough misunderstanding, and in ignominious disaster for the French Foreign Minister; nevertheless

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1

G. & T., III, 63 (No. 12)

2

Ibid.

it did serve an historic purpose in that it provided an occasion for the French Ambassador in London, M. Paul Cambon, to conceive a policy of his own that would ultimately lead to Military and Naval "conversations", and brought in a successor to M. Delcassé that would be amenable to M. Cambon's views and policy.

The Lansdowne-Delcassé efforts to draw up an effective method of cooperation can be said to have begun under Lord Lansdowne's initiative, some three weeks after the Kaiser's Tangier visit, on the occasion of a rumour that Germany was about to ask for a port on the Moorish coast.

On April 22 the British Foreign Secretary cabled to his Ambassador in Paris (Sir Francis Bertie) the following instructions:

It seems not unlikely that German Government may ask for a port on the Moorish coast.

You are authorized to inform Minister for Foreign affairs (M. Delcassé) that we should be prepared to join the French Government in offering strong opposition to such a proposal and to beg that if the question is raised French Government will afford us a full opportunity of conferring with them as to steps which might be taken in order to meet it.

German attitude in this dispute seems to me most unreasonable having regard to M. Delcassé's attitude and we desire to give him all the support we can.<sup>3</sup>

These instructions are of interest in that they contain the first formulation of the idea of Anglo-French "conferring". At this date, the idea was limited to the eventuality of Germany's requesting a Moorish port: one month later, it was to have become, in Lansdowne's mind, a principle of much broader scope.

Lord Lansdowne formulated - and proposed - this new principle

for the very first time on May 17 in the course of a conversation with the French Ambassador, M. Cambon. At a certain point in this conversation, when the discussion, having begun with the Abyssinian Railway question, turned upon the subject of the attitude of the German Government in Morocco and in other parts of the world, Lord Lansdowne - according to his account of the conversation to Sir Francis Bertie on the same day - put forward the proposal for Anglo-French "diplomatic concert" in the following terms:

..... I observed that the moral of all these incidents seemed to me to be that our two Governments should continue to treat one another with the most absolute confidence, should keep one another fully informed of everything which came to their knowledge and should, so far as possible, discuss in advance any contingencies by which they might, in the course of events find themselves confronted. As an instance of our readiness to enter into such timely discussions, I reminded His Excellency (M. Cambon) of the communication which had recently been made to the French Government by you at a moment when an idea prevailed that Germany might be on the point of demanding the cession of a Moorish port. His Excellency expressed his entire agreement with what I had said.....<sup>4</sup>

It would seem, however, that Lord Lansdowne's terms had been far less clear in the conversation itself than in his subsequent record to Bertie. M. Paul Cambon's account despatched to M. Delcassé on the following day contains some astonishing and serious differences:

..... Il (Lansdowne) me dit: "Nous vous avons promis notre appui au Maroc, et nous vous avons offert de nous concerter avec vous sur les mesures à prendre pour empêcher le Gouvernement allemand de s'établir sur les côtes marocaines". "Oui, ai-je répliqué, mais je doute fort que le comte de Tattenbach demande, et encore plus qu'il obtienne une concession de port. Je doute même que l'Empereur d'Allemagne

nourrisse contre nous des intentions hostiles; car nous avons pour nous l'opinion européenne.....Le seul moyen de le (l'Empereur) ramener à une saine appréciation des choses est de le convaincre de notre entente solide."

"Je partage votre sentiment, me répondit Sa Seigneurie, et dès à présent le Gouvernement britannique est tout prêt à s'entendre avec le Gouvernement français sur les mesures à prendre si la situation devenait inquiétante."

A cette proposition spontanée je lui répliquai que je ne voyais pas de raison de s'inquiéter, qu'il était dangereux de concerter des mesures ayant quelquefois pour effet d'augmenter l'excitation qu'elles ont pour but de calmer. "Mais ajoutai-je, je peux écrire à M. Delcassé que si les circonstances l'exigeaient, que si par exemple, nous aurions des raisons sérieuses de croire à une agression injustifiée, le Gouvernement britannique serait tout prêt à se concerter avec le Gouvernement français sur les mesures à prendre."

"Vous le pouvez, me dit Lord Lansdowne, nous sommes tout prêts."

Il est bon d'enregistrer de pareilles déclarations pour répondre au besoin, aux bruits répandus contre la solidité des accords anglo-français, mais il est prudent de n'en parler qu'avec réserve.<sup>5</sup>

Lansdowne and Cambon parted, on that 17th of May, completely unaware of the fact that a misunderstanding had occurred. One week later they discovered this grievous fact; but their very efforts to correct this serious error - particularly Cambon's efforts - only served to confuse the matter still more, and to lead the French Foreign Minister to wholly erroneous - and for him disastrous - conclusions concerning the British proposal and Lansdowne's true intentions.

Lansdowne was the first to suspect a misunderstanding. His discovery came about through a letter Cambon wrote to him on May 24:

Privée.

Le 24 mai, 1905.

Cher Lord Lansdowne,

Lors de notre dernier entretien relatif au Maroc vous avez bien voulu me rappeler le memorandum remis à M. Delcassé le 24 Avril dernier par Sir Francis Bertie



et vous avez ajouté que, dès à présent, si les circonstances l'exigeaient, si par exemple nous avions des raisons sérieuses de croire à une agression injustifiée de la part d'une certaine Puissance, le Gouvernement britannique serait tout prêt à se concerter avec le Gouvernement français sur les mesures à prendre.

J'ai fait part à M. Delcassé de cette communication dont il a apprécié l'importance et dont il m'a exprimé sa satisfaction.

Votre bien dévoué,  
(sd.) Paul Cambon. 6

On the very next day the British Foreign Secretary sent off to Cambon a personal letter in which he carefully restated his proposal for a diplomatic concert in the very same terms he had used in his account to Sir Francis Bertie on the 17th. In the last paragraph of the letter, Lansdowne tries to make clear the difference - in emphasis if not in substance - between his own proposal and Cambon's interpretation:

I do not know that this account differs from that which you have given to M. Delcassé, but I am not sure that I succeeded in making quite clear to you our desire that there should be full and confidential discussion between the two Governments, not so much in consequence of some acts of unprovoked aggression on the part of another Power, as in anticipation of any complications to be apprehended during the somewhat anxious period through which we are at present passing.

Yours, etc.  
LANSDOWNE 7

On May 29, M. Cambon transmitted Lansdowne's letter to M. Delcassé, with a covering note to which he appended a codified postscript marked "highly confidential":

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6

G. & T., III, No. 95; D.D.F. 2e S., VI, No. 455.

7

G. & T., III, No. 95; D.D.F., 2e S., VI, No. 465.

P.S. - Il résulte de ce document (la lettre de Lord L. du 25 courant)..... que Lord Lansdowne reconnaît m'avoir spontanément offert de discuter par avance les mesures à prendre en vue de toutes les éventualités. Mais dans la déclaration que j'avais transmise à Votre Excellence (M. Delcassé), il n'était question d'une proposition de concert que dans le cas où nous aurions de sérieuses raisons d'appréhender une agression injustifiée.

Le Principal Secrétaire d'Etat rectifie sur ce point, en lui donnant une portée plus large et plus prochaine, le sens de sa déclaration.

Ce n'est plus à une entente en cas d'agression qu'il nous convie, c'est à une discussion immédiate et à un examen de la situation générale.

Une réponse à de pareilles avances est fort délicate: se taire c'est décourager un bon vouloir évident et se donner des airs de reculer. Accepter la conversation, c'est entrer dans la voie d'une entente générale qui constituerait en réalité une alliance, et j'ignore si le Gouvernement de la République serait disposé à nouer de pareils accords.

Peut-être pourrai-je me borner à dire de votre part à Lord Lansdowne que vous avez lu sa lettre avec le plus grand intérêt et que nous pratiquons déjà en fait cette politique d'entente et de confiance qui répond aux désirs de Sa Seigneurie.....

Ce langage, tout en étant conforme à la stricte vérité et en constatant l'accord de fait existant entre nous, nous dispenserait de nous expliquer sur des projets d'accords généraux.

Je serais obligé à Votre Excellence de me donner des directions à ce sujet.<sup>8</sup>

On the next evening (May 30) Cambon received from his Foreign Minister cabled instructions that went completely counter to the Ambassador's advice:

En arrivant au ministère où le Roi d'Espagne vient d'entrer après une réception enthousiaste, je trouve votre dépêche 196 (ci-haut). J'apprécie toute l'importance de la réponse de Lord Lansdowne à votre lettre privée 24 courant. Dites-lui que j'en ai pris connaissance avec une grande satisfaction, que je suis d'avis, moi aussi, que les deux Gouvernements doivent plus que jamais se témoigner une

entière confiance et que je suis prêt à examiner avec lui toutes les faces d'une situation qui ne laisse pas en effet d'être quelque peu inquiétante. Je me propose d'entretenir, au premier moment de liberté, le Président de la République et le Président du Conseil.<sup>9</sup>

To Cambon, these instructions must have been rather alarming. Not only did they discard his counsel in a most peremptory fashion, but still more important, they were in diametric opposition to the express views and stand of the French Prime Minister, and bore signs of unusual haste and temerity. The French Ambassador promptly took it upon himself to withhold this communication from Lord Lansdowne, and sent off to Delcassé the following private letter (June 1st);

Je n'ai pas encore parlé à Lord Lansdowne de sa lettre relative à une entente générale entre nos deux Gouvernements et je n'ai pas usé de votre télégramme 139 (No. 470).

Une conversation de ce genre ne peut être engagée sans que toutes ses conséquences aient été envisagées et sans l'assentiment de M. Rouvier.

Vous vous rappelez son dernier mot en sortant de l'Elysée: "Surtout ne vous concertez pas."

A moins qu'il n'ait changé complètement d'idées, il me semble difficile que vous preniez sur vous de répondre à des ouvertures qui, je vous le disais dans ma dépêche du 29 mai dernier (No. 465), nous meneront à une alliance.

Que répondre à Lord Lansdowne s'il propose de réunir en vue d'éventualités redoutables les chefs d'Etat-major de nos armées de terre et de mer?

C'est à une suggestion de ce genre que nous serions exposés, si nous nous prêtions trop facilement à un entretien général.

Vous ne serez sûrement pas suivi par vos collègues du Cabinet ni par l'opinion et l'on vous accuserait de préparer la guerre.

Je crois donc plus prudent de répondre dans des termes assez cordiaux pour ne pas décourager la bonne volonté de Lord Lansdowne, et assez vagues pour éloigner des propositions de concert immédiat.

Le séjour du Roi d'Espagne à Paris vous occupe suffisamment pour qu'on n'attende pas de vous des réponses trop

promptes à toutes les questions dont vous êtes saisi.<sup>10</sup>

In Paris, this letter drew no reply. For, at this point a French Ministerial conflict that had been smouldering for some time had already passed into its last stage prior to eruption.

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For some weeks, now, an abyss had been steadily widening between the President of the Council and his Foreign Minister. Rouvier, alarmed by the German Government's attitude over Morocco and by their blank refusal to deal with M. Delcassé, had soon begun to view his Foreign Minister's policy with dissatisfaction. This fact, coupled with the poor personal relations that existed between the two men, made the Prime Minister unduly receptive to certain German under-hand overtures. Through private intermediaries, the German Government secretly informed Rouvier that a Franco-German "détente" and a subsequent "rapprochement" could be expected only (1) if Delcassé left the Quai d'Orsay and if (2) Anglo-French relations became less intimate: otherwise, these sources intimated, the "Army group" in Berlin might well get the upper-hand. By early May, therefore, Rouvier was already contemplating a clash with Delcassé.

The clash occurred in the first week of June, shortly after the Spanish Monarch's departure from Paris.

The Foreign-Minister himself provided the occasion - by proposing (or so it would seem) an "alliance" with Britain.

Drawing upon Lansdowne's offer for an immediate "diplomatic con-

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<sup>10</sup>

Ibid., No. 480.

cert" and - ironically enough - Cambon's unfavorable critique of the proposal, Delcassé apparently emerged with the notion that the British were really putting forward a muted offer of alliance. The idea of an Anglo-French alliance apparently met with Delcassé's eager approval: for, as soon as King Alphonsus left the Capital, the French Foreign Minister approached the Prime Minister with this proposal.

As was to be expected, Delcassé's suggestion met with violent and almost fear-stricken opposition from the French Prime Minister, who immediately consulted the President of the Republic and hurriedly summoned his Ministers to a Cabinet meeting to settle the matter.

On that "emergency" Cabinet meeting of June 6, which was to bring about Delcassé's fall and Rouvier's advent to the Quai d'Orsay, we have a witness account (written a few hours after the scene). This account is important, for it brings to light the real issues upon which Delcassé was to meet with his downfall, and exposes the frame of mind with which Rouvier entered the Foreign Office.

The author of the account is M. Joseph Chaumié, who was at that time Minister of Justice. According to this witness,<sup>11</sup> Rouvier called the meeting on the 5th, and at ten A.M. the next day all the Cabinet ministers but Rouvier and Delcassé were assembled, and it was only one hour later that the President of the Council and the Foreign Minister made their appearance. The two late-comers were ashen and still visibly shaken: they had just taken leave of the President of the Republic. Rouvier called the meeting to order and quickly and briefly exposed to the Cabinet the purpose

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D.D.F., 2e S., VI, p. 601 ff., Annex I.

of the meeting. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, he said, wished to pursue a policy which he, the Prime Minister, believed would imperil the nation. In view of the vital importance and of the urgency of the question, the Prime Minister wished to put it to the Cabinet for their decision.

Delcassé expose alors sa politique. Il fait connaître que l'Angleterre a fait des ouvertures en vue d'une action commune avec la France contre l'Allemagne. Ces ouvertures ne sont pas bornées à des simples pourparlers. Des notes écrites ont déjà été échangées. Il lit le texte de la dernière qui sans entrer dans le détail d'exécution dit très nettement l'offre par l'Angleterre de cette action commune. Il estime qu'il y a tout intérêt à conclure cette alliance. Sans doute l'Allemagne est menaçante, pour le cas où elle sentirait qu'on fait un acte quel conque qui soit hostile envers elle, mais il croit que c'est là une menace vaine, un bluff; que l'Allemagne ne veut pas faire la guerre, qu'elle ne la fera pas, ainsi que cela résulte des renseignements qu'il a recueillis, et de l'opinion de tous nos Ambassadeurs à l'étranger. "Prenons garde", dit-il, "si nous refusons les offres de l'Angleterre, que celle-ci, qui pour le moment veut faire cause commune avec nous pour détruire la marine et ruiner le commerce dont elle redoute la concurrence, ne se tourne bientôt du côté de l'Allemagne, qu'alors nous soyons isolés, exposés à une attaque, en danger de perdre la bataille en Europe, et d'être au loin dépouillés de nos colonies."<sup>12</sup>

Rouvier then took the floor. According to the same witness, he argued thus:

"Elle (l'Allemagne) connaît les pourparlers engagés avec l'Angleterre, elle sait que le moment serait bien choisi pour nous attaquer à présent, et de toutes les communications reçues, . . . , il résulte que ses menaces ne sont pas vaines, mais très sérieuses au contraire. Rouvier a été prévenu que si nous signons la résolution d'action commune avec l'Angleterre, l'Allemagne, qui ne peut manquer d'être avisée, entrera chez nous sans déclaration de guerre. . . "Or (dit Rouvier) sommes-nous en état de faire la guerre?"

Evidemment non."<sup>13</sup>

In view of the ever growing feud between the two principal personages over the previous few weeks, and in view of the true nature of the Lansdowne proposal of May 17 and 25, the Cabinet meeting of the 6th, as recounted by M. Chaumié, reads like a nightmare - so overwrought is the atmosphere, so strident its notes, so violent are its distortions, so blatant its flights from reality. For dénouement, there is the unanimous verdict in favor of Rouvier, and Delcassé's resignation: the verdict and the resignation come as nothing less than a "catharsis" to the witnesses...

And indeed, this experience of a catharsis seems to have swept the entire nation, at the news of Delcassé's departure from office. For, this departure drew few immediate regrets from the French press. - In fact, it was almost with a sigh of relief from the public, that Rouvier took over French Foreign Affairs. France's sudden release from the threat of "entanglement" with the British seemed to solicit just as much relief as did her release from the threat of German aggression.

It was in accordance with this public state of mind that Rouvier now attempted to set the course of French diplomacy.

### III.

From the story of those fateful days of May and June there emerges a clear picture of the attitudes and policies of the main personages who were to dominate the diplomatic scene in France and Britain for the next six months. In this section, we shall briefly survey the respective stands

of these leading persons, then pass on to a brief account of the course of events from Rouvier's entry into the diplomatic scene, to December of that year.

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In June, 1905, Rouvier assumed the added responsibility of directing French foreign affairs with but two thoughts in mind: to do all in his power to improve French relations with Germany, and to avoid at all costs any alliance or semblance of an alliance with Britain.

Rouvier's policy regarding Britain was intended to be ancillary to his policy towards Germany: it was meant to subserve his basic desire for a Franco-German "rapprochement". - As the Germans evidently took umbrage at the Anglo-French Entente, all Anglo-French intimacy and concerting must be brought to an end. For, in Rouvier's estimation, the French could more easily forego British assistance and even friendship than stand up to Germany's wrath.

In effect, Rouvier's early ideas on Anglo-French relations did not conflict too markedly with Cambon's own views on the matter. Undoubtedly, the French Ambassador in London was a champion of the Entente: as one of its main authors, he cherished it and wished nothing so much as that it should endure. But for him the Entente stood, above all (and perhaps exclusively) as a source of assurance to France - an assurance of diplomatic support in time of peace, and of possible armed assistance in the event of a Franco-German war. He did not wish to see the Entente become anything

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more than such an assurance to France. For this reason, he eschewed both the idea of an eventual Anglo-French Alliance, and even the idea of "diplomatic concerting." To him, France should strive to obtain from Britain the greatest diplomatic assistance possible; should strive, even, to obtain whatever promises she could of British armed assistance in the event of a Continental war: but, in her pursuit of these goals, France should never surrender, nor in the least way compromise, her absolute freedom of decision and of action in the diplomatic sphere.

Lansdowne had also - in common with Cambon - a dominating desire to preserve the Entente. For, he too had been a co-author and was a firm champion. In the face of German efforts to disrupt the Entente, however, the British Foreign Secretary could scarcely be expected to hold the same views as Cambon concerning the implementation of Anglo-French cooperation to meet the German attempts. Cambon could well afford to think only of French advantages and of French diplomatic freedom of action. Lansdowne, for his part, must take into account the British Government, Parliament and Public. Thus, while Britain was in fact committed to give France the fullest diplomatic support in Morocco, and wished, furthermore - for the sake of strengthening the Entente - to extend this diplomatic support over as vast an area as possible, still, she could not afford to follow the French diplomatic lead blindly and wordlessly. Should France ever embark upon a policy of which the British Government, Parliament or Public disapproved, and should she then demand of the British that they fulfill their pledge of diplomatic support - in this event, the British position would be untenable and the Entente would collapse....and Germany would have won the

game. For this reason, then, Lansdowne felt it wise that Britain should have a say in the formulation of French policy to meet German attempts in Morocco - and indeed, in any other area where German efforts towards Anglo-French disruption might make themselves felt. - It was to this end, precisely, that Lansdowne had proposed to Delcassé that they should "discuss in advance any contingencies by which they might, in the course of events find themselves confronted."

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There is no doubt that Lansdowne's idea of an immediate "diplomatic concert" to meet the current situation might well have proven a good and effective answer to the German efforts to break up the Entente. But for Lansdowne the prime concern was the preservation of the Entente itself. Thus, when Rouvier took over French Foreign affairs, early in June 1905, Lansdowne did not hesitate to drop his idea for fear of alienating the French Foreign Minister.

This does not mean, however, that with M. Rouvier's arrival on the scene, Lansdowne had decided to "lie low and wait": in point of fact, he deliberately avoided this. Rather, he chose to close his eyes on the whole "affair" of the 6th and to turn a deaf ear to whatever reverberations might ensue; and with scarcely a pause to "let the dust settle" in Paris, he simply continued his former policy of offering advice and lending support to the French whenever and wherever the occasion and need arose.

Needless to say, Lansdowne found an eager supporter and abettor in the French Ambassador in London. To the latter, British sympathy and sup-

port were the "pierre de touche" of any realistic French policy: without them, the French could have little hope for success in the diplomatic arena. Thus, less than three weeks after Delcassé's fall, Cambon was once more availing himself of Lansdowne's advice and diplomatic assistance. - And it would not be very long before Anglo-French relations had regained, thanks to the unstinted efforts of these two men, nearly all the harmony, and no little of the cordiality, of the pre-Rouvier days.

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If Rouvier put up so easily with this early resumption of Anglo-French cooperation, it was because his hopes for a Franco-German "rapprochement" collapsed at the very outset and thereby reduced to ashes whatever ideas of policy he may have had.

As we have seen, Rouvier brought with him to the Quai d'Orsay a new and most conciliatory tone towards Germany. Delcassé, he felt, had alienated the Germans, inhibited their "good will": he, Rouvier, would, with this new tone, surely "bring them round". By and large, the French people seemed to share his feelings (and perhaps his convictions): it was not that they particularly favoured the idea of a rapprochement with the Germans - Alsace-Lorraine imposed certain limits in this sense -; but that they did not like the policy (which they felt had been Delcassé's) of flouting the Germans, to the very brink of war.

Unfortunately, for Rouvier, the picture that quickly presented itself to him from the vantage-point of the Quai d'Orsay ran completely counter to all that he had imagined and presaged on the basis of previous, under-hand overtures. - Delcassé had been dismissed and the Anglo-French

"alliance" averted; but the German promise of "improved relations did not materialize. Less than three weeks after Delcassé's departure, Rouvier discovered, to his amazement and chagrin, that the German tone and demands were not to be modified. Germany still insisted on a conference to settle the Moroccan affair: she would not brook the thought of an amicable and reasonable settlement "à deux" - and still less the idea of a grand settlement, of the Anglo-French type, of all Franco-German differences.

From this first early encounter with Germany, Rouvier emerged the loser. Partly through consternation, inexperience and fear, he surrendered to the German demand for an international conference. This early experience proved as sobering as it was harsh: with a new sense of respect for "professional diplomacy", he wisely turned to his Staff at the Quai d'Orsay and to his diplomats abroad for advice and guidance, resolved to pay them greater heed.

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The men to whom Rouvier turned for assistance were diplomats and experts of unusual calibre. Among them were the Cambon brothers, Barrère, Révoil, Jusserand - to name but a few of the more prominent ones. These men had served under Delcassé during the whole of his long tenure of office: and, under him, they had played no small part in the formation of the "Delcassé" policy, and had learned to operate in unison and with the greatest mutual confidence, while all the same retaining an unusual degree of initiative in matters of policy.

This ability and harmony, on the part of his advisors, was to serve Rouvier in good stead. - But it was also to cost the new Foreign Secretary all hopes and chances for a novel departure in policy. Steadily, firmly, French foreign policy reverted to its "Delcasséan" pattern: towards Germany, an ever stiffening attitude, towards Britain, ever increasing confidence and reliance.

We have already described the resumption (if it can be called so) of Anglo-French relations. Now we must say a few words on Franco-German relations. For, it is, in great part, in the Franco-German struggle that the Military Conversations have their roots.

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On July 8, 1905, France ceded to the German demand for a Conference on the Moroccan Question. This early defeat had for effect to galvanize the French against further surrender to Germany. Now that the principle of a Conference was accepted, there remained for France and Germany to agree on a program for this conference.

From July to mid September a long, drawn-out diplomatic struggle ensued, almost exclusively between Germany and France, over the "basis" of such a program. For France, it was a question of having Germany concede the fact of French pre-eminent "political" interests over Morocco. For a long time, Germany remained recalcitrant; finally she surrendered: on September 26, Franco-German agreements were signed, whereby the German Government recognized the French claim.

Still, a program-project had yet to be agreed upon. - In less than a month, this too was realized.

Thus, by mid-October, the way was pretty well cleared for a Conference. This fact notwithstanding, Franco-German relations were, in reality, worsening rather than improving. From the French side, there came the Matin "revelations" of Stéphane Lausanne, who pretended to give the "inside story" of the Delcassé resignation. These so-called revelations caused considerable commotion on both sides of the Rhine. From the German side, on the other hand, there rose various speeches and declarations that betrayed Berlin's ever growing irritation over the German diplomatic "set-backs" of the last few weeks at the hands of the French, and over the ever dimming prospects of a diplomatic victory at the Conference that would soon be called. The Kaiser's "dry powder" speech and the Rosen declaration regarding the Moroccan police organization were two instances of this venting of German irritation.

Indeed, by mid-December, German ill temper and Franco-German hostility had reached such a pitch that rumours were beginning to pour in to Paris recounting strange and ominous military movements and preparations and other signs, beyond the Rhine.<sup>14</sup> One such rumour,<sup>15</sup> springing from the lips of the King of Spain, happened to arrest the French Foreign Minister's attention sufficiently for him to communicate it to his Ambassador in London and suggest certain "démarches".

As it happened, this particular communication and suggestion, against this background of high and ever-mounting Franco-German tension,

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<sup>14</sup>

D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, Nos. 218, 223, 227, 246, 302, 307, 318, 329, 332.

<sup>15</sup>

Ibid., Nos. 223 and 227.

happened to coincide with a certain recent event in Britain - a change of Government.

As we shall see in the next chapter, this coincidence was to give rise to a new departure in Anglo-French relations ... a new departure that would culminate, one month later, in Anglo-French naval and military "conversations" direct between staffs.

CHAPTER 2

Spanish rumours of imminent German aggression - Rouvier's request to Cambon - The New British Government - Cambon's preoccupations - Huguet's report on British Army strength - The First Huguet-Grierson conversation - Cambon's audience with King Edward and conversations with Grey and Sanderson - The second Huguet-Grierson conversation - Cambon's request to Rouvier - Rouvier's authorization.



## I

On December 13, 1905, the King of Spain, Alphonsus XIII, held an audience with the French Military Attaché in Madrid, Lieutenant-Colonel Cornulier-Lucinière. In this audience<sup>1</sup>, His Majesty made certain confidential revelations supporting the fears then current in Madrid (and in a good many Continental centres) that Germany was contemplating war with France.

In the most urgent tones, Alphonsus informed the Military Attaché that he had received letters from Berlin recounting the bellicose language used by the Emperor in intimate circles of Officers and before the "Gardes du corps"; that the correspondence of the Princes of Bavaria to the Court of Madrid was filled with ominous signs that Germany was determined to find grounds for a "definitive quarrel" with France and planned an aggression for the not-too-distant future; that, indeed, February 1906 had been pronounced as the moment for the aggression; and that, furthermore, He, Alphonsus, had, during his last visit to Berlin, been "solicited by the Emperor to concentrate His army corps, in the event of a war between France and Germany, in the vicinity of the Pyrenees and in sufficient numbers so as to force (the French) to immobilise a part of their own forces in that district."<sup>2</sup>

He himself, Alphonsus assured the French Attaché, definitely sympathized with the French; but there existed a strong pro-German element

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See the French Attaché's despatch of the 13th: D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 223, and that of the French Chargé d'Affaires at Madrid, dated the 14th, Ibid., No. 227.

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Ibid., No. 246: Rouvier to Cambon, Dec. 18.

in the Spanish Government, and furthermore there were powerful segments in the Public that might well deem it wise - in the event of a Franco-German war - to back the Germans. The King was far from sure that He could have his own views prevail ... Was the French Army actually sufficiently strong and ready to withstand a German aggression?

Rouvier, on reading the Madrid reports of this conversation, promptly decided to pass them on to his Ambassador to London and to suggest to the latter that he obtain Britain's assistance in an effort to keep Alphonse and Spain in the Anglo-French fold.

Vous penserez comme moi (he wrote to Paul Cambon on December 18<sup>3</sup>) que ce dangereux état de choses nous oblige à ne pas garder pour nous seuls les confidences du Roi d'Espagne et que le Roi d'Angleterre, qui nous a donné des marques si certaines de sa sympathie pour notre pays et de sa profonde compréhension de la communauté d'intérêts existant entre la France et l'Angleterre, doit être informé immédiatement des inquiétudes qu'Alphonse XIII vient de nous manifester. Si vous partagez mon sentiment à cet égard, je vous prie de demander une audience au Roi Edouard et de lui communiquer tout ce qui, dans les documents ci-joints, vous paraîtra de nature à être utilement porté à sa connaissance. Vous apprécierez s'il était possible, à cette occasion, d'amener le Roi à faire tenir en son nom personnel au Roi d'Espagne par Sir A. Nicolson un langage qui pût déterminer Alphonse XIII à se maintenir et peut-être même à entrer plus complètement dans l'entente anglo-française.

Une conversation avec le Roi d'Angleterre sur l'objet de la présente dépêche me paraît nécessaire et urgente. Avec le Cabinet britannique elle serait, à mon sens, prématurée.

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Ibid., No. 246. - According to Paléologue (in his Un Grand Tournant, 416-7,) it was he, Paléologue, who advised Rouvier to inform the British immediately, and who, "d'accord avec George Louis," wrote the despatch.

When, in compliance with M. Rouvier's request, M. Cambon set out for Buckingham Palace on December 20th, he did not have in mind merely to convey to King Edward the French Foreign Minister's anxieties and request regarding Madrid.

The French Ambassador had, in fact, set for himself yet another mission: to inquire - strictly on his own initiative - as to what effective assistance France might expect from the British, should she suddenly find herself confronted with a German aggression. - Furthermore, he would go so far as to suggest, most tentatively, of course (and perhaps as a sort of bait), that Lord Lansdowne's proposal of the previous May for an Anglo-French meeting to review the whole situation, be taken up for reconsideration.

To appreciate fully Paul Cambon's new "departure", and its significance from the view-point of the Military and Naval "conversations" (which would be the ultimate outcome of this new "departure"), we must turn our attention to Paul Cambon's thoughts and preoccupations at that time, and try to bring to light the elements therein that prompted him to undertake this démarche of the 20th.

## II

Two main facts must have been uppermost in Paul Cambon's mind, on the day of his audience with King Edward: First, the resurgence of the German threat of aggression - a threat that had been in abeyance since Delcassé's departure from office; secondly, the recent resignation of the Unionist Government and the entry of the Liberals into Power.

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On December 4, the Unionist Government resigned. One week later, a Liberal Cabinet under the leadership of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, received the seals of Office.

In the opinion of many continental observers, the entry of the Liberals into power seemed to augur ill for the Anglo-French entente. For one thing, the Liberals were, by tradition, pacifists; for another, they were known to lean more towards Germany than towards France.

Paul Cambon, an experienced and acute observer of the British political scene, did not share to any great extent the opinions prevalent on the Continent. He knew Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to be an ardent Francophile. Also, he believed the new Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to be favorably disposed towards the French: as late as October, Grey had, in a public address, "proclaimed his unqualified adhesion to the policy pursued by his predecessor".<sup>4</sup>

And of the Liberal Party as a whole, Cambon held the following views (as stated in a despatch to Rouvier on December 12<sup>5</sup>):

L'inclination traditionnelle du parti libéral anglais le portait depuis longtemps vers l'Allemagne plutôt que vers notre pays. La culture germanique des savants et des littérateurs qui y tiennent une place importante s'associe pour expliquer cette tendance aux sentiments religieux des non conformistes si nombreux parmi les libéraux et qui, protestants et religieux, sont hostiles à la fois à la France catholique et à la France libre-penseuse. Mais avant tout les libéraux sont des pacifistes. L'entente récente avec la France a eu leur approbation parce qu'elle leur a paru une garantie de la paix. S'ils cherchent à la transformer, ce ne sera pas pour la rendre moins étroite, ce sera pour lui enlever le caractère d'hostilité d'autres Puissances qu'elle prenait aux yeux de certains Anglais. Le parti libéral serait certainement heureux de voir un rapprochement avec l'Allemagne se combiner avec l'entente cordiale avec la France. Si toutefois ces amis de la paix constataient qu'il se manifeste à Berlin des tendances belliqueuses, s'ils voyaient l'Empereur d'Alle-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, No. 219

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, No. 219

magne se poser en Europe comme le champion de l'autocratie et des idées de guerre, tous leurs sentiments s'uniraient pour les porter vers la France libérale et pacifique, avec une résolution plus énergique encore, peut-être, que celles qu'eussent manifesté en pareil cas les conservateurs.

Thus, it would seem that under normal circumstances the new British Government could be counted on to continue to give full diplomatic support to the French in Morocco and very likely in other areas as well, where Franco-German friction presently existed.

But now that the German menace loomed once again on the horizon, there was need to determine whether the new Government could be expected to come to France's assistance - be it diplomatic, be it also with arms - in the event of a Franco-German war. With the Unionists in power, Cambon could safely assume that the Cabinet's sympathies, at least, would be on the side of the French, and that the Government would, in their effort to assist France, go to the very limit that Parliament and the People could be expected to tolerate.- Moreover, Cambon had obtained from Lord Lansdowne (or so he was convinced, as we have seen) that "if the circumstances should ever require it; if, for instance, we had serious reasons to believe that an unjustified aggression by another State was imminent; the British Government would be ready to concert with the French Government regarding the measures to be taken."<sup>6</sup>

This "guarantee" had been, for Cambon, a substantial assurance of effective assistance from the British in the event of German aggression.

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G. & T., III, No. 95; D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 455.

Now, with the Liberals in power - with a Cabinet and Party that contained a significant pro-German segment - ; and in view of the sudden resurgence of the German "menace", Cambon had ample reason to wish to ascertain the new British stand.

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If Cambon's main thoughts, on December 20, bore on fresh rumours of German plans of aggression and on the possible stand of the new British Government should such an aggression occur, his conversation with King Edward was to betray no little interest in another matter - one that he had never brought up before -: that of the British military potential actually available for intervention on the Continent.

It would seem that Cambon had always assumed - right up to a month or so prior to this date - that British armed assistance to France (should it ever be forthcoming, when and if required) would necessarily be limited to naval action; that military assistance on the Continent was out of the question, given the state of depletion of British land forces and the obsolescence of their equipment.

Cambon's estimation of the British Army potential (and worth) was that of many a non-expert both British and Continental. This estimation could be traced to Britain's military experiences in the South African War, which had led more than one capable observer to conclude that the British Army "was only fit for police duties or for minor colonial expeditions".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Huguet, Britain and the War, p. 3: This was Huguet's summation of the opinion of the previous French Military Attaché to London, who had been attached to the British Forces in S. Africa in the Boer War.

In November of 1905, however, Cambon was suddenly brought to a brusque reassessment of Britain's army, when the French Military Attaché to the London Embassy, Major A. Huguet, placed before him a careful detailed study of Britain's Military strength and potential.

Earlier in the year, Major Huguet had been asked by General Brugère, Vice-Chairman of the Supreme War Council ("vice-président du Conseil supérieur de la guerre") and French "Généralissime", to look into the question: "What would be the effectives, in the event of a war between France and Germany, that Britain would be capable of mobilising and landing on the Continent".<sup>8</sup>

Huguet had reported his findings to the French Minister for War (M. Etienne) in a despatch dated November 18<sup>9</sup>. His conclusions had been arrived at strictly "by means of his own observations and without any communication whatsoever with the (British) War Office"<sup>10</sup>. In his own summary of this report he describes the study as bearing on

both the question of how many men England could put into uniform in the event of a Continental war and the question of the time it would take to mobilise and transport them to the Continent. The answer was that about (115,000) men could be raised but probably not all of these could be landed before the 30th day after mobilisation, that is to say, very late if they were to take part in the big engagement of the opening phase of the war.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> D.D.F., 2es., VIII, No. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., No. 137.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., No. 262: Cambon to Rouvier, 21/12/05.

<sup>11</sup> Huguet, p. 4. - In the passage quoted above, Huguet gives 150,000 as the number of men that could be raised: in his report to Etienne of November 18, however, he places the number at 115,000. As the rest of the summary quoted above was correct, I took the liberty of substituting the correct figure.

As Huguet recounts in his Book, Britain and the War, Cambon was much impressed by these figures, for, "up to then he had believed England incapable of mustering more than 30,000 men".<sup>12</sup>

Cambon must have been still further impressed when, one month later - i.e., only a day or two prior to the French Ambassador's audience with King Edward - General J.M. Grierson, Head of the Military Operations branch of the British Army, confirmed Huguet's conclusions.<sup>13</sup> This happened in a chance encounter between the British General and the French Military Attaché, sometime between December 16 and 20 ("when I rode with him in the Row (a chance meeting)...", Grierson writes.<sup>14</sup>).

According to Huguet<sup>15</sup>, it was the General who brought up the subject of Anglo-French relations, on this occasion. The General began (always according to Huguet) with some reflections on the current difficult state of affairs between France and Germany, and stated to Huguet his conviction that in the event of war Britain would not fail to give France all possible armed assistance, both on land and on the seas.

It was at this point in the conversation, says Huguet, that he, Huguet, disclosed the fact of his recent study and made known to Grierson the conclusions at which he had arrived.

Je ne lui (General Grierson) ai pas alors caché que j'avais, en ce qui me concernait, étudié les effectifs qu'elle (l'Angleterre) pourrait mobiliser. Il m'a confirmé le chiffre de 115,000 combattants auquel j'étais arrivé, en m'ajoutant toutefois que 100,000 constituaient

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<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> D.D.F., 2eS, VIII, No. 256: Huguet to Etienne, 20/12/05.

<sup>14</sup> G. & T., III, No. 211: Grierson to Sanderson, 11/1/06.

<sup>15</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 256.



un minimum absolument certain qui serait si possible, élevé jusqu'à 120,000. Cette armée comprendrait trois corps d'armée, ayant la composition et l'organisation que j'ai indiquées et quatre brigades de cavalerie, au lieu de trois, comme je l'avais supposé.<sup>16</sup>

For the remainder of the conversation, the General engaged in a description of the present military artillery, the nature and rate of British land armaments, and current plans for the transportation of artillery units... Unfortunately, (Huguet concludes,) the General had to leave before they had had time to broach the subject of mobilisation timing and of schedules.

Historically, this meeting constitutes the very first military "conversation" between British and French officers, of which we have any trace.

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Huguet, in his report of November 18, expressed a very low opinion as to the value of British armed assistance on the Continent: "for a good many reasons, it is doubtful whether (Britain's) assistance could be really useful and effective, and likely to have any serious influence upon the course of events."<sup>17</sup> But in a matter of weeks, his opinion changed radically - as we shall see.

Cambon, for his part, would seem to have held in some esteem Huguet's and Grierson's figures on possible British assistance on the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., No. 256.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., No. 137.

Continent. True, the number seemed almost insignificant, in comparison with the French and the German armies. Still, this small number, if well trained and armed, and if strategically employed, might just possibly tip the scales in France's favour....

### III

We have attempted to give an account, in the preceding section of this chapter, of the main preoccupations and thoughts that were very likely on the French Ambassador's mind on December 20, when he set out for Buckingham Palace, ostensibly to communicate to the King his Foreign Minister's preoccupations and request regarding the Spanish Monarch.

Now - and without any further comment - we shall take up Paul Cambon's account<sup>18</sup> of the Audience of the 20th and of his conversations with Grey and Grey's Permanent Under-Secretary, Lord Sanderson, immediately following the Audience.

(In our rendition of this account, we shall adhere strictly to M. Cambon's own development, and will endeavour to preserve the proportions - both with regard to length and emphasis - he himself gave to his various topics. Our wish is to convey, as faithfully as possible, his own train of thought.)

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Cambon began his conversation with King Edward by conveying to

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<sup>18</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII; No. 262: Cambon to Rouvier, 21/12/05. This is the sole source of the account in this section.

the Monarch the substance of the information obtained from the Spanish King, and asking King Edward "if He did not think it would be useful to have Sir Arthur Nicolson approach King Alphonsus to heighten the latter's sentiments of energetic resistance against the Emperor's efforts and the pro-German tendencies of the Spanish Cabinet." To this suggestion King Edward gave his full assent. Whereupon Cambon suggested that, as he expected to spend "the last days of the year" with his brother in Madrid, he himself might see His Majesty's Ambassador and speak with him. - "Does Your Majesty authorize me to inform His Ambassador of His attitude ("sentiment") and to recount this conversation in its essentials?" To this the King replied: "I fully authorize you."

Je résumai cet entretien (Cambon narrait,) en disant que je parlerais à Sir E. Grey dans des termes plus ou moins vagues des renseignements venus d'Espagne, ce qui permettait à Sa Majesté d'aborder la question avec son Ministre.

Je crus pouvoir alors (Cambon immédiatement continues) pousser l'entretien un peu plus loin et j'essayai de sonder le Roi sur le concours que nous pourrions éventuellement attendre de l'Angleterre.

"L'attitude de l'Allemagne est d'autant moins compréhensible, dis-je, que nos arrangements n'ont jamais eu d'autre objet qu'un règlement d'affaires, qu'ils ne visent personne et doivent être considérés comme une garantie de paix. On a parlé d'une alliance défensive et offensive, on a répandu en France le bruit que l'Angleterre nous poussait à la guerre, on dit encore qu'elle veut faire la guerre à l'Allemagne pour son propre compte."

-- "Rien de moins vrai, dit le Roi, nous désirons plus que personne le maintien de la paix."

-- On a raconté, ai-je continué, que vous étiez prêts à jeter 100,000 hommes sur le continent au cas d'une agression sur notre frontière de l'Est. Vous le pourriez certainement, mais nous n'en avons jamais parlé."

--- "Oui, nous le pourrions, dit le Roi d'un air assuré, mais...", et il s'interrompit en ébauchant un geste dont il était assez difficile de démêler le sens. Voulait-il dire qu'avec un Cabinet libéral on ne pourrait entraîner le Gouvernement britannique dans une action militaire, voulait-il exprimer l'idée qu'en tous cas l'Angleterre devait se borner à une action navale? Je n'en sais rien. Mais il m'a semblé qu'un concours de l'armée de terre ne lui semblait pas pouvoir être envisagé pour le moment. Allant encore plus loin, je lui rappelai que Lord Lansdowne avait fait remettre par Sir F. Bertie à M. Delcassé un memorandum lui proposant de se concerter pour le cas où le Gouvernement allemand émettrait des prétentions excessives au Maroc, qu'un peu plus tard il s'était montré désireux d'examiner par avance avec nous toutes les éventualités d'ordre général qui pourraient surgir au cours des difficultés actuelles, que la retraite de M. Delcassé et le changement du Cabinet en Angleterre n'avaient pas permis de continuer les entretiens sur ce sujet et que je n'avais pas l'instruction de les reprendre, que j'ignorais si le nouveau Gouvernement serait disposé à poursuivre l'examen auquel nous avait conviés le marquis de Lansdowne et que je me demandais si je pouvais demander à mon Gouvernement des directions dans ce sens.

--- "Faites-le, dit Sa Majesté, demandez l'autorisation de causer de tout cela avec Sir E. Grey. Ce sera fort utile."

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On taking leave of the King, Cambon went directly to the Foreign Office: it was reception day, and he had an interview with Sir Edward Grey.

The conversation opened with a discussion concerning a recent exchange of telegrams between the "doyens des marchands de Berlin" and the new British Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's telegram in reply to a plea by this Berlin group for a "resumption, by the two countries, of cordial relations as in the past", had been polite and innocuous.

En me voyant hier, (Cambon continues to Rouvier,) Sir E. Grey m'a raconté cet incident et m'a dit qu'il fallait considérer la réponse du Premier Ministre comme un simple acte

de courtoisie, qu'elle n'indiquait nullement l'intention du Gouvernement anglais de modifier ses relations avec nous et que l'entente avec la France restait un des facteurs essentiels de la politique extérieure du nouveau Cabinet. Je l'ai remercié de cette déclaration qui d'ailleurs est bonne à enregistrer au moment où la presse allemande escompte bruyamment l'arrivée des libéraux aux affaires. J'ai été ainsi amené à parler au Secrétaire d'Etat des bruits qui nous venaient d'Espagne. ...

Cambon thereupon alluded to Alphonsus' revelations and his own audience just concluded with King Edward, and repeated his suggestion that Sir Arthur Nicolson be instructed to approach the Spanish Monarch. To this Grey replied that the British Ambassador in Madrid had been instructed to keep in close touch with the French Ambassador and to "conform his attitude" with that of the latter. "He repeated to me that we could count on absolute assistance from Britain both in Madrid and in Algé-ciras."

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Before leaving the Foreign Office, Cambon stopped for a word with Sir Thomas Sanderson, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office.

J'ai été un peu plus explicite avec lui et je lui ai demandé incidemment s'il ne se souvenait pas de l'offre qui nous avait été faite par l'ancien Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires étrangères d'envisager toutes les éventualités qui pourraient sortir de la crise actuelle. Sir Thomas m'a répondu qu'il lui semblait que la proposition du marquis de Lansdowne ne visait que les prétentions éventuelles de l'Allemagne au Maroc. C'était en effet l'objet du premier memorandum remis à M. Delcassé, mais des suggestions postérieures le Sous-Secrétaire permanent ne semblait pas se souvenir; il est possible qu'il ne les ait pas connues.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lord Sanderson did, indeed, know of the Marquess's subsequent proposals: See his minute to Lansdowne's despatch to Bertie of May 17 (G. & T., III, No. 94). Lord Sanderson's reply to Cambon seems, rather, to have been a tactful evasion.

And immediately Cambon closes his despatch with the following sentence:

Je serais reconnaissant à Votre Excellence de me donner des instructions pour les cas où elle désirerait chercher à obtenir quelques sûretés du côté de Londres.

#### IV

If we may judge by his conversation with King Edward on the 20th, Paul Cambon was indeed preoccupied with the question of eventual British military assistance.

On the day following his Audience, his interest in the matter must have been still further intensified. - For, on this day, the French Military Attaché and General Grierson met once again, and from this meeting there emerged yet more - and far more important - disclosures.

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It will be recalled that Huguet had parted from General Grierson - on the occasion of their first, and chance, encounter - with the regret that there had been no time for them to go into the subject of mobilisation-timing and transportation schedules.

On the morning of December 21, the two men met once again, this time by pre-arrangement, for a highly confidential "tête-à-tête".<sup>20</sup> From the tenor and substance of the conversation, it would seem to have been the General who called the meeting: for it was he who was to make all the disclosures.

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<sup>20</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 256.

To begin, the General "confidentially informed" Huguet".... that intervention on the part of the British army in the event of a war between France and Germany had just been the object of a thorough study at the War Office, and he (Grierson) wanted to inform me as to the main conclusions of this study."<sup>21</sup>

The General then promptly began a detailed account of all Army units presently ready for mobilisation for service on the Continent; of the location of these units (in the British Isles, Malta, Egypt, Gibraltar), of the time required for their mobilisation and for their transportation to the point of assembly on the Continent; and of the means of transportation.

La conséquence de l'étude a donc été l'envoi il y a deux jours par le War Office à l'Amirauté d'un memorandum demandant que l'aménagement des vaisseaux de transport soit hâté le plus possible....<sup>22</sup>

And Huguet goes on to give in detail the instructions and requests of the War Office to the Admiralty on this matter.

La réponse de l'Amirauté à ces propositions n'est pas encore arrivée, mais on estime que, si elles sont adoptées, toute l'armée anglaise se trouvera concentrée, à Burxelles, non plus le 30e, mais le 21e jour de la mobilisation.<sup>23</sup>

En terminant, (Huguet writes) le Général Grierson m'a ajouté qu'il me donnait ces renseignements, non à titre officiel mais simplement à titre privé, de camarade à camarade, pour me montrer que la question de la coopération de l'armée anglaise avait été sérieusement étudiée au War Office, mais sans que cette étude préjugeât la décision que le Gouvernement croirait devoir prendre au moment voulu. Il

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<sup>21</sup> D.D.E., 2eS, VIII, No. 256: Huguet to Etienne, 21/12/05. - When, on January 11, 1906, General Grierson was asked by Lord Sanderson of the Foreign Office, whether he had been in communication with the French Military Attaché, the General replied: "I have had no communication with the French Military Attaché on the subject of British cooperation with France except, to a certain extent, about the 16th or 18th December, when I rode with him in the Row (a chance meeting), and he told me of the French fears of an attack by Germany..." (G. & T., III, No. 211.) Thus, Grierson made no mention to Sanderson of his conversation of December 21, with Huguet, and at the General's own request.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. The underlined is in Italics in the Text.

a d'ailleurs tout de suite déclaré qu'à son sentiment, si une guerre survenait, l'opinion publique en faveur d'une coopération de l'Angleterre serait tellement forte que le Gouvernement, qu'il fût libéral ou conservateur, ne pourrait se soustraire. Il estime que cette unanimité de sentiment ne doit pas être inconnue de l'Empereur d'Allemagne et que se serait une folie de sa part, dans l'état actuel des choses, que d'entreprendre contre la France une guerre à laquelle l'Angleterre participerait certainement avec toutes ses forces.

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On returning to the Embassy, that morning of the 21st, Huguet immediately drew up an account of this second conversation, including it in his despatch addressed to the French Minister for War and recounting the previous meeting.

The Ambassador, informed of the second encounter as well, deemed it important to bring the Attaché's dispatch to the attention of his Foreign Minister. Thus, in a postscript to his account of the interviews of the 20th, Cambon wrote:

P.S. Commandant Huguet, Military Attaché to this Embassy, sent to the Minister for War, in the last bag, (a report) stating that Britain could easily send on the Continent, within three to four weeks, an army of 100,000 men. The Commandant has determined this number by means of his own personal observations and without any communication with the War Office.

Since then the Commandant has been able to verify the accuracy of these previsions thanks to confidential revelations on the part of an Officer General who fulfills the functions over here of Chief of Staff for the Army. (Commandant Huguet) has even been informed that the War Office and the Admiralty had, between them, undertaken a thorough study of operation in case of German aggression. He is sending this new information to the Minister for War by today's bag. This information may well interest Your Excellency.<sup>24</sup>



## V

Two days later, the French Foreign Minister had before him the Cambon and Huguet despatches of the 21st. On the night of the 23rd he sent off to Cambon a telegram marked "Personal and secret":

Reçu votre dépêche politique 423, ainsi que son annexe que j'ai gardée provisoirement, me réservant d'en entretenir le destinataire.

Si vous n'y voyez pas d'objection, je suis d'avis que vous repreniez et poussiez un peu plus loin l'entretien que votre principal interlocuteur vous a conseillé d'engager. Il est bien entendu qu'il s'agirait non pas d'arriver à un accord ferme et immédiat qu'il faut au contraire éviter, mais uniquement de vous assurer si, le cas échéant, un tel accord pourrait être conclu rapidement et même si les dispositions actuelles sont si certaines qu'un tel accord soit superflu.<sup>25</sup>

Rouvier's instructions are far from clear. Evidently the Foreign Minister's telegram was meant to answer Cambon's request "for instructions should your Excellency wish to seek some assurances from London". It would seem, also, that Rouvier's consent that Cambon "take up and push a little farther the conversation that your main interlocutor advised you

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D.D.F., 2eS, VIII, No. 265. - Paléologue (in his Un Grand Tournant, 420,) relates how, on the morning of the 23rd, "Rouvier me prie de lui rappeler minutieusement tout ce que nous savons sur les intentions agressives et les plans stratégiques de l'Allemagne contre la France. Quand j'ai fini et qu'il tient encore dans ses doigts la note où j'ai consigné les révélations du Vengeur, it me dit:

"-- Evidemment, l'alliance anglaise nous est indispensable; elle est devenue pour nous une nécessité nationale. Je vais donc autoriser Paul Cambon à reprendre les pourparlers secrets.

"Ainsi, par la force des choses, Rouvier en arrive exactement aux conclusions pratiques de Delcassé.

"Ensuite, après une conférence avec George Louis, il adresse à Paul Cambon ce télégramme...(Here he quotes the above telegram - without the last sentence.)

"Là se terminait le texte rédigé par le directeur politique. Rouvier, encore troublé sans doute par ses craintes récentes, a cru devoir ajouter, de sa main: ... et même si les dispositions actuelles du gouvernement britannique sont si certaines qu'un tel accord soit superflu."

to engage in", refers to Cambon's discreet suggestion to the King that Lansdowne's May proposals for an immediate "discussion" of the whole diplomatic situation might be taken up for reconsideration. - On this instance, it will be recalled, King Edward had urged Cambon to discuss the whole matter with Sir Edward Grey... But again, it appears that Rouvier has confused inextricably the military matter (of Huguet's despatch, particularly,) with this diplomatic proposal.

Fortunately, we need not try to extract from Rouvier's telegram of the 23rd any coherent plan of policy. What is important is the fact of Rouvier's ready acquiescence to Cambon's unauthorized overtures to King Edward, his prompt (and almost eager) submission to his Ambassador's views. With Cambon, the Foreign Minister never deigns to more than suggest, tentatively propose: over the past six months, he has learned to prize this Ambassador's ever wise (and ever tactful) counsel.

And now, it is almost with alacrity that he relegates to Paul Cambon the task of re-defining Anglo-French relations.

The French Ambassador in London, however, will not take up immediately, with Britain, this matter of "assurances". - By Christmas day he will be on his way to Madrid and his brother Jules; and he will be back in London only in the second week of the new year.

When he next speaks with Sir Edward Grey, therefore, it will be January 10. By then he will have carefully determined his objectives regarding "assurances" from Britain, clearly exposed his

policy to Rouvier, and gotten the latter's whole-hearted consent...

... and by then, also, he will have found the military  
"conversations" proceeding apace under private auspices.

### CHAPTER 3

Cambon's departure - Huguet's preoccupations - Huguet's conversation with Repington - Repington's letter to Grey - Contact with Defence Committee members - Letter from Grey - Army and Navy projects - Fisher vs Grierson - The Repington-Esher-Clarke decision - The Questionnaire - Huguet's return - The Army's decision.

## I

On the morning of December 24, Paul Cambon had in hand Rouvier's telegram authorizing him "to seek some assurances from London" (as Cambon had requested) and granting him, in effect, full discretionary powers regarding the formulation of his wishes and the manner of their pursuit.

A day or two later, however, the French Ambassador left London for a two to three week sojourn on the Continent, without having approached the British any further on the matter. He planned to be back in London by January 12: only on his return would he broach the question with Grey.

Apparently the Ambassador felt that the international situation was sufficiently calm to permit such a delay; and perhaps he believed that his Foreign Minister should be more fully and clearly acquainted with his intentions and preoccupations regarding this matter of "assurances", before Grey was approached. - In any event, Cambon left behind in London a Military Attaché who did not share in the least his calm view of the situation and his lack of urgency. After Cambon's departure, Huguet was more preoccupied than ever over the Franco-German tension and the perhaps imminent French need of British armed assistance.

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For, Major Huguet, it appears, had not been appeased by the discovery that the British War Office (and presumably the Admiralty also)

was giving serious thought to the possibility of British military intervention on the Continent. Indeed, General Grierson's disclosures seem, on the contrary, to have awakened in the Attaché an overwhelming desire to see to it that the British should be ready to give the French prompt and most effective military assistance possible should a war suddenly erupt.

As an expert in military matters, Huguet could readily perceive that Military planning on the part of the British alone - no matter how competent and thorough this planning might be - could not adequately prepare for the day British troops would be called upon to join the French against a German aggression. Certain major items, such as railway transportation of troops and supplies on the Continent, and the location and preparation of concentration zones near the eventual area of operations (to mention but two items), required concerted planning between Britain and her potential allies, if the British really wished to be in a position to give quick and effective military assistance.

But more immediate, in Huguet's mind, than this question of military preparedness, was that of British intentions: whether the British, under their new Government, were willing to join France in arms should the need arise. Quite evidently, this urgent question weighed heavily upon Huguet, who could not view with equanimity the ever-mounting Franco-German tension - and whose misgivings were not lessened by the knowledge that the French Ambassador would be absent from London until mid-January, that is, through the most critical pre-Conference period.

There is no indication that Major Huguet imparted these pre-

occupations to his Superiors in Paris at any time during the last days of December and the first week of January, or that such thoughts were shared, throughout those days, by anyone in the French War Office or Admiralty. Nevertheless, Huguet's preoccupations were sufficiently acute, after Cambon's departure, to bring him to confide them to an intimate British friend in rather urgent and perhaps alarming tones.

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The friend in question was a certain C. à Court Repington, retired Colonel of the Intelligence branch of the British Army, and at that time a military correspondent for the Times. Colonel Repington had written in the Times, on December 27, an article "dealing with the growing hostility of Germany against France, and (ending) with a warning to Germany that she would endanger her vital interests if she staked upon a doubtful hazard the results achieved by the great founders of German unity."<sup>1</sup> The article, though far from remarkable in the matter of military analysis, was nevertheless of some significance from the political aspect: for, in tone it was unconcealedly anti-German, definitely Francophile. The author himself summed up the purpose of his article thus: "I warned her (i.e., Germany) that a war might unchain animosities in unexpected quarters, and I did not pretend a friendliness that I did not feel."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Repington, The First World War, I, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., I, 2.

Major Huguet received this article with considerable warmth and even went to the pains of summarizing it for a despatch to the French War Office: "Although (the article) has but slight value from the military point of view," he wrote to M. Etienne, the French Minister for War, "I nevertheless think it useful to analyse it briefly in view of its indisputable pro-French tendencies".<sup>3</sup>

On the very next evening (December 28), the Major and Colonel Repington dined together. They were intimate friends of long standing, and had a long and unrestrained conversation which continued on past midnight. Major Huguet gives an account of the conversation (in the same despatch as above<sup>4</sup>) that would lead one to believe that the conversation was no more than one long monologue on the Colonel's part, with only an occasional query from the Major. But according to Repington<sup>5</sup>, the most notable topic of the evening was the French Attaché's preoccupation over the gravity of the current situation, and over the new British Government's attitude towards France:

I found (writes Colonel Repington<sup>6</sup>) that we were both anxious about the situation. He (Huguet) told me that his Embassy people were worried because Sir Edward Grey, who had just taken over the Foreign Office, had not renewed the assurances given by Lord Lansdowne .... Moreover, M. Cambon was now on leave till Jan. 12, and the Algéiras Conference was due to meet on the 16th. I asked why the Councillor of the Embassy did not go to clear the air. Major Huguet replied that he could not, in the absence of the Ambassador, open such a grave conversation without instructions, but that if Sir E. Grey would broach the subject at the next diplomatic

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<sup>3</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 300: Huguet to Etienne, 30.12.05.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., No. 300.

<sup>5</sup> Repington, I, 2-3. See also: Letter Repington to Grey, 29.12.05, in G. & T., III, p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> Repington, I, 2-3.



reception, the French Embassy would be much relieved. They knew that our sympathies were with them, but they wanted to know what we should do in case Germany suddenly confronted them with a crisis.

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We do not know what Major Huguet had in mind, that Thursday evening, when he set out for dinner with the Colonel. But we do know that he parted from his friend, that night, with a promise from the Colonel to write to the British Foreign Secretary the very next morning.

It is possible that Repington even went so far as to outline some projects for bringing to the attention of the British Authorities the anxieties and worries of Major Huguet's "Embassy people". - But it is safe to assume that the French Attaché never suspected, that night, that he had, in effect, set into motion a series of démarches that would bring about "semi-official" and authorized communications between the French and British War Offices, less than three weeks hence.

## II

The Colonel had parted from his friend Major Huguet, on that Thursday night, December 28, convinced that the British should be brought to give France fullest assurances of armed assistance should the latter be the victim of a German aggression. - What is more, he had parted with the firm resolve to do all that lay in his power, to bring about these assurances just as soon as possible.

For, Colonel Repington was an ardent Francophile; and in

his opinion, France was definitely under the menace of a German assault. The Algé-ciras conference was little more than two weeks off, and Germany, acutely aware of her dwindling chances of a diplomatic victory over France (and the detested entente) at the hands of an international body upon which she herself had insisted, was growing increasingly irate by the hour.

The fact that pressed the Colonel to action, however, was not the German threat alone, but the absence from London of the French Ambassador, and the current dispersal of the British Cabinet and Government. Paul Cambon, as we have seen, was not expected back before January 12; and the Cabinet Ministers, having already left the Capital for the New Year Week-end, had yet before them some three weeks of electoral campaigning, and would, in all likelihood, not assemble in London until after the elections, - that is, after the Algé-ciras Conference was under way.

Meanwhile, something must be done to prepare against the eventuality of a German aggression. The situation was too grave for Repington and the French to await Cambon's return and the conclusion of British elections. Without losing a single day, Repington set himself to the task.

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On the morning following his dinner with Huguet, the Colonel wrote a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, imparting the French Attaché's misgivings:

... (Major Huguet) confessed that his Embassy felt anxious upon the question of the attitude of the new Government in England. His people, he said, had nothing to complain of, since the speeches of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as well as yours, had produced an excellent effect. It was not a question of sympathies, but rather of acts, and of what the British Government were prepared to do in a situation which presented dangerous aspects...I hinted that I was inclined to let you know the general purport of this part of our conversation, and to this he raised no objection.<sup>7</sup>

Having despatched this letter, the Colonel now sought out certain influential persons in the Capital who might be of help to him in the realization of his mission. As a retired military man of considerable rank, and furthermore as military correspondent to the Capital's most influential newspaper, Repington had broad and intimate contacts in the highest échelons of the Army and Navy, as well as in certain politically influential "non-party" circles in London. To these acquaintances he now turned for help.

The first of these to be approached were Viscount Esher and Admiral Sir John Fisher, First Sea Lord. These two men, together with Sir George Clarke, constituted the "permanent members" of the newly formed Committee for Imperial Defence, which they, in fact, had organized. - On Saturday, December 30, the Colonel lunched with Lord Esher, and together they "discussed the whole situation"<sup>8</sup>. Then, in the afternoon of the same day, Repington visited Sir John Fisher at the Admiralty<sup>9</sup>. Sir George Clarke, Permanent Secretary of the Imperial Defence Committee, happened to be out of town: Esher, however, offered to communicate to him Repington and Huguet's pre-occupations.<sup>10</sup>

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7 G. & T., III, p. 169: letter Repington to Grey, 29.12.05. - Published document here quoted in full.

8 Repington, I, 4.

9. Ibid., I, 4.

10. Ibid., I, 4.

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The first perceptible results of Repington's initial efforts were by no means favourable. On Monday, January 1st, letters arrived from Sir Edward Grey and Sir George Clarke. - Wrote Grey from Fallodon, on December 30:

I am interested to hear of your conversation with the French Military Attaché. I can only say that I have not receded from anything which Lord Lansdowne said to the French, and I have no hesitation in affirming it.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, the Foreign Secretary had carefully avoided the question "rather of acts, and of what the British Government were prepared to do in a situation which presented dangerous aspects". Sir George Clarke, on the other hand, was definite and explicit, but no more favorable towards Repington's ideas: "Sir George disapproved of the idea of our joining the French Army in case of war, and also of our supporting the Belgian Army unless Germany violated Belgium".<sup>12</sup>

Yet notwithstanding these Monday "set-backs", Repington was, in fact, making substantial progress. For, by Wednesday, January 3, he had managed so well to communicate his preoccupations, directly and through the Defence Committee, that Military and Naval circles were rife with projects for eventual British military assistance to France.

Indeed, as a result of Repington's efforts, a heated controversy had sprung up between the Admiralty and the War Office, over the question of military intervention in case of war. On the one hand, there was a project propounded by the First Sea Lord and supported by

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., I, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., I, 4.

the Secretary of the Defence Committee, which held for "a serious military attack on the German coasts in case of war"<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand there were the plans drawn up by General Grierson and his Military Operations group, which the General had confided to Major Huguet on December 21, and which were based on the assumption that British military intervention would take place on the Continent alongside French and/or Belgian troops. - Dining with Repington (and Major Gorton) on Wednesday, January 3rd, General Grierson made it known that he "opposed all the Fisher-Clarke ideas..." and upheld the view that "on the assumption that Germany violated Belgium, we could put two divisions into Namur by the 13th day of mobilisation, and all our field army of that period into Antwerp by the thirty-second day"<sup>14</sup>.

Significantly, this Fisher-Grierson controversy did not put to question the principle of armed assistance to France should the latter be attacked by Germany. Both the War Office and the Admiralty were convinced that Britain should and would come to the aide of the French with arms. We have already seen Grierson's assurances to Huguet on this matter<sup>15</sup>. On January 2, (1906) Admiral Sir John Fisher extended similar assurances to the French Naval Attaché in London, Captain Mercier de Lostende, when the latter appeared at the Admiralty to present the Admiral with the ensigns of the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour:

"Je connais beaucoup Sir Edward Grey," the Captain quotes Fisher as telling him, "je le vois souvent et suis au courant de ses sentiments. Il est fermement décidé à continuer vis-à-vis de la France la politique du Cabinet précédent. L'opinion publique est du reste si forte en

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<sup>13</sup> Repington, I, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., I, 5. This War Office-Admiralty dispute was not to be settled permanently until 1911.

<sup>15</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 256.

vosre faveur qu'il serait impossible de ne pas vous prêter un appui effectif en cas de conflit. J'ai donc tout lieu de croire que nous marcherons avec vous.

"Tout en pensant et espérant que la guerre n'éclatera pas, j'ai pris toutes mes dispositions pour que la marine anglaise soit prête à toute éventualité. Ces dispositions je vais vous les dire confidentiellement. Je suppose que de votre côté en France vous avez pris vos précautions.<sup>16</sup>

The question at issue, then, between Fisher and Grierson, was: Where (and how) British troops should be used in the event of war with Germany. For Grierson and the Army (as for Repington and Huguet) the British army should be prepared to intervene on the Continental war front. In Fisher's view, however, as in that of his successor, Sir Arthur Wilson, later on - the British troops should not be called upon to play more than a diversionary rôle (preferably against the German coast, as we have seen), perhaps even subordinated to the Navy.

In the coming years, this conflict would prove as critical as it was basic.

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On the morning of Friday, 5th, - exactly one week since the Colonel had set out on his mission - Major Huguet paid him a visit, and received an account of the progress made over the past week. The two men discussed at length the two main proposals for assistance on land, and both voiced their opposition to the Fisher-Clarke project<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately, Repington could report no concrete and definite progress towards "assurances": only the several projects - all strictly academic -

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., No. 308. - N.B. This account (to the French Minister of the Marine) contains the sole record we have of any "Naval Conversations" during 1905 and 1906.

<sup>17</sup> Repington, I, 5.

for military assistance, and the consequent Army-Navy controversy.

That same Friday night, the Colonel saw Lord Esher and Sir George Clarke at Whitehall Gardens, and once again they "fully discussed the situation together". This time, however, the conversation assumed a very practical turn. "The Moroccan crisis was coming to ahead"<sup>18</sup>, the Colonel recounts, and there might be "an explosion at any hour":

All our new Ministers were away electioneering, and as at that time an election lasted many weeks, there was almost a complete separation between responsibility and the executive. We were well aware that the Germans knew how to profit from such a situation. We thought it indispensable that something should be done, and as both Lord Esher and Sir G. Clarke were serving in an official capacity and I was a free lance, it was eventually agreed between us that I should sound the French Government through Major Huguet, and that when the French views were thus privately and unofficially ascertained, we should pass the matter on to our Government, which would be completely uncommitted and able to continue the conversations or drop them as they pleased.<sup>19</sup>

### III

What Repington, Esher and Clarke set out to do, on that evening of January 5, was to bring to light the attitude of the French Government and the Conseil supérieur de la guerre, regarding British co-operation in the event of a war with Germany.

To this end, they drew up "a list of questions" which Repington would submit to Huguet for a French reply.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I, 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Repington, I, 6.

It seems that their immediate wish was to overcome the deadlock that had sprung up between the First Sea Lord and the Director of Military Operations. So long as the Admiralty and the War Office remained at loggerheads, comprehensive planning for prompt and effective armed intervention on land as well as on the seas was impossible. A clear statement of French opinions and desires might help considerably to settle the dispute and give definitive direction to Army and Navy planning.

The questions, however, were not limited to the Fisher-Clarke and Grierson projects. They sought out French views on Belgian defence (and neutrality) and Dutch co-operation, inquired into the eventual disposal of German colonies and possessions and even captured ships, brought up the question of Anglo-French "single command" on land and on the seas, and quizzed the French on probable German continental strategy. Evidently, Repington and his collaborators wished to provide the British War Office and Admiralty with the broadest possible basis for "global" planning.

On Saturday, the 6th, Repington saw Huguet, gave him the list of questions and told him he "desired a good French opinion"<sup>21</sup>. Huguet immediately got in touch with Paris and arranged for an interview with the French "généralissime", Brugère, and his Chief of Staff, Général Brun, for Monday the 8th.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Ibid.,

22 "



On Sunday, Huguet left for Paris, and that same evening he went into conference with Prime Minister Rouvier and the Minister for War, M. Etienne<sup>23</sup>. The following morning he placed the British questions before M. Thomson, Minister of the Marine, and his naval staff<sup>24</sup>, then went to keep his appointment at the French War Office.<sup>25</sup>

Repington's record of Huguet's reception at the 2me Bureau of the French General Staff is as revealing as it is picturesque: it shows how "academic" the question of British armed assistance in the event of war had appeared to the French Army men up to that date:

"Major Huguet's account of the profound astonishment of the 2me Bureau of the French General Staff, when he announced to them the mission on which he had come, was most amusing. He found them deeply engaged upon the elaboration of an academic plan for the invasion of England, and when he told them of the friendly British invasion which some of us contemplated, their jaws dropped, their pens fell from their hands, and they were positively transfixed with surprise."<sup>26</sup>

"All went well," Repington reports. "The French Ministers, soldiers, and sailors did everything possible to facilitate the mission"<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, within five days Major Huguet was back in London with detailed answers to Repington's questions.

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Questions submitted to the French by Colonel Repington on January 5th, and the French replies.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>24</sup> "

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<sup>26</sup> Repington, I, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., I, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., I, 6-10. - These Questions have been published in the D.D.F. (2eS., VIII, No. 389), under the heading: "Demandes formulées par le colonel Sir George Clarke, Secrétaire permanent de défense de l'Empire britannique." The Answers given in the French documents are much briefer, and would seem to be preliminary notes.

1. Have the Conseil supérieur de la Guerre considered British co-operation in case of war with Germany? In what manner do they consider this co-operation can best be carried out: (a) by sea, (b) by land?

1. La question de la coopération de l'armée britannique sur terre a été étudiée -- on estime que, pour être le plus efficace, son action devra: - (a) être liée à celle de l'armée française, c'est-à-dire, être placée sous la même direction, soit que les deux armées agissent sur le même théâtre d'opérations, ou sur des théâtres différents. (b) se faire sentir dès le début des hostilités, en raison de l'effet moral considérable qui en résultera. Il serait à désirer qu'un certain nombre de corps anglais, quels que soit leur nombre et leur effectif (1 à 2 divisions si possible) puissent être débarqués vers le 5<sup>me</sup> ou 6<sup>me</sup> jour, de manière à être transportés sur le lieu de leurs opérations, en même temps que le seront les corps français. Ils pourraient partir à leur effectif de paix en doublant les unités; les réservistes rejoindraient ensuite pour porter les unités à leur effectif normal de guerre. Le reste de l'armée exécuterait sa mobilisation régulièrement, et partirait quand il serait achevé. Sur mer, la situation particulière de l'Angleterre, la grande supériorité de sa flotte, la possibilité qu'elle a de prendre à l'avance toutes les mesures préparatoires qu'elle juge utiles, la mettent à même d'établir un plan mieux que la France, qui ne jouit pas de la même liberté d'action parce que:-  
 (1) Elle ignore quelle serait l'attitude de l'Italie.  
 (2) Elle ne peut, pour cette raison et aussi pour éviter des récriminations, prendre à l'avance les mêmes mesures que l'Angleterre.

2. May we take it as a principle that France will not violate Belgian territory unless compelled to do so by previous violation of Belgian territory by Germany?

2. Oui, d'une manière absolue.

3. Do the French realise that any violation of Belgian neutrality brings us into the field automatically in defence of our Treaty obligations?

3. La France l'a toujours supposé, mais n'en a jamais eu l'assurance officielle.

4. Assuming that Germany violates Belgian territory, what plan of operation do the French propose for cooperation between the French, English and Belgian forces?

4. On compte peu sur une action de l'armée Belge (sic)

qui, croit-on, se contenterait de se retirer à Anvers en protestant contre la violation de son territoire. Dans le cas où elle serait décidée à défendre son sol, on proposerait une action commune immédiate, sous une direction unique, action qui ne peut être définie à l'avance, parce qu'elle dépendra des circonstances.

5. What is the French opinion concerning landings on the German coasts? If we could send 100,000 men for such operation and assisted France with transports, could she supply another 100,000 men, and in what time and from what ports?

5. Vu la supériorité numérique probable des Allemands, une opération de ce genre au début de la campagne paraît très délicate, et ne semble pouvoir être tentée que dans des circonstances exceptionnelles.

6. Do the French look to us to propose a plan of joint action by sea? Have they any plan ready to suggest to us?

6. Voir à la première question.

7. Would it be possible for France to capture Togoland and the Cameroons, if we captured German E. and S.W. Africa and German possessions in the Pacific?

7. Au point de vue militaire, l'opération sera facile à exécuter et notre intention est de l'exécuter.

8. Would it be agreeable to France that all captures of German ships and colonial possessions by France and England during the war should be pooled and held as a set-off against any possible German successes in Europe?

8. Cette question est surtout d'ordre diplomatique et devra être traitée diplomatiquement au moment voulu. Toutefois, à priori, il semble probable que - l'Angleterre devant avoir le rôle le plus brillant - la France s'en remettra entièrement à ce que décidera l'Angleterre.

9. Should we establish it as a principle, except for the operations described under 7, that the English shall command at sea and the French on land?

9. Oui; l'unité de direction étant absolument indispensable, soit sur terre, soit sur mer.

10. What share should the Netherlands be asked and expected to take in the war, or what precautionary measures should she be asked to take?

10. On n'est pas fixé à cet égard. Si les Pays-Bas veulent résister on leur conseillera de s'opposer par tous les moyens possibles à la violation de leur territoire; de résister pied-à-pied, et de se retirer sur le gros des forces françaises, en détruisant les voies ferrées et tous les

ouvrages d'art. Défensive passive, s'ils n'osent, comme il est probable, opposer une défense active.

11. In general terms, what line of action do the French expect the Germans will adopt in case of war? How soon will they be concentrated, and upon what lines are they expected to advance, in what numbers and in what time?

11. D'une manière générale, on estime que l'effectif probable de l'armée allemande sera de 1,300,000 à 1,400,000 hommes. Le gros des combattants aura achevé la concentration vers le 11<sup>me</sup> ou le 12<sup>me</sup> jour, les convois vers le 15<sup>me</sup>, ou le 16<sup>me</sup>. Le réseau ferré allemand semblerait indiquer que la concentration se fera entre Metz et Thionville. Une offensive immédiate très énergique dans la direction de Paris est ensuite à prévoir.

Jan. 5, 1906.

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Major Huguet returned from Paris on the evening of January 11<sup>29</sup>.

The next morning he visited Colonel Repington at his house; handing over the French replies, he informed the Colonel that "he was sure that everything possible would be done officially to prolong the conversation and to make the necessary arrangements for co-operation the moment that we (the British), on our side, gave our consent"<sup>30</sup>.

Meanwhile, (Repington continues<sup>31</sup>,) Major Huguet told me that M. Cambon, who had returned earlier than he had intended, had seen Sir. E. Grey on January 10, when the latter had said that he could not speak for the Government who were all scattered on electioneering work, but that his private opinion was that we would not be able to keep out of a war if Germany attacked France. M. Cambon had then suggested official intercommunications by the respective Staffs, but Sir E. Grey had said that they were impracticable at present, and that we must wait until the elections were over and the Government installed. M. Cambon had judged that Grey was privy to the private and unofficial conversations in progress.

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<sup>29</sup> Repington, I, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., I, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., I, 10-11.

## IV

As we shall see, Cambon, who was fully informed of the Repington-Huguet démarches, had indeed approached Sir Edward Grey on the subject of military and naval conversations. But, as we shall also see, Huguet's report of Grey's reaction was very misleading; for, only three days later, that is, on the 15th, the British Foreign Secretary authorized direct communications between British and French Military and Naval Authorities.

Yet by that date invaluable basic decisions would have been made which were to make the authorized conversations most effective, and which were to expedite matters considerably.- For, on the afternoon of Friday 12th, immediately after Huguet had left the Colonel, Repington set out for Sir George Clarke's offices with his "questions, the French replies, and some explanatory notes", and there he "discussed them at length with Lord Esher and Sir G. Clarke"<sup>32</sup>. And that same afternoon, (presumably after Repington had left Clarke and Esher,) there took place in the very same offices another meeting, at which the Military Officers decided definitely on intervention on the Continent alongside French and possibly Belgian troops - thus discarding permanently Fisher's project for invasion upon the German sea coast. In a letter from Admiral C.L. Ottley to Sir John Fisher, we find some pertinent details of this Army decision.

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<sup>32</sup> Repington, I, 11.

Admiral C.L. Ottley to First Sea Lord<sup>33</sup>

SECRET

First Sea Lord: Submitted.

Jan. 13, 1906.

Another informal meeting was held in the offices of the Secretary of the C(ommittee) I(mperial) D(efence) yesterday afternoon: Lord Esher, General Sir John French, Sir George Clarke, General Grierson and myself being present.

It was settled between the Military officers that, in the event of our being forced into war (by a German violation of Belgian neutrality or otherwise) - our proper course would be to land our Military forces at the nearest French ports, Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe and Havre -- About 100,000 British troops would be ferried across each day after the 3rd day - so that the entire British Army would be on French soil on the 14th day.

The process of transporting the troops would be in the nature of a ferry over ...

I submit for consideration that it appears very desirable that the C(ommander) in C(hief) Channel Fleet should be apprised of what is now being thought of...

C.L. Ottley.

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Thus, when three days later Grey authorized "direct" conversations, all the groundwork was completed for Anglo-French concerted planning. The British had selected their general area of intervention and the Continental ports of debarkation; detailed plans for mobilization were either completed or under way. It remained, now, for the British to concert with the French (and perhaps Belgium) over transportation schedules and matters of logistics on the Continent, and to determine, together with their potential allies, warfront concentration-

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<sup>33</sup> G. & T., III, p. 185-6, No. 221 (a), "Ed. Note". (Printed document here reproduced in full.)

zones and other necessary strategical questions.

In general, then, all broad matters of "principle" lay behind: only technical matters remained to be dealt with. - The latter would constitute the whole of the military "conversations".

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We must now return to the diplomatic and political spheres, whence these military "conversations" (as well as the naval ones, which took place later on) sprang into official being.

CHAPTER 4

Cambon's policy - Request for Military Conversations - Sanderson's inquiry at War Office - Grierson's reply - Grey's meeting with Haldane - Haldane's return to London - Grey's Consent to Cambon - War Office and Admiralty notified of approval - Military Conversations begin.



## I

Major Huguet was still in Paris, awaiting the completion of the French replies to the Repington questions, when Paul Cambon returned to his London post and saw the British Foreign Secretary on January 10.

In his first interview of the new year with Sir Edward Grey, Paul Cambon had a dual mission: firstly, to secure from the British a promise of armed support in the event of war; secondly, to have the Foreign Secretary consent to direct communications between the French and British Army and Naval Staffs.

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Before leaving Paris, the French Ambassador had apparently been apprised - perhaps by the French Foreign Minister himself - of the Repington Huguet démarches: he was fully informed of these private communications, and evidently approved of the principle. No doubt he fully appreciated the usefulness of such communications; in any event, they fitted very neatly into the scheme of his projected diplomatic advances to Britain.

These projected advances - for British assurances - were substantially the same ones that he had begun to formulate just before leaving London, and of which we saw the first traces in his audience with King Edward on December 20. Before returning to his Embassy, Cambon was careful clearly to enunciate to M. Rouvier the exact terms

of these advances: in an introduction to his account of his interview with Sir Edward Grey on the 10th, he summarizes his policy thus:

M. Paul Cambon à M. Rouvier<sup>1</sup>

Lors de notre dernier entretien, vous avez bien voulu reconnaître avec moi qu'il était difficile de ne pas répondre aux ouvertures que nous a faites le Gouvernement anglais par l'organe de Lord Lansdowne, et de décliner la conversation qui nous avait été offerte l'ancien Secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires étrangères sur les éventualités qui pourraient surgir à la suite des difficultés soulevées au Maroc par le Gouvernement allemand.

Il est probable qu'en manoeuvrant avec sang-froid nous pourrions sortir de la Conférence d'Algesiras sans que nos intérêts d'avenir soient trop compromis, mais il serait souverainement imprudent de nous endormir dans une fausse sécurité et de nous exposer à une surprise sans avoir mis de notre côté les chances qui peuvent nous être réservées.

Votre Excellence a donc pensé qu'il convenait de nous assurer des dispositions du Cabinet anglais et de nous éclairer sur la nature de l'appui que nous pouvions en attendre. Elle m'a prescrit de reprendre avec Sir E. Grey la conversation interrompue avec le Marquis de Lansdowne et, sans nous engager dans une négociation pouvant aboutir à une convention formelle, d'obtenir au moins des déclarations de nature à nous mettre à l'abri d'un isolement complet en cas de guerre.

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We may justly suppose that Cambon considered the Military and Naval communications as an essential part of "all possible chances" in favour of the French and of which the French must avail themselves. For, it is probable that he held these conversations to be vital to his country.

But there were grounds for his believing that the British Foreign

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Despatch, Jan. 11, 1906: D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 385.

Office was aware of the Repington-Huguet démarches<sup>2</sup>: if this was so, then he could presume that the conversations had its tacit approval. Perhaps it was for this reason that he chose to keep this matter of conversations distinct from his request for assurances - and that he was so careful to emphasize that such communications did not commit either Government in any way<sup>3</sup>.

This clear distinction between the matter of conversations and the question of assurances is evident in both Cambon's and Grey's account<sup>4</sup> of their conversation of the 10th.

In this interview, Cambon's main preoccupations were whether Sir Edward Grey "was disposed to envisage with me (Cambon)" - in the manner proposed by Lord Lansdowne in his letter of May 25 - "all the eventualities that might arise from this affair (i.e. Morocco and

<sup>2</sup> The French Documents (as we have already noted) attribute the "Repington" questions to Sir George Clarke, Secretary of the Defence Committee; and Major Huguet was fully aware of the participation of Esher and Fisher and Grierson - or at least of their knowledge of the communications. - And, in point of fact, Lord Sanderson, Grey's permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, was, on his own admission, aware of them: see his "minute" of Jan. 11 to Grey, which is quoted further on.

<sup>3</sup> While Cambon's record does not mention any such statement of non-committment, Grey's does: indeed, the Foreign Secretary seems to attribute it to Cambon, and to make it out as being unsolicited by himself.

<sup>4</sup> For Cambon's account (to Rouvier, and dated Jan. 11, 1906): D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 385, For Grey's (to Bertie, dated Jan. 10): G. & T., III, No. 210 (a).

the Conference)", and, more specifically, "whether, in the event of an aggression on the part of the German Government, Britain would come to the side of France and lend her armed assistance"<sup>5</sup>. It was on these two questions - particularly the latter one - that the conversation was centered, Cambon contending that while war was not imminent, still, British assurances of this nature would be most effective in definitively dispelling the chances of war, and Grey maintaining that the British Government was at present in no position to give any such assurances, since the Cabinet would not assemble till after the elections and Public Opinion could be ascertained only through the outcome of the elections. Personally, Grey added however, he himself was convinced that, in the event of war, public opinion would be strongly in favour of British assistance to France - but that this was only a personal opinion and therefore did not bind the Government in any way.

The main topic of the conversation concluded with Cambon's statement that he would bring the matter up again, once the elections were over. - Only then did the French Ambassador broach the subject of Military and Naval conversations:

I now added (Cambon records<sup>6</sup>) that, so ill-founded as they might be, the apprehensions of late had imposed upon the military and naval administrations of the two countries the obligation to study certain measures and to communicate to each other semi-officially, outside the Governments and by safe intermediaries, certain confidential information. I opined that it was advisable that these conversations should

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<sup>5</sup> D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 385: Cambon to Rouvier, Jan. 11, 1906.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

be continued and Sir E. Grey said that he saw no objection to this.

With this short reference to the Conversations, the interview came to an official close.

## II

On the day of the interview, Sir Edward Grey despatched to Sir Francis Bertie the following record of Cambon's request for conversations:

... (M. Cambon) repeated that he would bring the question (of British Assurances) to me at the conclusion of the elections.

In the meantime, he thought it advisable that unofficial communications between our Admiralty and War Office and the French Naval and Military Attachés should take place as to what action might advantageously be taken in case the two countries found themselves in alliance in such a war. Some communications had, he believed, already passed, and might, he thought, be continued. They did not pledge either Government.

I did not dissent from this view. - I am, etc.

Edward Grey.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to this conversation of the 10th with the French Ambassador, Grey, it would seem, had been totally ignorant of the Repington-Huguet démarches.<sup>8</sup> - Yet, only five days after Cambon's request, Grey would summon the French Ambassador to the Foreign Office and give his formal consent to "direct" military and naval conversations. The decision will have been taken promptly, and with no apparent hesitation. And the conversations would be extended, in the same breath, to Belgium.

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<sup>7</sup> G. & T., III, No. 210 (a).

<sup>8</sup> See: G. & T., III, No. 212, Encl. 2, "minute".

How explain this decision and its promptness?

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Sir Edward Grey had taken over the Foreign Office at a moment when the Moroccan Question was reaching its pre-Conference high point, and Franco-German relations were becoming unusually - indeed, critically - strained.

Several weeks before assuming Office, he had publicly affirmed his complete accord with Lord Lansdowne's foreign policy. The Anglo-French Agreement of 1904 had met with his entire approval; the entente he supported whole-heartedly. For him, as for Lord Lansdowne, good relations with the French must be the corner-stone of any sane and wise British policy. To this effect he had stated to Cambon, on December 20<sup>9</sup>, that "the entente with France remained one of the essential factors of the new Cabinet's policy". And without any hesitation he let it be known - to the Germans as well as to the French - that Britain's policy towards France would remain unchanged, and that British support to France, according to the terms of the 1904 Agreement, would continue unabated.

Towards Germany, Grey held basically the same view as had Lansdowne. Good relations with the Kaiserland he certainly wished for - but not at the cost of the entente. Like his predecessor, Grey saw in Germany's attitude and acts over the Moroccan question, a desire, on the part of the German Government, to disrupt the Anglo-French entente: to

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D.D.F., 2eS., VIII, No. 262: Cambon to Rouvier, Dec. 21, 1905.

the French Chargé d'affaires in London, on December 27, the new Foreign Secretary had stated that "indeed the Anglo-French entente had displeased Berlin, but that they were mistaken if they had counted on a change of policy as a result of the change of Cabinet"<sup>10</sup>.

In effect, Sir Edward Grey's policy was dominated by one dominating wish: to preserve the entente. This entente he considered indispensable to what he considered to be his one official mission: the preservation of Peace in Honour. All other wishes - including friendship with Germany - were, to him, subsidiary.

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It will be recalled that throughout the latter part of December and the early days of January, rumours of impending German aggression upon France were rife. Grey, like Cambon, did not believe that the Germans really intended to attack France; but all the same - and by that same sane caution that dominated Cambon - he could not dismiss the possibility because of its apparent unlikelihood. Two days before his interview of the 10th with Cambon, Grey had despatched the following note to the Secretary of State for War, Haldane: the note reveals the Foreign Secretary's state of mind on the matter:

F.O., Jan. 8, 1906. My dear Richard, persistent reports and little indications keep reaching me that Germany means to attack France in the spring. I don't think that these are more than precautions and flourishes which Germany would naturally make à propos of the Morocco Conference. But they are not altogether to be disregarded. A situation might

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<sup>10</sup> D.D.F., 2eS, VIII, No. 262.

arise presently in which popular feeling might compel the Government to go to the help of France, and you might suddenly be asked what you could do. Fisher says he is ready, by which I take it he means that his ships are so placed that he can drive the German fleet off the seas and into shelter any time. I don't ask you to give me a definitive answer in a hurry, but I think you should be preparing one.<sup>11</sup>

We see by this note that even before Cambon approached him on the matter of military and naval conversations, Grey did give some thought to the possibility of Britain's being called upon to give armed assistance to France. - Indeed, on January 3, the Foreign Secretary had opined to the German Ambassador himself that "if France got into difficulties arising out of the very document which had been the foundation of the good feeling between us and France, sympathy with the French would be exceedingly strong."<sup>12</sup> " And to Cambon himself, on January 10 as we have seen), Grey repeated with yet greater clarity, this same personal opinion<sup>13</sup>.

In Grey's mind, Public Opinion alone - and only when faced with the immediate crisis or fact of war - could decide whether Britain would give France armed assistance in case of war. Under no circumstances could the British Government pledge armed assistance beforehand. Nevertheless, since Public Opinion might very well be moved, one day, to voice her desire to help France with arms, Grey felt it to be nothing less than his - and his fellow-Ministers' - bounden duty to see to it

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<sup>11</sup> Trevelyan, Grey of Fallodon, 137, foot-note.

<sup>12</sup> Grey, Twenty-Five Years, (3 vol. ed.,) I, 148: Despatch Grey to Frank Lascelles, 9. 1.06.

<sup>13</sup> G. & T., III, No. 210 (a).



that this armed assistance was available, that is, ready and effective.

Only in this light can we understand Grey's note to Haldane on the 8th - and his not unfavorable reception of Cambon's request for conversations two days later.

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As we have seen, then, the British Foreign Secretary was well "conditioned" for the French Ambassador's proposal that the British and French Military and Naval Staffs continue to communicate with a view to possible eventual cooperation in arms. There is no doubt, however, that without Cambon's assurance that such communications "did not pledge either Government", the proposal would not have been considered.

As it was, the Foreign Secretary received the request without comment, and left it up to the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Lord Sanderson, to inquire at the War Office regarding the true nature of the communications to date and the opinion of the Military heads on the usefulness of such communications.

Meanwhile, Grey returned (on the following day, Thursday the 11th) to his constituency, where - as was his practice during that "Election month" of January, 1906 - he spent the last three days of the week electioneering.

And on the day he returned to Fallodon, his Under-Secretary, Lord Sanderson, sent him the following "minute":

Minute Sanderson to Grey 14:

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I noticed that in your conversation yesterday with the French Ambassador, the latter stated that unofficial communications had already passed between our Admiralty and the French Naval Attaché as to the methods in which the two countries might assist one another in case of a joint war against another Power, and that he added that some similar communications had taken place between the Military Authorities and the French Military Attaché, not directly but by intermediaries. I thought that this latter remark looked very much as if the conversations which we know that Col. a'Court-Repington (sic) has had with the French Military Attaché had been taken by the latter and by the Embassy as being authorized by our General Staff.

I therefore asked General Grierson today whether he had made any inquiries of the kind directly or indirectly.

He told me that he had not done so, but that if there were any probability of his being called upon at short notice to furnish plans for joint operations it would be important that he should obtain information on several points.

I asked him to write a letter to me on the subject which I could send to you for your instructions, and I suggested to him that if he should have an opportunity he should inform the French Military Attaché that he (had) not authorized anybody to communicate on these subjects on his behalf.

I annex his letter just received. Are you disposed to authorize him to commence unofficial communications with the French Military Staff?

Do you think that any similar communications should be commenced with Belgium? They would have presumably to be carried on through our Military Attaché at Brussels. The Belgians would, I suppose, let the Germans know.

Jan. 11, 1906.

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As for the letter from General Grierson to Lord Sanderson, which the latter enclosed with his note:

Dear Lord Sanderson:

As I told you today in our conversation, I have had no communication with the French Military Attaché on the subject of British Military cooperation with France except, to a certain extent, about the 16th or 18th December, when I rode with him in the Row (a chance meeting), and he told me of the French fears of an attack by Germany. He asked me some questions about our war organisation, and I referred him to the Army List, which shows it and actually gives the composition on mobilisation of a division which actually does not exist in peace. He also asked if we had ever considered

operations in Belgium, and I said that, as a strategical exercise, I had worked such out last spring. That, to the best of my recollection, was all that passed between us, and I have not seen him since that date.

At the same time I think that, if there is even a chance of our having to give armed assistance on land to France or to take the field on her side in Belgium in consequence of a violation of Belgian territory by the Germans, we should have as soon as possible informal communication between the military authorities of France and/or Belgium and the General Staff. There are a great many points which we must settle before we can make our plans for the dispatch of a force to join either the French or the Belgian armies, and these we cannot settle without information which the staffs of these armies alone can give us. Then there are the arrangements to be made as to the utilisation of railways, harbours, billets, transport, and supplies, which would be quite different in a friendly country from those which we should have to make "on our own" in a hostile country, and these greatly influence our establishments and consequently the numbers we can put in the field. All these take a great deal of time, and it is exactly that factor which will be wanting on the outbreak of war. To make our help effective we must come at once with every available man. First successes are everything, and if the French could gain those they would "get their tails up" and all would go well.

For all these reasons I urge that, if there is a chance of such operations, informal communications should be opened between the General Staffs on both sides, and I see no difficulty in such communication being made on the express understanding that it commits the Government to nothing.

I remain, etc.  
J.M. Grierson.<sup>15</sup>

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Presumably, Grey received Lord Sanderson's minute and its annex on Friday the 12th. On that same day, he met his fellow-Minister Haldane at Burywick (in Grey's constituency) where the latter appeared on the platform with him. After the rally, Grey took Haldane aside and confided to

him the French Ambassador's request that the military conversations be continued. According to Haldane<sup>16</sup> the Foreign Minister asked: "How far were we, if an emergency compelling our intervention should arise, prepared with plans for it? Had we compared ideas about preparations with the French Generals?"

I said (writes Haldane<sup>17</sup>) that there had been before my time general conversations, but that the one thing needful, the interchange of scientific General Staff ideas, had not taken place to anything like the extent which modern standards of preparedness required. He asked whether such an interchange could not now take place, as a military precaution committing neither Government to any action, but enabling us to be ready for a serious contingency should it arise. I said that the General Staff at the War Office could easily do this, and that it should be done with a written declaration that the conversations were to be wholly non-committal. We both thought that Campbell-Bannerman should be first consulted, and I undertook to go to London and see him.

Haldane promptly returned to London, and over the week-end of the 13th-14th saw the Prime Minister, his Military Staff, and the French Attaché Major Huguet as well<sup>18</sup>. Grey, on his part, wrote a "minute" to the Foreign Office saying that he approved of the conversations,

being continued in a proper manner, i.e. with the cognizance of the Official heads of the Admiralty and War Office. In the case of the Admiralty I gather that what is being done is known to Sir J. Fisher. I have now spoken to Mr. Haldane as regards the War Office and he is willing that the French Military

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16 Haldane, Autobiography, 189-190

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 190.

Attaché should communicate with G(eneral) Grierson.  
The communication must be solely provisional and  
non-committal.<sup>19</sup>

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On Monday, the 15th, Sir Edward Grey was back in London,  
and had another conversation with Paul Cambon.

M. Paul Cambon à M. Rouvier<sup>20</sup>

Londres, le 15 janvier, 1906

Sir Edward Grey m'a prié de venir le voir au-  
jourd'hui à son retour de sa tournée électorale. Il m'a  
dit qu'il avait rendu compte au premier ministre, Sir  
Henry Campbell-Bannerman, de notre conversation du mer-  
credi dernier relative à l'appui éventuel que la France  
pourrait attendre de l'Angleterre en cas d'Aggression de  
l'Allemagne .....

Le Premier Ministre a répondu qu'il était im-  
possible en ce moment d'aborder l'examen d'une question  
aussi importante, mais qu'aussitôt après les élections  
il s'en entretiendrait avec le Secrétaire d'Etat pour  
les Affaires Etrangères et qu'il prendrait l'avis du  
Gouvernement dans le Conseil dont la date est déjà fixée  
au 29 janvier.

En ce qui concerne les échanges de renseignements  
entre les administrations militaires et navales des deux  
pays, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman est d'avis qu'il im-  
porte de les continuer. Quoi qu'il arrive, il faut être  
prêt et il serait imprudent d'attendre au dernier moment  
pour envisager les dispositions à prendre en cas d'éven-  
tualité menaçante. D'après le Premier Ministre, dont  
Sir Edward Grey partage l'avis, les communications entre  
nos administrations militaires et navales doivent se  
faire avec une entière discrétion et sans l'intervention  
d'intermédiaires officiels. L'Attaché naval de l'ambas-  
sade peut causer avec Sir John Fisher, Lord de l'Amirauté,  
qui remplit les fonctions analogues à celles de notre chef  
d'Etat-major général de la marine et l'Attaché militaire  
peut s'entretenir directement avec le General Grierson,  
Directeur des opérations militaires au ministère de la

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<sup>19</sup> G. & T., III, No. 212, Encl. 2, "minute", dated: 13.1.06. - According  
to this minute, Grey's authorization would have come before the Prime  
Minister's being consulted.

<sup>20</sup> D.D.F., 2eS, VIII, No. 417.

guerre.

Le capitaine de frégate de Lostende et le commandant Huguet ont d'ailleurs eu déjà avec les représentants de l'Amirauté et de War Office des conversations intéressantes dont ils ont adressé les relations à Paris et dont Votre Excellence a eu connaissance.<sup>21</sup>

Je prescris à ces deux officiers de continuer à se prêter à des échanges de vues et de renseignements en observant la discrétion la plus absolue.

### III

Thus, on January 15, Sir Edward Grey, with the avowed approval of the Prime Minister, and in accordance with the wishes of the British War Office and the French Military, Naval and Political Authorities, formally consented to the Conversations.

And on that same day, notice went out from the Foreign Office to General Grierson, authorizing him to enter into communication with the French Military Attaché - and the Belgian Military Authorities as well<sup>22</sup>.

Lord Sanderson to Man.-Gen. Grierson

January 15, 1906.

My dear Grierson,

I showed your letter of the 11th to Sir E. Grey, and he has spoken to Mr. Haldane on the subject. They agree to your entering into communications with the French Military Attaché here for the purpose of obtaining such information as you require as to the methods in which military assistance could in case of need be best afforded by us to France and

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<sup>21</sup> See: D.D.F., 2eS, VIII, Nos. 256, 300, 308. - These accounts have been mentioned in Chs. 2 and 3.

<sup>22</sup> There is no record of the Belgians having requested military conversations: the British Military Attaché in Brussels would, on Grierson's instructions (G. & T., III, No. 217 (b)), introduce the idea of Military conversations himself to the Belgians. (See: G. & T., III, No. 218)

vice versa. Such communications must be solely provisional and non-committal.

Sir E. Grey sees no objection to similar inquiries being addressed by our Military Attaché at Brussels to the Belgian Military Authorities as to the manner in which, in case of need, British assistance could be most effectually afforded to Belgium for the defence of her neutrality.

Yours sincerely,

SANDERSON<sup>23</sup>

(Approved by Sir. E. Grey.)

The following day, the Foreign Secretary himself communicated his consent to naval conversations to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Tweedmouth.

Private.

January 16, 1906

Dear Tweedmouth,

Cambon tells me that the French Naval Attaché has been unofficially and in a non-committal way in communication with Fisher, as to what help we could give in a war between Germany and France. We haven't promised any help, but it's quite right that our Naval and Military Authorities should discuss the question in this way with the French and be prepared to give an answer when they are asked, or rather if they are asked...<sup>24</sup>

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On Wednesday, January 17, General Grierson got in touch with Huguet, thus "formally" opening the Military Conversations<sup>25</sup>. Two days later, Haldane informed Grey of this in a note: "Gen. Grierson is in communication with the French Military Attaché confidentially and without

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<sup>23</sup> G. & T., III, No. 214.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 203, "Ed. Note".

<sup>25</sup> Repington, I, 12. - When Huguet, on the same day, informed Repington that Grierson had called him up, the Colonel thereupon notified the Major "that my share in the conversations was now at an end" (Ibid., I, 12).

prejudice"<sup>26</sup>.

With this Grierson-Huguet contact, the Anglo-French Conversations were formally under way.

#### IV

We have concluded our account of the genesis of the Conversations. But before drawing this First Part to a close, we must examine one or two matters that will bring into sharper relief certain facets which we shall not have occasion to consider later.

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In January 1906, scarcely more than a handful of British Cabinet Ministers knew of the existence of the Military Conversations. Among the informed few there were: Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, Sir Edward Grey, Haldane, Lord Tweedmouth, and Lord Ripon. Perhaps Asquith, also, knew of the conversations at this date. Most of the other Cabinet Ministers would only learn of them some six years later.

There is no doubt that the main responsibility for this ignorance of the majority of the Cabinet rests with the Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. He had the final say in the matter of the conversations: ultimately, the conversations could only be assented to by his authorization. It was up to him, then, to decide whether the

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<sup>26</sup> Letter Haldane to Grey, Jan. 19, 1906: G. & T., III, No. 217 (a), "Ed. Note".



matter required Cabinet discussion and decision.

Of his attitude towards the Conversations, and his reasons for allowing them to remain secret to the majority of the Cabinet, his biographer<sup>27</sup> has this to say:

Campbell-Bannerman had his misgivings about the interpretation which might be put upon these "communications", but he was made aware of all the circumstances and gave his consent to their going forward on the understanding that they were provisional and precautionary measures, and that the Government was not bound by their results. Thus limited, he regarded them as raising no new question of policy and therefore within the competence of the War Office.

For Campbell-Bannerman, then, it would seem that the conversations were strictly a departmental, non-policy affair proper to the War Office and the Admiralty, and of no concern to the Cabinet as a whole. Given the Primer Minister's record for probity and his experience in Ministry, - and the further fact that only such a view could absolve him from this neglect to submit the matter to a Cabinet - this must indeed have been Sir Henry's stand and conviction.

Sir Edward Grey had much the same view as the Prime Minister, though with some slight differences. He too, would seem to have considered the matter as being essentially "departmental" and of an internal order: for, on January 13, even prior to Campbell-Bannerman's being consulted, and on the sole basis of Grey's conversation of the 12th with Haldane, the Foreign Minister was instructing the Foreign Office to authorize General Grierson to resume communication directly

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27

Spender, Life of Campbell-Bannerman, ii, 253.

with the French Military Attaché.<sup>28</sup>

Sir Edward Grey also makes the claim that the Conversations, being non-committal and unofficial, and mere provisional and precautionary measures, were therefore not a matter of policy - at least in so far as the Foreign Office was concerned. For, he was of the opinion that the conversations affected in no way Britain's diplomatic freedom.

It is true that Grey took infinite care to have everyone involved understand that the conversations were unofficial and non-committal and strictly provisional: Grierson certainly understood this perfectly clearly<sup>29</sup>; and according to Haldane<sup>30</sup>, the French Military Attaché and the British War Office would have exchanged letters to that effect; and certainly Cambon - as was evident six years later - fully understood this... But it is still questionable whether the conversations left Grey's diplomacy unaffected.

For, in the final analysis, it would seem that the conversations were an inextricable part of Grey's diplomacy of January 1906. - And furthermore they can logically be said to have been a definite part of British policy at that time.

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G. & T., III, No. 212, Encl. 2, "minute".

29

Grierson understood this perfectly clearly: See his letter of Jan. 16 to Lt. Col. Barnardiston in Brussels: G. & T., III, No. 217 (b).

30

Autobiography, 190.

It will be recalled that the main question before Sir Edward Grey in that first month of 1906 was whether he would give the French a promise of armed assistance in case of war. Cambon put the question before him on January 10: Grey gave the Ambassador his answer on January 31.

What Cambon really wanted was "some form of assurance which might be given in conversation"<sup>31</sup>: for, as we have seen, Cambon wished to avoid involvement in any negotiations that might lead to a formal convention"<sup>32</sup>. To this request for a verbal assurance Grey replied "that an assurance of that kind could be nothing short of a solemn undertaking. It was one which I could not give without submitting it to the Cabinet and getting their authority, and that were I to submit the question to the Cabinet I was sure that they would say that this was too serious a matter to be dealt with by verbal agreement but must be put into writing."<sup>33</sup> But putting it in writing would present almost insuperable difficulties: for one thing, "it could not be given unconditionally, and it would be difficult to describe the conditions"<sup>34</sup>; moreover, such an assurance would change the entente into a defensive alliance; and "should such a defensive alliance be formed, it was too serious a matter to be kept secret from Parliament. The Government could conclude it without the

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<sup>31</sup>

G. & T., III, No. 219: Letter Grey to Bertie, 31.1.06.

<sup>32</sup>

D.D.F., 2eS. VIII, No. 385.

<sup>33</sup>

G. & T., III, No. 219.

<sup>34</sup>

Ibid.

assent of Parliament, but it would have to be published afterwards. No British Government could commit the country to such a serious thing and keep the engagement secret"<sup>35</sup>. ... In short, Public Opinion must be the final arbiter of the question, and could not be called upon to give a verdict before the absolute need for a decision arose: "Much would depend as to the manner in which the war broke out between Germany and France." - Meanwhile:

since the Ambassador had spoken to me (Grey recounts as having told Cambon<sup>36</sup>) a good deal of progress had been made. Our military and naval authorities had been in communication with the French, and I assumed that all preparations were ready, so that, if a crisis arose, no time would have been lost for want of a formal agreement.

Grey gave Cambon no "assurances", on January 31st: but he had already granted him the conversations - so that "all preparations were ready", and thus "no time would have been lost for want of a formal agreement".

Diplomatically, there are grounds for considering the Conversations as the most effective alternative - indeed, the only alternative - to outright assurances ... Whether Grey acknowledged them as the only alternative at his disposal - and whether he consented to them for this reason - is very doubtful.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

It is notable that the Cabinet was never consulted or informed regarding Grey's reply of the 31st to Cambon.

Yet Campbell-Bannerman had written to Grey, of the 21st: "When would you like a Cabinet? Would the 30th, 31st, or the 1st do? Would you like the answer for the French to be confirmed by a Cabinet before it is given?"<sup>37</sup> And on the very day of the interview with Cambon a Cabinet was held - the first following the elections<sup>38</sup>.

Grey, in his Twenty-Five Years, cannot account for this; nor can Campbell-Bannerman's biographer. However, we find in a despatch from Cambon to Rouvier - the very despatch in which the Ambassador recounts his interview of the 31st with Grey -:<sup>39</sup>

D'autre part, j'ai eu des renseignements confidentiels sur les conversations du Roi avec Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman et Sir. E. Grey durant le séjour des deux Ministres à Windsor de samedi à lundi dernier. On a reconnu l'identité des intérêts de l'Angleterre et de la France dans le cas d'une offensive de l'Allemagne, mais on est tombé d'accord sur ce point qu'une extension de nos accords devrait donner lieu à une discussion au sein du Cabinet et qu'à l'heure actuelle cette consultation aurait des inconvénients, car certains ministres s'étonneraient de l'ouverture de pourparlers officiels entre les administrations militaires des deux pays et des études auxquelles elles se livrent en commun. On a donc pensé qu'il valait mieux garder le silence et continuer discrètement des préparatifs qui mettraient les deux Gouvernements en état de se concerter et d'agir rapidement au besoin.

On a dit qu'en tout cas il convenait d'attendre la clôture de la Conférence d'Algésiras, car le conflit ne pourrait sortir que d'un échec de cette réunion.

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37

Spender, Life of Campbell-Bannerman, ii, 253.

38

Trevelyan, 138.

39

D.D.F., 2eS., IX (1re Partie), No. 106: Cambon to Rouvier, 31.1.06.

If we can give credence to this account, then perhaps we have the real reason why the Conversations were never brought up before a Cabinet: In view of the substantial pro-German element in this Cabinet, to reveal the existence of the Conversations would have been to expose the new Cabinet and Government to a perhaps fatal Crisis.

But the most significant revelation in the account above is the acute awareness, on the part of the King, the Prime Minister and Sir Edward Grey, of the identity of interests that were now found to exist between France and Britain and which an aggression by Germany would necessarily imperil; and the equally acute sense that a significant element in the Cabinet itself (not to mention the Nation) were not yet aware of this identity of interests. ... Nothing could bear witness more eloquently than this to the evolution undergone by the Entente since April 1904. - The Conversations were, in fact, the one tangible outcome of this evolution.

P A R T II

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONVERSATIONS

1906      to      1914

The study of the diplomatic and political development of the military and naval conversations from their formal beginnings to the eve of the war.

CHAPTER 5

The conversations military and naval from 1906 to 1914 -  
The conversations continue after Algéçiras - The French  
interest - The conversations and the Haldane reforms -  
Haldane's revelation to the Emperor, September 1906 -  
Rumours of a Convention - Clémenceau's statement in the  
Senate and Grey's reaction - Tirpitz's interview and  
Grey's instructions - Metternich's query - The  
Clémenceau-Campbell-Bannerman misunderstanding, April  
1907. - General Lyttleton's memorandum, July 1907 -  
Clémenceau's interest in the conversations and the Haldane  
Reforms - Clémenceau's conversation with Goschen, August  
1908 - The Casablanca Incident and the conversations -  
Naval conversations begin - The conversations and the  
Committee of Imperial Defence - Briand and the French  
"moral obligations" towards Britain.



## I

The military conversations, which, as we have seen, began in January 1906, continued uninterrupted, right up to the first World War. Their pace, however, was by no means constant. Throughout the Algé-ciras Conference, Anglo-French joint military planning was intensive and highly detailed. After the Algé-ciras settlement, in April 1906, the conversations abated considerably: with the exception of a slight quickening in the last weeks of 1908 (at the height of the 'Casablanca Deserters' incident and the Bosnian question), this casual pace continued up to 1910. In August of that year, General Henry Wilson became Director of Military Operations, and instilled into them a new vitality. The Agadir Crisis of the summer and fall of 1911 gave them a further impulsion; and this new intensity was to continue without relapse, up to July 1914.

The naval conversations, for their part, followed a different pattern. They began only in late 1908, and - because of their very nature - were only occasional. In 1912, however, they received considerable impetus and became the major issue of Anglo-French diplomatic relations for several months, as a result of the British decision to withdraw the Mediterranean Fleet to Home Waters.

In the last two years of peace, the conversations continued, without any restraint on the part of either the French or the British Government. And in 1914, they even became a diplomatic instrument for the preservation and the furthering of the Triple Entente, by leading to Anglo-Russian naval conversations. In some ways, these Anglo-Russian conversations, relatively unimportant in themselves, do reveal the

diplomatic importance which the Anglo-French conversations finally achieved.

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In this chapter, we shall treat the first phase of the military conversations, covering from January 1906 to General Henry Wilson's advent in August 1910.

## II

On February 2, 1906, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, writing to Lord Ripon on Foreign Office affairs,<sup>1</sup> referred to Anglo-French relations and the conversations, in the following terms: "The (secretary) said that Cambon appears satisfied. But I do not like the stress laid upon joint preparations. It comes very close to an honourable understanding: and it will be known on both sides of the Rhine. But let us<sup>2</sup> hope for the best."

Throughout the Alg ciras Conference, General Grierson and Major Huguet<sup>3</sup> gave their undivided attention to the task of joint planning: the statesmen, having given their consent, let the conversations proceed without further intervention.

On April 7, the Alg ciras Conference terminated in a Settlement.

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Sir Edward Grey's wife had just passed away, and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was supervising Foreign Office activities in the Foreign Secretary's absence.

2

Spender, Campbell-Bannerman, II, 257.

3

For details of the technical data exchanged in the Grierson-Huguet conversations of 1906, SEE: D.D.F., 2eS., IX, Nos. 34, 68, 181; and Ibid., 2eS., X, No. 48; and G.&T., III, App. "D".

The Act of Algé-ciras brought to an end Franco-German tension, and lifted the threat of war. Two days later, the British Director of Military Operations went over to the Foreign Office "and arranged for <sup>4</sup>détente of war preparations."

Yet, notwithstanding Campbell-Bannerman's qualms of conscience, the international détente, and Grierson's and the Foreign Office's decision in favour of a consequent relaxation of war preparations, the conversations did not cease. - Indeed, they continued in spite of the fact that for the next five years the British army was in the throes of drastic reform, which made all joint planning purely temporary and in need of constant revision.

In view of all this, our first question - since this is primarily a diplomatic study - must be: Why is it that the conversations continued after the Algé-ciras Settlement?

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The conversations, it will be recalled, consisted in joint preparations for British assistance to France, should France get involved in a war with Germany, and should Britain decide to intervene.

According to the nature of these conversations, all their advantages and eventual benefits accrued to France. True, they did not assure her of British support, but they brought into being the possibility not only of British support on land, but of immediate and effective British military assistance. This planning came, moreover, without the slightest commitment or bondage on the part of the French.

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4

Macdiarmid, Grierson, 217.-The words are from an excerpt of Grierson's diary.

If the conversations continued after Algé-ciras, it would not be unreasonable, therefore, to suspect that they did so at the request of the French. There is, however, not the slightest evidence to indicate that this was so. - Nowhere do we find even a suggestion that the French asked the British to allow the French and British Army General Staffs to continue to confer. The French, it would seem, merely assumed that the conversations would continue. The British, for their part, took no measures to bring them to a close.

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There is a reason for this British submission to the French assumption. We find it primarily in Haldane and his Army reform.

Haldane had taken over the direction of Army affairs, realising full well that this department was in dire and urgent need of radical reform. He had assumed this office, however, without any pre-conceived plans or ideas for reform. Then, after scarcely a month in his new post, he was brought to a sudden and acute awareness of the imminent possibility of a continental war as a result of the Moroccan dispute: the occasion was Grey's conversation with him at Berwick, on January 12, regarding Cambon's suggestion that the French and British General Staffs be allowed to "confer directly" with a view to possible  
5  
British assistance to France.

This problem was submitted to him precisely at a time when he was searching for an "objective" which might guide him in the elaboration

of an Army reform project. His investigation of the problem with his War Office Staff led him to his "objective".

Ellison, Harris, and I set to work (Haldane recounts in his Autobiography <sup>6</sup>). The first question was, what must be our objective, and what was required for its attainment? In almost every period the peril to be provided against is different from what it is in another period. Once it had been invasion by the French. Changes in diplomatic relations had made this particular peril for the time an obsolete one. In 1906 there was a possibility, I thought it no more than a chance which was improbable, that the Central Powers might invade and occupy France, in which case, with growing German sea-power, our island security from invasion would be much diminished. The continued occupation by a friendly nation like the French of Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne, the vital Northern Channel ports of the Continent, was therefore an objective on which to concentrate. The accomplishment of this implied that we should have an Expeditionary Force sufficient in size and also in rapidity of mobilising power to be able to go to the assistance of the French Army in the event of an attack on the Northern or North-Eastern parts of France.

We had, therefore, to provide for an Expeditionary Force which we reckoned at six great divisions, fully equipped, and at least one cavalry division. We had also to make certain that this force could be mobilised and sent to the place where it might be required as rapidly as any German force could be. The limit of time was worked out at fifteen days.

In line with this train of reasoning, Haldane designed his new Army primarily for service on the Continent against Germany. His Expeditionary Force was recast in formations more suitable to Continental warfare: to this end, the "great division" of twelve battalions was adopted. Military training and the choice of equipment were determined by the anticipated nature of Continental warfare, in accordance with the

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<sup>6</sup>

Op. Cit., 187, 188.

conclusions arrived at through the conversations. ... All army reorganization was conducted under the hypothesis, that if the British Army were made ready for such a Continental war, it would, a fortiori, be capable<sup>7</sup> of handling any Colonial uprising, or aggression upon the Empire.

For Haldane, then, the conversations played a vital role. It was through them that he and his War Office were able to determine the effectiveness of any military item. Haldane had good reason, therefore, to see to it that the conversations continued. And as we shall see, particularly in our study of General Wilson's efforts, the War Secretary displayed unflagging interest in the development of these conversations.

If, then, the Anglo-French General Staff exchanges continued after the Algé-ciras Settlement, most of the credit (on the British side) must go to him. There are grounds for believing that had the question of their continuation been left to the Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, or his successor, Asquith, the conversations would have ceased. Haldane alone, among the British Ministers, could be said to have had a "vested interest" in the conversations, and an earnest wish that they continue.

Regarding the attitude of the British Foreign Secretary, we shall now have occasion to study it, as we turn our attention to the diplomatic relations that attended the conversations up to late 1908.

### III

One condition attached to the military conversations from the very start was that they be conducted with the utmost secrecy. On the

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See: Dunlop, The Development of the British Army, 241-6.

British side, it was even deemed advisable, in January of 1906, not to inform the whole Cabinet of their existence. Whether the chief French Ministers shared the same reluctance to impart the information to their Cabinet confrères not directly interested, it is impossible to say. But it was not long before rumours of Anglo-French joint planning, and even of an Anglo-French Convention, began to spread through the European Capitals, and to find their way to the Press.

In September 1906, Haldane visited Berlin, at the invitation of the German Emperor (through the Duke of Connaught), to study first hand the organisation of the German War Office. In the course of one of the many private conversations which he had with the Emperor, the latter informed him that secret Staff Anglo-French conversations had come to the knowledge of his secret service department. Haldane made no attempt to deny the fact.

"...I replied that such preliminary knowledge was regarded today as essential for any Army that was to be prepared for a possible task, and that his own Great General Staff had been the first to teach the principle to the world. He (the Kaiser) fully admitted that this was so and said that he had no quarrel with us for doing this." <sup>8</sup>

In that same month, General Grierson, soon to leave his post of Director of Military Operations, attended the French manoeuvres of the 1st and 2nd Army Corps. The deferential treatment he received and his intimacy with the French General Officers, gave further fuel to the

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Haldane, Autobiography, 190-1. No mention is made of this matter in Haldane's Account to the King, of his various Berlin interviews in the course of this sojourn. - For this Account, See Maurice, Haldane, I, 191-200.

rumours of Anglo-French concerting for eventual military cooperation. By the end of that month, the German press was freely discussing the likelihood and possibilities of such a cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

But in early October, that same German press now came forth with the rumour of an Anglo-French military convention.<sup>10</sup> While neither the French nor the British leading papers paid any heed to this allegation, it continued its rounds, until it was finally brought up in the French Senate.

On November 20 (1906), a French "Nationaliste" Senator, M. Gaudin de Villaine, rose in the Senate to denounce the policy, both internal and external, of the new President of the Council, M. Clémenceau. On foreign affairs, the Senator accused the Prime Minister of conducting an "English policy". To this, M. Clémenceau replied that it was impossible to retort to anything so vague. Thereupon, M. Gaudin de Villaine interrupted him, saying:

"Is there a military convention between France and England? Yes or no."<sup>11</sup>

M. Clémenceau's reply to this precise question was evasive and rather misleading. He answered

that he had only been at the head of the Ministry for three weeks, but that among the documents laid before him by the Minister for Foreign Affairs concerning such agreements, for instance, as those on the subject of Morocco, he had not seen anything of the sort. He protested against questions of that kind being addressed to him, and added that there might be occasions when a

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<sup>9</sup>

D.D.F., 2eS., X, No. 215.

<sup>10</sup>

Ibid., No. 227.

<sup>11</sup>

G. & T., III, 394, No. 443: Bertie to Grey, Nov. 21, 1906.



Government conscious of its responsibilities ought not to give any reply to them and that it was not right that anything should be said from the Tribune which might "décourager les amitiés" or "rompre des accords"....

The senate expressed their confidence in the Government by 213 votes to 32. <sup>12</sup>

Three days after M. de Villaine's query in the French Senate, M. Cambon paid a visit to Sir Charles Hardinge, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office. To M. George Louis, Cambon recounted:

...Sir Ch. Hardinge craint que le débat qu'a eu lieu au Sénat français ne suscite une question à la Chambre des Communes. Je lui ai dit qu'il était facile au Gouvernement anglais de décliner toute question relative à la politique extérieure. Il en est convenu, mais il se demande s'il ne vaudrait pas mieux de (sic) répondre simplement: il n'y a pas de convention militaire, en laissant entendre qu'au besoin on pourrait en conclure une. C'est à examiner. <sup>13</sup>

Hardinge's version is slightly different:

...In view of the fact that Conference (i.e., military conversations) took place last spring to concert joint measures of action and that no convention actually exists it would, I thought, have been best if M. Clémenceau had given a "démenti".

M. Cambon was not quite of the same opinion as he regards the myth of the existence of a Convention as a deterrent to Germany. <sup>14</sup>

Strangely enough, Sir Edward Grey's reaction differed markedly from that of his official advisor, Hardinge: Indeed, Grey sided with Clémenceau and Cambon:

It would have been difficult (he writes below Hardinge's Minute) for M. Clémenceau to deny the existence of a Convention without giving the impression that such a Convention was not desired. I

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<sup>12</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>

D.D.F., 2eS., X, No. 305: Cambon to George Louis, 23 November, 1906.

<sup>14</sup>

G. & T., III, 395, No. 444.

shall endeavour to avoid public denial, if I am asked a question.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, no questions were asked in either House - or even, it would seem, in Cabinet. But had there been a query, Grey's answer, apparently, would not have been a straightforward "démenti", as his Permanent Under-Secretary would have wished. Why did Grey intend to avoid a direct "démenti"? There is no certain answer. We can safely assume that he, for his part, did not desire a Convention. Perhaps he did not wish to cross M. Clémenceau and "décourager les amitiés".... Or perhaps, Grey, like Cambon, "regarded the myth of the existence" - or of the imminence - "of a Convention as a deterrent to Germany."...

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In any event, while Haldane showed himself most ready at all times to admit to the Germans the existence of the Anglo-French staff conversations, Grey, on the other hand, had no wish to enlighten them at all on the subject.

In early January of 1907, Admiral von Tirpitz, speaking with the British Naval Attaché in Berlin, Captain Dumas, claimed, in passing, to know that Britain "had offered to lend France 200,000 men last spring, but that (such) assistance would have been helpless against 4,000,000 men Germany could put into the field." The British Attaché, admitting the futility of such an insignificant British offer in the face of such overwhelming German superiority, concluded, to Tirpitz, that "His Excellency must therefore acknowledge that we (the British), knowing that, could

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<sup>15</sup>

Ibid.

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never really have made such a useless offer".

Sir Edward Grey annotated this despatch. His opening words were: "I do not altogether like this conversation." His minute leaves little doubt as to what he disapproved of: the last paragraph of the minute reads -

None of our officers or diplomats should discuss with the Germans what assistance we may offer or may have offered to France at any time past or future. This should be pointed out to our Embassy at Berlin with a view to possible future conversations. <sup>17</sup>

This order, in the light of the despatch, could, strictly speaking, only mean that Grey did not want any one to make any reply whatsoever, whether non-committal or in denial, to any reference by any German to questions on Anglo-French military conversations or even conventions.

Grey's intent on silence, towards Germany, be this silence ever so ambiguous, is clearly demonstrated in an interview which he had with the German Ambassador, two months later.

In the first week of March, Count Metternich was suddenly summoned to Berlin. The reason suspected by both Grey and Cambon was German bewilderment over the enigma of the rumoured Anglo-French military convention.

On returning to London, the German Ambassador went straight to the Foreign Office. Immediately after his interview with Grey, Cambon called on the Foreign Secretary - avowedly, to appease his curiosity regarding the purpose of Metternich's sudden and brief visit to Berlin.

According to Grey, Metternich had absolutely nothing either vital

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<sup>16</sup>

G. & T., VI, No. 1 (Encl.).

<sup>17</sup>

Ibid., Minute.

or urgent to communicate. Only the Ambassador's closing remarks gave a clue as to his (and Berlin's) possible preoccupation. As Cambon records  
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 it,

Enfin, comme l'Ambassadeur d'Allemagne s'apprêtait à se retirer, il a tout à coup demandé à son interlocuteur si l'Entente entre la France et l'Angleterre n'avait rien dont pût s'inquiéter le Gouvernement allemand. Sir Edward Grey n'a pas pu s'empêcher de sourire et lui a répondu: le caractère de notre entente avec la France dépend uniquement de l'attitude du Gouvernement allemand. C'est un arrangement d'affaires, une garantie de paix et de tranquillité. Dans le cas seulement où l'action du Gouvernement allemand deviendrait menaçante, notre entente serait défensive.

It must be borne in mind that at that time there were no major diplomatic differences impeding Anglo-German relations. In view of this fact, then, Grey's reply to Metternich's awkward query seems rather curt and unfriendly; while it cannot be said that he really quelched the rumour of an Anglo-French convention.

The only explanation that can be derived from Grey's attitude towards Germany, as it is indicated in his dealing with her over the question of Anglo-French military relations, is that Grey was growing ever more distrustful of the Germans, and that, in his fifteen short months of office, German diplomatic machinations and methods of "alternate cajolery and threats", had only served to nurture, in him, dislike and wariness.

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It would seem that Grey was slightly mistaken, when, in November  
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 1906, he suggested that M. Clémenceau desired a convention with Britain.

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D.D.F., 2eS., X, No. 431

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G. & T., III, 395, No. 444

What M. Clémenceau wanted was that France should have every possible assurance of effective British military support, without incurring the bondage of a convention.

The new Prime Minister had no love for Germany. He saw in her a threat, not only to France, but to all Europe. The Kaiser, he readily depicted as another Napoleon. But as a Frenchman, his first fears were for France: Germany might take it in her mind at any time, to attack France on the flimsiest pretext; or, again, she might choose to place France in such a humiliating predicament, that no Frenchman could possibly refuse to take up the sword to save his nation's honour.

These thoughts haunted Clémenceau: they did not dominate him. He also saw the likelihood of Franco-German relations continuing along that long, bumpy road of petty grievance and momentary flare-up, France always on the "qui vive", and Germany always "growling at her heels". For Clémenceau, no precautions were to be overlooked, in France's preparations against the day when France and Germany would finally meet, once again, on the battlefield. At home, the Army and war plans were brought to a high-point of readiness. Abroad, everything was done to strengthen the links with allies and friends, and to appease those borderline nations (actually or nearly in the other "camp") with whom no basic quarrel or deep-rooted antagonism existed.

In Clémenceau's thoughts, Britain was the "pierre de touche". France's only military ally, Russia, was still badly shaken by the military disaster and political strife of 1905: militarily, Russia could be discounted. Moreover, Russia would only intervene - if she chose to at all - on Germany's eastern front, and only after a slow mobilisation. The soundest

French military opinion in 1907 foresaw a lightning stroke, by the German troops, along the Meuse, through Belgium, and directly upon Paris, at the very outset of the war. Numerically, French troops would be considerably inferior to the Germans. Even on the hypothesis of Belgian assistance to France, British military aid would still be necessary, to assure an outcome favourable to France.

We can readily see the importance that the Anglo-French conversations assumed in Clémenceau's thoughts. - And the first evidence of this occurs in April of 1907, on the occasion of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's visit to Paris.

On April 9, Clémenceau had a long conversation with the British Prime Minister. It appears that the conversation was not recorded at the time. Two days later, however, Clémenceau, in an interview with the British Ambassador, Sir Francis Bertie, expressed himself as deeply troubled by one remark made by Sir Henry. As Bertie records it,

They had, he (Clémenceau) said, been talking about Germany and he (the French Prime Minister) had expressed the sincere desire of France to maintain peace but he had pointed out the possibility of the ambition and proceedings of Germany bringing about such a state of things as must result in war. It seemed as if Germany was gradually assuming the attitude of France under Napoleon and that everybody would be expected to give way to German pretensions. There might be a moment when Europe would have to resist..... In the present circumstances and state of affairs he regretted the reductions in the British Army and he had expressed his feelings to Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and had been quite taken aback by the Prime Minister having said (lui ayant jeté à la figure) that he did not think that English public opinion would allow of British Troops being employed on the Continent of Europe. Clémenceau thought that the Prime Minister could not be aware of the communications which had passed between the General Staff French and the General Staff British during the acute stages of the Morocco crisis when it had been contemplated that in certain eventualities

115,000 British Troops would be employed in Belgium or elsewhere in support of France. Was there now to be a change of attitude on the part of England? France ardently desired to maintain peace and nothing save dire necessity would make her resort to war. She had not detached Italy from the Triplice. It was sufficient for France to feel sure that no attack would come from that quarter. Her right would be safe, but how about her left if she had to face Germany? Could she only rely on Naval support? This would be very serious. He must inform the President of the Republic and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of what the Prime Minister had said, but he would not inform his other colleagues in the Cabinet for he hoped that the Prime Minister had spoken without full consideration of the effect of what he had said. The effect on his colleagues of such an exposition of British policy would be disastrous. He said that he would instruct Cambon to speak to you on the subject. He sincerely trusted that his anxiety would be relieved by you. It was not that he had raised the question of the employment of British Troops. The Prime Minister "m'a jeté ça en pleine figure." 20

Read carefully, Clémenceau's communication to Bertie, as recorded by the latter, makes a subtle transition, from Anglo-French military planning, to the whole sphere of British policy towards France, enmeshing the two items so intricately that they finally appear as one. As a result, one finally has the impression that there had been assurances of British support both on the Continent and on the seas, and that such assurances had become an integral part of Britain's French policy.

It would be unjust to say that Clémenceau wished, in effect, to distort the actual terms of January 15, 1906, regarding the conversations. It would be fairer to say that he wished to create a vivid impression upon the British, of French dependence on British armed support on the Continent as well as on the seas.... And perhaps, also, did he want to sow the notion of "moral obligation" on the part of the British.

Grey took great care to correct M. Clémenceau's impression of Sir Henry's remarks, - and to define, once again, the terms and nature of the conversations. He wrote to Bertie: <sup>21</sup>

The Prime tells me that he dwelt upon the reluctance of the British people to undertake obligations, which would commit them to a Continental war, but that he made no statement to the effect that under no circumstances should we allow British troops to be employed on the Continent of Europe...

Grey recalled that at the time of Algéiras "it was ... urged by the French" that the Army and Naval experts of the two countries be allowed to confer, so as "to make prompt co-operation possible, if a crisis arose in connection with the Algéiras Conference": this could be done "without committing either of us." "To this we (the British) agreed and the Prime Minister knew at the time that, such consultation was taking place."

The whole thing is really in a sentence: public opinion here would be very reluctant to go to war, but it would not place limits upon the use of our Forces, if we were engaged in war, and all our naval and military would then be used in the way in which they would be most effective.

It is not a matter to be made the subject of any written communication (Grey concludes), but you should take any opportunity of correcting M. Clémenceau's impression, and I shall give the same explanation to M. Cambon, if he asks me, as you say he will.

I have shown this letter to the Prime Minister, who confirms its accuracy.

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Meanwhile, the military conversations continued. On July 26, 1907, Sir Neville Lyttleton, Chief of General Staff, submitted to the Foreign Office a memorandum covering a scheme which the Director of Military Operations, together with the General Staff, had drawn up and wished to communicate to Colonel Huguet. This new scheme had been prepared under Gen. Ewart, who had succeeded Gen. Grierson in October of 1906; it took into account new changes in the organisation of the Home Army, and "certain changes in the French plans of mobilisation and concentration, which affected the ports of disembarkation and the railway transport therefrom."<sup>22</sup>

In this memorandum it was clearly laid down that the scheme was not binding on the British Government, but merely showed how the plans made in view of the situation of 1906 would be modified by the changes made in the organisation of the Home Army in 1907. The memorandum with a few verbal amendments was approved by Sir Edward Grey, and Colonel Huguet was informed accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

It was with Sir Edward Grey's full knowledge and consent, therefore, that the conversations continued.

#### IV

From the summer of 1907 to the spring of 1909, Europe went through one of the most crucial stages in its pre-war diplomatic history. On August 31, 1907, the Anglo-Russian Settlement was signed: for the first time, there appeared the prospect of a Triple Entente which might effectively counter-balance the Triplice. Then, in late

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<sup>22</sup> G. & T. VII, 626, No. 639: Memorandum by General Nicholson, Nov. 6, 1911. - For complete text of Memorandum, see Appendix to this Thesis.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

1907, the German Government drew up a new Naval Bill, which set off the fateful Anglo-German naval race. Finally, in October 1908, Austria-Hungary effected (or rather, consummated) the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This resulted in a fresh outburst of Slav irridentism, and a further breach between the Central Powers and Russia. After Germany's "diplomatic ultimatum" to Isvolsky in March, 1909, one could begin to speak of the Triple Entente, which, tenuous as it was, would withstand "Potsdam" and other German appeals, in the years to come.

By mid-1909, all the components required for the First World War were finally assembled.

During this period, the conversations underwent a quiet and almost imperceptible evolution. The Haldane reforms continued apace, giving rise to vigorous debate both at home and in France. The naval conversations came into being. And finally, the British Government began a close study of the effects of an eventual European war, upon Britain and the Empire, and of Britain's possible rôle as outlined in the Anglo-French military conversations.

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In 1907, Lord Roberts, supported by an influential group, raised the possibility of a German invasion upon British soil. This alleged danger of "a bolt from the blue" raised a double issue: it challenged the ability of the British Navy to assure adequate protection against a sudden invasion of British coasts, and it sounded the clarion for

compulsory military service (in order to be able to provide enough troops for service both at home and abroad).

Haldane was convinced that such a scheme of compulsory military service "was impracticable politically and (he) was by no means certain that it was advisable militarily."<sup>24</sup> But the whole issue came up at a most embarrassing moment. For the sake both of efficiency and of economy, Haldane had been obliged to effect a temporary reduction in the Regular Army; and his proposal for the abolition of the Militia (in favour of a more rational Territorial Army) would bring about a further, temporary reduction, in the "reserve" sphere.

It was this fact that the French Prime Minister had been complaining about, in his conversation with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in Paris in April 1907. One year later, Clémenceau found still more reason to lament this reduction: the Anglo-German Naval rivalry had now made its appearance.

In April, 1908, the French Premier paid a visit to London. At a dinner held by Asquith in his honour, he met Haldane and had a long talk with him. On the following day, Haldane wrote an account of the encounter:<sup>25</sup>

I met Clémenceau, the French Prime Minister, at Asquith's last night ... One of the objects of his visit was to stir us up to create a great field army, founded on compulsory service, which could take the field along with the French against the powerful German Army. I had

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<sup>24</sup>

Maurice, Haldane, I, 202.

<sup>25</sup>

Ibid. I, 227-8.

an hour's talk with him, and found him very well informed, he had been following our army reforms closely, but he wanted much more from us. I explained to him that the two things which were essential to us were a supreme navy and the maintenance of our foreign garrisons, particularly in India. No country had ever been able to bear the burden of maintaining a very large navy and a very large army. I said that for myself I was determined that the bulk of our strength should be concentrated on the preservation of naval superiority, and on the developing as far as possible its organisation. As to the Army, no country had ever proposed to conscript 120,000 men to serve for long periods abroad, and compulsory service would make it more than doubtful whether we could obtain the volunteers to keep our Army in India and our other garrisons at the requisite strength. These considerations make conscription both politically and militarily impracticable for us. All that remained for us to do as regards the Army was to organise from the troops at home, required to keep up our foreign garrisons, as large an Expeditionary Force as possible, finally equipped and so organised as to be capable of rapid mobilisation and transport. This I had done and we had a force ready to co-operate with an ally on the Continent, if necessary. If we maintained a large and costly army at home, down would go the resources in money which we could pour into the Navy and that I would not stand for. He was not impressed but then no Frenchman has never understood what the Navy means to us.

Indeed, Haldane's exposition failed utterly to impress the French Premier. In the months that followed, Clémenceau did not hesitate to communicate his misgivings to British (and French) journalists, British Ambassadors, and even to the British Sovereign himself. In August 1908, he brought up the matter in a talk with Sir. W. Goschen, while vacationing at Marienbad. As Goschen records to Grey:<sup>26</sup>

(M. Clémenceau) was, or at all events pretended to be for his own purposes, most nervous about

the situation, and talked in a most pessimistic vein, his theme being: "The smallest incident may bring about a rupture between Great Britain and Germany; you may sink the whole German Navy if things go right for you; but how about us? We shall in any case have to bear the brunt, and shall go to the wall unless you give us military assistance, which, as things now stand, you cannot do. Whatever the cause of war might be, Germany would not hesitate to try and get out of France by land what she might lose to England by sea. ...

... No! Your statesmen must realize that a strong effort must be made to cause this country to emerge from its present state of unpreparedness. You may be right and I wrong as to any imminent danger of war, but in any case for the sake of future peace, Great Britain must be strong on land as well as by sea. Your attitude at Algésciras did much to explode the legend of 'Perfide Albion' - and the entente between our two countries is almost universally popular in France; but let our people realize, as I do, the price which France may probably have to pay for England's friendship, if her military resources are allowed to remain as they are now, and away goes the Entente, away the men who promoted it, and away go the friendly feelings which are of so much advantage to both countries." ...<sup>27</sup>

Less than one month later, the Casablanca Deserters Incident took place, and M. Clémenceau's misgivings regarding the British Army spread to the French press.<sup>28</sup>

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Ibid. - There is a minute to this document by King Edward: "Mr. Clémenceau held similar language to me and there is no doubt that he is nervous about Germany, and in his point of view he has reason to be so, because if we have not a soldier to help France were she to be attacked by Germany, she feels she would be unable to hold her own. E.R. September 10/08".

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G. & T., VI, 168-9, Bertie to Grey, December 4, 1908.

Indeed, the Casablanca Incident gave rise to more than this. It brought into being the first Anglo-French naval conversations.

The Deserters incident was, in itself, a very minor matter. But in the first week of November, it took a slightly alarming turn: the German Government was insisting that the French Government express formal regret for certain French acts of violence to German Consular Officers in the course of the arrest of the deserters. This crisis soon passed, when a mutual Franco-German exchange of regrets was agreed to.

On November 12, Grey admitted to Esher that he "was touched" by the French Government's self-restraint displayed in the most anxious days. As Esher recounts: "They never asked or attempted to inquire whether we were going to their assistance. In point of fact, Asquith, Grey and Haldane had decided to do so."<sup>29</sup>

When, on the 24th, Cambon paid Grey a visit at the Foreign Office ("about nothing in particular", says Grey), the British Foreign Secretary congratulated the Ambassador on the attitude of France during the Casablanca affair. Cambon, in his reply, managed to introduce the topic of the conversations. - As Grey recounts to Bertie,<sup>30</sup>

Cambon considered that the line which France had taken in this affair was the only one which would keep the peace. Had France taken the same line in 1905 and not allowed Delcassé to resign, there would have been an end of the trouble in the same way. He spoke of the spirit of the Army being now very good, and generally spoke as if the

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Esher, Journals, II, 359.

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G. & T., VI, 167-8, No. 106.

French were quite prepared to defend themselves.

He then went on to say that he heard from his Naval Attaché that we should be prepared for an informal discussion as to the form which Naval co-operation should take if war broke out, just as there had been a discussion about Military co-operation in 1905.

I told him this was the first I had heard of any such idea. I had always assumed that our Admiralty had considered the matter, and might even have spoken informally to the French Naval Attaché; but certainly no proposal had originated with me, the idea had not been mentioned to me before.

Cambon then told me that Haldane, in the course of a conversation with someone connected with the French Embassy, had dropped a remark to the effect that what had been done as regards Military matters in 1905 should be done now with regard to Naval matters. Cambon explained to me that in the event of Military co-operation it was well understood that the chief command should be with the French General; but on the sea the chief command would be ours<sup>31</sup>, and the French would like to know what we should ask of them in case of war.

I said I would speak to McKenna on the subject.

As we know from a note in the French Diplomatic Documents<sup>32</sup>, McKenna and the Prime Minister did consent to naval conversations: for, such exchanges did take place - the first since Captain de Lostende's interview with Admiral Fisher in January 1906<sup>33</sup>.

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Against the general background of Anglo-German naval rivalry and of the Bosnian annexation, the Casablanca incident and the resul-

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The question of "Single Command", here mooted, does not seem to have perturbed Grey in the least: his minute following the account merely makes an indignant correction, that Haldane was not the one to propose naval conversations.

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D.D.F., 3eS., I, 328, "Note".

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See: Chapter 3, above.

tant request for Anglo-French naval conversations seem to have brought about a heightened preoccupation among the main British Ministers, over Britain's preparedness for war. This matter was now submitted to the Committee of Imperial Defence for study. Three meetings resulted.

On December 3, 1908, the British Army Expeditionary scheme of July 26, 1907, as subsequently elaborated, was

laid before a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence appointed by the Prime Minister to consider the Military Needs of the Empire. This Sub-Committee was presided over by the Prime Minister and included among its members the Marquess of Crewe, Viscount Haldane, Mr. McKenna, Lord (Sir C.) Hardinge, and Lord (Sir J.) Fisher. The question of rendering naval assistance to France in the event of an unprovoked attack on that Power by Germany was considered at a second meeting of the Sub-Committee on December 17th, 1908; and at a third meeting on March 23rd, 1909, the question of rendering military assistance was further discussed, the following conclusion being unanimously arrived at:

"(a) In the event of an attack on France by Germany, the expediency of sending a military force abroad, or of relying on naval means only, is a matter of policy which can only be determined, when the occasion arises, by the Government of the day.

" (b) In view, however, of the possibility of a decision by the Cabinet to use military force, the Committee have examined the plans of the General Staff, and are of opinion that in the initial stages of a war between France and Germany, in which the British Government decided to assist France, the plan to which preference is given by the General Staff is a valuable one, and the General Staff should accordingly work out all the necessary details."

The Sub-Committee reported this conclusion to the Committee of Imperial Defence on July 24th, 1909. In their report the Sub-Committee remarked that it would be possible in the course of a few months to strengthen the British Expeditionary Force of four Divisions and one Cavalry Division on the two remaining Divisions, thus bringing the force up to 160,000 men.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> G. & T., VII, 626-9, No. 639: Memorandum by Brigadier-General Sir G.N. Nicholson, Nov. 6, 1911.



If the joint Anglo-French plans received the whole-hearted approval of the Committee of Imperial Defence; they were not without critics. The main critics were, Admiral Sir John Fisher, First Sea Lord, and Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson, Head of the Channel Fleet (and Sir John Fisher's successor as First Sea Lord). At one of the Committee of Imperial Defence meetings, - perhaps that of March 23, 1909 - Sir John Fisher, who had been very careful to conceal his opinion regarding War Office plans, finally gave tongue to his views. - We have the following account, written by a friend of the Admiral's in November 1909:<sup>35</sup>

During the Morocco crisis the French Government was within an inch of war with Germany, and insisted on 120,000 British troops being sent to the French frontier. The Cabinet agreed. At a meeting of the Defence Committee, where the military plans were set forth by General Nicholson, Fisher remained silent, seated opposite to Mr. Asquith at the end of a long table. The only question put to Fisher was "whether the Navy could guaranteed transport", to which he answered "Yes". Mr. Asquith then asked him if he had anything to say; and he replied that he had nothing to say that anyone present would care to hear. Mr. Asquith pressed him then a scene took place. Fisher told the Committee that if 120,000 English were sent to France, the Germans would put everything else aside and make any sacrifice to surround and destroy the British, and that they would succeed. Continental armies being what they are, Fisher expressed the view that the British Army should be absolutely restricted to operations consisting of sudden descents on the coast, the recovery of Heligoland, and the garrisoning of Antwerp.

This War-Office-Admiralty difference was to remain unsolved right up to the Agadir crisis, when at last it came to a dramatic conclusion.

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The months between the Franco-German settlement of February 1909 and General Henry Wilson's advent in August of the following year, were months of relative calm.

Yet, the new French Government under Briand, which succeeded Clémenceau's, showed no less enthusiasm and appreciation for the Anglo-French conversations than had their predecessors.

In early February, the new Prime Minister, Briand, made a special appeal to his Cabinet colleagues, to have them approve a new ship-building program. As Pichon recounted to Bertie, at luncheon, a few days after a critical Cabinet Council,

...Briand had been splendid for he had said that he would not remain at the head of a Government which did not observe moral obligations. Besides the necessity for France to have a navy able to defend her she had moral obligations towards England. There had been pourparlers with the British Authorities as to the respective parts to be played by the Navies of the two countries in the event of a war in which they became allies. A duty had been assigned to the French Navy, and it must be rendered fully able to carry it out, and the shipbuilding programme was considered by those competent to judge to be necessary. He would not accept the position of its being said with any show of accuracy that France would not fulfil her moral obligations and was of no reliable aid at sea to England. M. Fallières and the Cabinet generally sat on the Minister of Finance and Briand had his way ...<sup>36</sup>

Grey's reaction to Bertie's account was substantially the same as in the days of Clémenceau. To his Ambassador he replied:

The disposition towards us shown by M. Briand is very

gratifying but the form it has taken may raise some embarrassing questions later on. I would rather that the French spent all they could afford to spend on their Army and not on the Navy.

However, there is nothing for us to say about it: they must do as they think best: and meanwhile I will reserve the subject till you come here, when we will talk about it. <sup>37</sup>

## CHAPTER 6

General Henry Wilson becomes Director - Background and predisposition - His concern for the Expeditionary Force - His investigation into its unpreparedness - The conversations and the diplomatic doldrums, February 1910 to January 1911 - The Briand Government interpellated - A question to Grey in Parliament, March 30, 1911 - Cruppi's projected statement - Grey's veto - Cruppi's disappointment - General Foch proposes a Convention, April 1911 - Cruppi turns to conversations - Grey's warning to Asquith - Cruppi's continued wish for more detailed conversations - The Grey-Asquith attitude towards the conversations, May-June, 1911 - Nicolson's letter to Bertie.

## I

On August 1st, 1910, General Henry Wilson succeeded General Ewart as Director of Military Operations. On assuming his new post, Wilson fell heir to the Military conversations. He was still in office, four years later, when Britain was called upon to put into effect the plans evolved through the conversations. As History has shown, Wilson proved more than ready: the mobilisation and transport and delivery of the Expeditionary Force went off without a flaw. Wilson had left nothing undone, nothing to chance.

Indeed, from his first days in office, he devoted himself single-mindedly to the Conversations. By a happy coincidence of personality, predilection and circumstances, the idea of Anglo-French concerting on the Continent against Germany became his dominant preoccupation. His eyes had been turned to the Continent in his earliest days as Commandant (from 1907 to 1910) of the Imperial Staff College at Camberley. During this period, his tours (with students and colleagues) of the Franco-Belgian and Franco-German frontiers, and his teachings at the College, left no doubt as to his beliefs:

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For (as his biographer writes <sup>1</sup>), fully convinced as he was that a European conflict was not only certain to come but that it was certain to come within a very few years, he made no concealment of that conviction in his intercourse with the contingents of officers successively under his control at Camberley. He laboured unceasingly to inspire them with the force of his own con-

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Callwell, Sir Henry Wilson, I, 73. - Even at this date Wilson was giving lectures on "Is Conscription Necessary?" - and upholding the affirmative.

victions on the subject.

Wilson's convictions were only enforced by his partiality for the French. While at Camberley, he managed to make the acquaintance of General <sup>2</sup> Foch, Commandant of France's Ecole Supérieure de la Guerre. The acquaintance quickly developed into a deep and lasting friendship, which was to lead Wilson to intimate acquaintance and professional relationship with the highest French General Officers.

Finally, Wilson took up his new post, while Haldane's "objective" still held true and was proving more so by the day. All was quiet in the Empire: only Europe caused uneasiness. Anglo-German, Franco-German and Austro-Russian relations all contained highly inflammable elements. In many quarters (and not least in Army and Navy circles), there was a strong conviction that a Continental war had become inevitable. - Wilson, as we have seen, was a strong adherent to this school of thought.

In view of all this, it could only be expected that the conversations should receive the brunt of his effort, and that under him they should flourish. He was not of a nature to consider any such matter a mere "academic" pursuit, or the eventuality of a Continental war and British participation an "hypothesis". Circumstances, fortunately, favoured his natural bent: by the end of 1910, the Army Reforms were completed, and for the first time, there was a possibility of laying definite and definitive Expeditionary plans.

Wilson did not miss his opportunity.

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<sup>2</sup>

Ibid. I, 77 ff.

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Less than two days after he had assumed his post of Director of Military Operations, General Wilson proceeded to France "in fulfilment of his agreement with General Foch to take part in a staff tour of that country. The proceedings were, however, interrupted just when they had got into full swing, by Foch being ordered back to Paris on his being chosen to attend the Russian manoeuvres."<sup>3</sup>

Wilson, left to return to London, stopped off in Paris, "to go thoroughly into the work of Colonel Fairholme", the British Military Attaché. On August 5, he noted in his diary:

There is much I will change here, and, I suppose, in the other Military Attachés. They appear to me to be dealing with details and with peace, and not with war.<sup>4</sup>

For Wilson, War Planning - as we have seen - did not mean academic planning for hypothetical war. It meant earnest planning, for a real likelihood of war. In a matter of weeks, Wilson found his "real likelihood": he found it in the course of another visit to Paris, in a talk with General Foch.

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On October 12, General Foch's daughter was married. One of the Guests of Honour was General Wilson. On the following day, at the early hour of 8:30 a.m., the two men met at l'Ecole Supérieure de la Guerre and

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<sup>3</sup>

Ibid., I, 86.

<sup>4</sup>

Ibid., I, 86.

had a two-hour chat. General Foch had much to relate: as Wilson recounts in his diary,

He (Foch) had just been to Russia as the Tsar's guest. He tells me that the Russian army is getting on, but very slowly; he tells me that the Russian secret service report that the Germans think the French army very fine; he says that he doesn't think Russia would actively interfere if Germany and France were to fight over Belgium, but Russia would do all her possible if war broke out through the Balkans; he tells me that the Emperor Bill has actually offered his army to Russia to quell internal disturbances, and always does all he can to get into Russia's good graces. This in order to pacify her if, and when, he moves west.

He tells me that he believes Germany will absorb Belgium peacefully and throw the onus of war on France, and, in short, Foch is of the opinion that, in the coming war in Belgium, France must trust to England and not to Russia, and that all our plans must be worked out in minutest detail so that we may be quite clear of the action and the line to take.

He finished off by warning me that, for many reasons which he could not give, I was to remember that the year 1912 would be a dangerous year to live through.<sup>5</sup>

This, coming from General Foch, could not be treated lightly.

Two weeks later, General Wilson was deeply engrossed in an investigation of British preparations for possible prompt employment of the Expeditionary Force on the Continent in the event of a European War:

Long day in office (he wrote in his diary). I am very dissatisfied with the state of affairs in every respect. No rail arrangements for concentration and movements of either Expeditionary Force or Territorials. No proper arrangements for horse supply, no arrangements for safeguarding our arsenal at Woolwich. A lot of time spent in writing beautiful but useless minutes. I'll break all this somehow.<sup>6</sup>

And with this, the Director of Military Operations began to des-

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<sup>5</sup>  
Ibid., I, 88.

<sup>6</sup>  
Ibid., I, 89.



patch queries to all the pertinent Army departments, in his quest for the necessary answers to the vital question: When will our Army be in a state to mobilise and to be off to the Continent?

The answers, as they came in, revealed an amazing state of unpreparedness:

January 2 (1911). Ever since last August I have been trying to find out when the 4 Divisions (1,2,3,5) of the Expeditionary Force will be ready to move, and up till now (5 months) have been quite unable to do so.<sup>7</sup>

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Early in the second week of the New Year, Wilson made an inventory of the Army's unpreparedness. The list contained six items:

- I. Date of completed mobilisation unknown.
- II. No train arrangements to ports.
- III. No staff arrangements at ports.
- IV. No naval arrangements.
- V. Emergency strengthening of fortresses by parts of 30 battalions.
- VI. Emergency scheme for Aldershot to send troops to East Coast.

He incorporated these points in a minute addressed to his Chief, Sir W. Nicholson, Chief of Imperial General Staff. In little over a week, Haldane intervened.

January 20. Haldane asked me to lunch at 28 Q.A. Gate. No one else there. He wanted to discuss my minute. I told him exactly what I thought of the state of unpreparedness we were in, I said it was disgraceful and could be, and should be, remedied at once. He said that Nick had already been to him about the railways

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<sup>7</sup>  
Ibid., I, 91

<sup>8</sup>  
Ibid., I, 91

and that he (Haldane) had seen Grey, and Grey agreed that we could go to the railway companies. This is good. I told him the horse question was in a disgraceful state. He said he was doing all he possibly could. I said it was no business of mine, but until it was put on a proper basis we could not mobilize. He asked me what else was required, and I enumerated the points I made in my minute to Nick (General Nicholson), and I hope now we will get on with some practical work...<sup>9</sup>

With Haldane's intervention, Wilson's task progressed admirably.

On March 21 - just two months later - the Director made the following entry in his diary:

We had our first meeting about accelerating mobilization, and we settled that the whole of the infantry of the 6 divisions would embark on the 4th day, cavalry 7th day, artillery 9th day. We will work this out in detail and see what will have to be done.<sup>10</sup>

This first meeting was, it seems, partially the outcome of a confidential talk "on secret affairs", which Wilson had with General Ladébat, Chief of Staff at the French War Office, some three weeks previous.<sup>11</sup> The meeting had come about through General Foch's introductions - for Foch and Wilson had been in constant relations throughout the winter.

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Three days later, the results of this meeting were reported to the French Military Attaché in London, Colonel Huguet, who communicated the details to his War Office in Paris:

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Ibid. I, 92.

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" , I, 92.

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" , I, 94.

"Ces dispositions ont été arrêtées d'accord avec le ministre de la Guerre et le chef d'état-major général," writes Huguet, on March 24; "mais tous deux désirent qu'il reste entendu comme par le passé que le nouveau plan n'engage nullement le gouvernement anglais et ne préjuge en rien la décision qu'il pourra être appelé à prendre au moment voulu. Il restera libre comme auparavant d'intervenir ou non et de fixer lui-même l'effectif des forces, qu'il estimera à propos d'envoyer sur le continent."<sup>12</sup>

## II

Throughout 1910 and up to the spring of 1911, the conversations caused almost no diplomatic stir. They did draw some slight attention from the German press, when, in the first weeks of 1911, the French Foreign Minister, M. Pichon, was forced to reply to insinuations in the Senate "que depuis M. Clémenceau tous les rapports relatifs aux questions militaires étaient suspendus"<sup>13</sup> M. Pichon retorted by questioning the sources of this allegation that these relations no longer existed. The German newspapers lost no time in concluding that a military convention, aimed at Germany, existed between France and England.

In a matter of weeks, the question was brought up in the British Parliament.

On March 30, 1911, a certain Mr. Jowett, M.P., rose in the House of Commons, to ask the Foreign Secretary "if, when he came into office, there was in existence any understanding or undertaking, expressed or implied, in virtue of which Great Britain would be under obligations to France to send troops, in certain eventualities, to assist the operations of the

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<sup>12</sup>

Les Armées Françaises, I, 1, 48.

<sup>13</sup>

Un Livre Noir, I, 37.

French Army."

Sir Edward replied: "The extent of the obligation to which Great Britain was committed was that expressed or implied in the Anglo-French convention laid before the Parliament. There was no other engagement bearing on the subject."<sup>14</sup>

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Sir Edward Grey's denial of the 30th, came upon the French Government at a most critical time. After two years of relative tranquillity, Morocco seemed about to erupt once again upon the international scene.

Moulai Haffid, the Sultan of Morocco, and his Grand Vizier, Glawi, had managed, through persistent stupidity and cruelty, to alienate a large segment of the Moroccan natives. A revolt, begun in the "back country", was now acquiring such dimensions that it threatened to get out of hand. Moulai Haffid seemed unable to stem it: the French, it appeared would have to intervene.

On April 4, M. Paul Cambon went to the Foreign Office and informed Sir Arthur Nicolson "that unless there was an improvement in the serious situation round Fez the French Government might possibly find it necessary to take military measures for the protection of Europeans in the Capital."<sup>15</sup> - And that same day, M. Jules Cambon made a similar communication to Herr von Kiderlen Waechter, in Berlin.

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<sup>14</sup>

G. & T., VII, 182, No. 197.

<sup>15</sup>

G. & T., VII, 186, No. 202.

The French Foreign Office and Government were far from certain as to how Germany would react to such a move; yet, they considered it all but inevitable that they should have to intervene, Germany's eventual reaction being (to say the least) doubtful; the French, once again, fastened their hopes on Britain.

But Great Britain was, at that time, herself a source of worry. The ambivalent German Emperor had just entered an Anglophile phase, and was currently wooing the British. This fact, alone, was enough to frighten any Frenchman, in whom always lurked, deep down, the spectre of "Perfide Albion". But, to add to French misgivings, there had recently been a statement in the German press "to the effect that a positive understanding between England and Germany was on the point of being concluded."<sup>16</sup>

The general situation compelled M. Cruppi, the new French Foreign Minister, to make a declaration on Foreign Policy, in the French Senate. He must give an exposé on the situation in Morocco. He must also reassure his compatriots on the score of "British faithfulness". He went about this last aim in a rather naive manner.

M. Cruppi was scheduled to rise before the Senate at 2.30 p.m. on April 6. In the evening of the 5th, he sent over, to the British Ambassador, the text of a statement which he proposed to incorporate in his declaration of the next day. He wanted to have Sir Edward Grey's opinion on the text - "if possible tomorrow morning"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup>

Ibid. 187, No. 203: Goschen to Nicolson, April 7, 1911.

<sup>17</sup>

G. & T., VII, 185, No. 200: Telegram Bertie to Grey, Apr. 5, '11.

The text of the statement ran as follows:

"Mon accord avec l'Angleterre (? a) apporté naguère une solution satisfaisante à des questions importantes demeurées trop longtemps en suspens. Nous sommes disposés à résoudre dans le même esprit les questions d'ordre secondaire, dont le règlement apportera aux deux pays intéressés un avantage réciproque. Quand la communauté des intérêts (? s') affirme ainsi entre deux nations sur des faits positifs on peut être certain qu'elles resteront amies et unies en présence de toute éventualité et on peut s'en remettre à leurs Gouvernements respectifs du soin de donner le moment venu une forme précise à leur entente."<sup>18</sup>

Sir Francis Bertie immediately wired Cruppi's intended statement and request to London, adding that he, Bertie, had taken it upon himself to send the French Foreign Minister a private letter saying that, in his opinion, "the remainder of the statement after the words "amies et unies" might give rise to inconvenient questions in the House of Commons."<sup>19</sup>

Next morning, Grey wired to Bertie, saying that he entirely agreed with the Ambassador. "The last words of proposed statement by M(inister) F(oreign) A(ffairs) are sure to give rise to inconvenient demands for more precise information of their meaning. They had much better be omitted."<sup>20</sup> And Sir Arthur Nicolson wrote on the same day to Bertie: "I must say that the words which (M. Cruppi) proposed to employ would have caused great comment here as they would almost give the impression that something very serious was impending and that the two Governments had come to a definite understanding as to the action which they

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<sup>18</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "

Ibid. VII, 185, No. 201.

would take."<sup>21</sup>

M. Cruppi's immediate reaction to this veto was one of pessimism and despondency. To Bertie, on the 8th, he let it be known that Grey's refusal of the 30th<sup>22</sup> had had a regrettable effect in certain Parliamentary circles", and that "he would have preferred that there should have been a suspicion that an understanding did exist for possible eventualities." Finally, "he threw out a hint that there might be a change of disposition within the (British) Cabinet in regard to Foreign Policy and that perhaps this accounted for (Sir Edward's) statement." - "My impression," says Sir Francis in conclusion, "is that he (Cruppi) may have been led to believe that there is an inclination towards Germany. I do not think that the matter is worth noting unless he returns to the subject."<sup>22</sup>

The French, however, had no intention of letting the matter drop. British support was vital. If Grey would not connive with Cruppi to create "a suspicion" that an Anglo-French military understanding did exist, then the French Minister had better turn to the less dramatic, but far more practical and substantial topic of the conversations themselves.

It was General Foch who tacked the new course - in a conversation with the British Military Attaché in Paris, Colonel Fairholme, and on the very day (April 8) that Cruppi aired his "déception" to Bertie.

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<sup>21</sup>  
Ibid. VII, 186, No. 202.

<sup>22</sup>  
G. & T., VII, 189, No. 205.

In this interview with Fairholme <sup>23</sup>, the General began with an analysis of the Diplomacy of the respective European Powers. The Triple Entente, he complained, had no common policy, no common objectives, no diplomatic coordination. Germany, on the other hand, had a definite goal, and a systematic policy; and by her constant display of "power and self-assertion", she was winning over - through fear - the smaller States of Europe. To put an end to this influence, "the French and British Governments ought to settle beforehand exactly what they are prepared to concede, and what to resist... so that they may not be perpetually faced by fresh minor encroachments of German policy all over the world, which become faits accomplis, before a joint decision has been arrived at to resist them."

But, above all, (Colonel Fairholme continues,) General Foch is firmly convinced of the urgent necessity for an understanding between His Majesty's Government and that of the Republic regarding the form which joint action should take in the event of war between France and Germany.

It will by no means suffice that decision to co-operate should be arrived at after war had been declared, or even on the eve of a rupture.

The most acceptable and the only really effective form which British help could take would be the dispatch of the strongest possible expeditionary force, in time to take part, side by side with the French armies, in the decisive battle or battles between the main forces of France and Germany...

The (main) collision may be expected to take place any time after the thirteenth day of the French and German mobilisation...

In order that the British expeditionary force should be in its place by that date, it would have to be mobilised simultaneously with the French Army, and it would have to be transported to the continent, and railed to the front without a moment's delay.

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23

G.& T., VI, No. 460 (Encl.).



It must be evident to anybody in the least familiar with the complicated mechanism of modern war, ... that an operation on such a scale could only be undertaken, with the slightest hope of success, if the whole plan had been worked out beforehand on both sides of the channel in its minutest details, down to the sequence and composition of the hundreds of troop-trains, as well as the exact hours and minutes of their respective departures from the selected ports of debarkation and of their arrival at their ultimate destinations.

The preparation of such a scheme offers no official difficulties to the British and French general staffs, and it is obviously their function to study and work out beforehand the military problems connected with any course of action which their respective Governments may be expected to adopt under any reasonably probable circumstances.

But General Foch points out that, however fully such a scheme might be prepared beforehand by the two general staffs, the French Government, could not possibly afford to earmark railway lines and rolling-stock for such a purpose at a moment when all its resources must be so urgently required, unless indeed it had received a previous assurance that it could count with certainty on the arrival of the British contingent.

Hence the absolute necessity for a clear previous understanding between the two Governments. Upon its existence may depend the result of the war and, consequently, the fate of Europe.

A British contingent dispatched at a later moment than as above might probably just as well stay away.

General Foch observed that no doubt there might be insuperable difficulties in the way of getting a majority in the British Parliament to vote for such an agreement at the present moment, but he pointed out that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had been arranged without the previous consent of Parliament having been obtained.

The dispatch arrived at the Foreign Office on April 11.

General Foch's proposal was clearly understood to be a "definite military Convention."<sup>24</sup>

Sir Arthur Nicolson felt that the dispatch should go to a Cabinet Committee. Grey decided to have it communicated to the Prime Minister, Lord Morley and Lord Haldane;<sup>25</sup> after all (he could legitimately claim), the suggestion did not come from the French Foreign Office.

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<sup>24</sup>

Ibid. (Minutes.)

<sup>25</sup>

Ibid....

Mr. Cruppi, however, took up the same theme, on the 12th, in a conversation with Bertie. The French Foreign Minister covered much the same territory as Foch; but he did not dare to venture so far as to propose a definite military convention.

M. Cruppi then referred (wrote Bertie to Grey, on the 13th <sup>26</sup>,) to the objection which you had made to a part of the declaration of policy which he had proposed to make to the Senate. He said that he quite understood and appreciated your objection. He felt, however, that having regard to the inflammable state of the political atmosphere in and out of Europe and the attitude of the German Mercantile world and the Press, a crisis might come on at any moment and quite unexpectedly, and that it behoved the French and British Governments to carry matters further as regards possible co-operation in certain eventualities than had hitherto been done. He did not mean a formal Convention but an understanding which would not bind the two Governments to act but which would define what the joint action should be in case they had to co-operate. To defer such a definition until the crisis came would be very bad policy, for if unfortunately war came it might be too rapid in its progress to await the conclusion of the arrangements which would be necessary for effective co-operation. M. Cruppi said that he intended to confer with M. Paul Cambon on the subject when he next came to Paris, which he was expected to do in a few days time.

This letter received the attention of Mr. Eyre Crowe, at the Foreign Office. To this despatch he affixed a minute in which he summed up, briefly, the friction between France and Germany, Spain's drifting towards Germany, Germany's efforts towards diplomatic "dictatorship" and her striving to multiply dissention between the Entente Powers and third States.

In the face of this situation, (the minute concludes <sup>27</sup>,)

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<sup>26</sup> G. & T., VII, No. 207: Bertie to Grey.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., (Minute)

the French suggestion that some closer agreement, in whatever form, between England and France respecting the eventuality of an armed conflict with Germany, is desirable, deserves the most careful consideration.

Perhaps because it followed so closely on the heels of Général Foch's suggestions, Bertie's despatch of April 13 received Grey's "most careful" consideration. On the 16th, the Foreign Secretary drew it to the attention of the Prime Minister, in a private letter in which he summarised the origins, nature, and diplomatic "status" of the Conversations up to that time.

My dear Asquith,<sup>28</sup> Please look at Bertie's despatch of April 13. I have marked it for you, Morley, Haldane, and I would suggest that, as soon as Haldane returns, that (sic) you and Morley should have a talk with him.

Early in 1906 the French said to us, "Will you help us if there is a war with Germany?"

We said, "We can't promise, our hands must be free."

The French then urged that the military authorities should be allowed to exchange views, ours to say what they could do, the French to say how they would like it done, if we did side with France. Otherwise, as the French urged, even if we desired to support France, on the outbreak of the war we shouldn't be able to do it effectively. We agreed to this. Up to this point C.-B. (Campbell-Bannerman), R.B.H. (Haldane), and I were cognizant of what took place -- the rest of you were scattered in the Election.<sup>29</sup>

The military experts then conversed. What they settled I never knew -- the position being that the Government was quite free, but that the military people knew what to do, if the word was given.

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Grey, I, 164,

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On first reading, this letter may suggest that Asquith was, at this time, still not cognizant of the existence of the conversations. This is false. As we have seen (in Chapter 4,), Haldane asserts that Asquith was informed of them from the very outset.--And the Imperial Defence Committee meetings of 1908-9, recorded by General Sir. W. Nicholson (See: Chapter 5) give further proof. -- This letter can only be understood as intended to "freshen" Asquith's memory on the history of the Conversations and their diplomatic "status".

Unless the French **war** plans have changed, there should be no need of anything further, but it is clear that we are going to be asked something.

Yours Sincerely,  
E.G.

Although Grey expected to be asked something and anticipated the French request by forwarning the Prime Minister, he apparently deemed it advisable to avoid any reference to the matter either to Bertie or to Cambon. One month later, Sir Francis Bertie, in a private letter <sup>30</sup> to Sir Arthur Nicolson, voiced M. Cruppi's disappointment.

"Cruppi is generally alarmed all round", wrote Bertie: Turkey's pro-German element, its unstable "Committee of Union and Progress", and the Yemen revolt, were troubling the French Minister deeply. Meanwhile, closer to home,

... Spain is foolishly playing into Germany's hands and aspires to undertake jobs for which she is quite unfit. Germany is on the watch to see what she can grab out of any trouble that she can create by her intrigues and England is so occupied by her unfortunate internal difficulties that Germany may think that she is a "quantité négligeable". If only the understanding between France and Russia and England could be made more active and evident the danger from Germany of troubling the peace of Europe would be averted for the German Government would hesitate to try the game of bluff...

You will see that Cruppi was in a despondent state. What he, Jules Cambon and I suppose Paul Cambon also and many others hanker after is something more visible to Germany and useful to France than the existing Entente between England and France. The French Government have found it very useful in restraining Spain, but they do not feel sure how far they could rely on it if Germany became threatening or bluffed. This feeling is useful to us as a security against France committing imprudences in her discussions with Germany, but it is also a danger as France might if hard pressed give way in a question important to British and not to French interests, as Sazonov gave way at

the Potsdam interviews both France and England. I quite understand and appreciate the difficulty of H(is) M(ajesty)'s Government Government to anticipate events by a formal and binding agreement in furtherance of the Entente with France, but everything military and naval ought to be arranged unofficially to meet the contingency of British and French forces having to act together. Otherwise in these days of quick locomotion we might arrive a day too late for the fray and find our essential interests already compromised. Perhaps those arrangements have been made.

Yours ever,  
FRANCIS BERTIE

On May 17, Nicolson replied to Bertie: <sup>31</sup>

My dear Bertie,

. . . . . Your long letter of the 14th was shown by Grey to the Prime Minister and he had a talk with the latter in regard to extending our present 'entente' with France. I have my doubts whether it will be found possible to go as far as the French apparently desire us to do. You can quite understand that there is considerable hesitation here to binding ourselves to any definite course of action in view of possible eventualities. Personally I should wish that some arrangement in the nature which you indicate could be made. I gather that there has been a certain amount of desultory talk between our military authorities and the French military authorities but nothing definite seems to have been laid down, and I have my doubts whether a concerted plan of action will ever be settled. To my mind this is unfortunate and I quite agree with you that if a crisis does arise it will be sudden and probably unexpected. However these are my personal opinions which I give to you for your own information only.

There were sound reasons for Grey and Asquith to hesitate in granting to the French their wish for detailed and definite joint military planning. For some weeks now, Anglo-German relations had been improved, and the current visit of the Kaiser to England seemed to augur still better relations. On the other hand, a French detachment had already set out for

Fez, and the British felt that the stay would not be brief, and that a prolonged occupation would eventually give rise to trouble from one quarter or another. In view of this, it would be wise to avoid more advanced military conversations, the knowledge of which would not fail to irritate the Germans at such a moment, and the existence of which might well give the French the impression that Britain fully approved and fully supported their every action and policy - especially regarding Morocco.

Times had indeed changed, since the days of Clémenceau and Briand: The conversations were no longer a matter for casual treatment... Meanwhile, it would take a crisis to make Grey and Asquith hurry to a decision. - For General Wilson, the crisis would prove a boon.

CHAPTER 7

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The despatch of the Panther - Agadir and the conversations -  
No request for assurances, from the French - Wilson's  
"mission" - The Wilson-Dubail meeting, July 20 - Lloyd  
George's speech and the War Office panic - The scare of July  
25 - Wilson's encounter with Grey and Crowe - The General's  
two papers - The Committee of Imperial Defence meeting, August  
23 - The War-Office-Admiralty encounter - The Admiralty's  
need for reform - The Wilson-Churchill campaign - Joffre's  
interview and Asquith's fears - Wilson at the French Staff  
meeting, September 29 - The discovery of the conversations -  
General Nicholson's memorandum - Paul Cambon's statement -  
Grey's speech in Parliament, November 27.

## I

On July 1st, 1911, the German Ambassador at Paris, Herr von Schoen, communicated the following memorandum to the new French Foreign Minister, M. de Selves:

" Des maisons allemandes établies au Sud du Maroc notamment à Agadir se sont alarmées de la fermentation parmi les tribus de ces régions. Elles se sont adressées au Gouvernement Impérial pour réclamer protection de leur vie et de leurs biens. Sur leur demande le Gouvernement Impérial a décidé d'envoyer au port d'Agadir un bâtiment de guerre pour prêter en cas de besoin aide et secours à ses sujets et protéger les importants intérêts allemands engagés dans ces contrées. Dès que l'état de choses au Maroc sera rentré dans son calme antérieur, le bateau chargé de cette mission protectrice aura à quitter le port d'Agadir." <sup>1</sup>

That same evening, at 8 p.m., the German gunboat, the Panther, dropped anchor in the Moroccan port.

The act came as a complete surprise. In the British and French Foreign Office, it caused considerable alarm. For, Agadir was not an open port, and there were no German nationals or German interests in the district. - Furthermore, Herr von Kiderlen Waechter had, on June 20, informed Jules Cambon, at Kissingen, after weeks of troubling silence: "You want us to 'faire notre deuil du Maroc! Well, if we consent to disinterest ourselves politically from Morocco, you must give us something in return. A rectification of frontiers in Equatorial Africa or a slice of your Congo or something of that description." <sup>2</sup>

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1. G. & T., VII, 232, No. 340

2 Ibid., p. 546: letter Goschen to Grey, 6. 10. 11.



At Kiderlen's request, Jules Cambon had set out for Paris to communicate this suggestion to his Government. But before he had time to do so, <sup>3</sup> the Panther had moored at Agadir.

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The dramatic flourish of Agadir occasioned the most serious war scare since Algéçiras, some five years previous. It brought about a crisis that lasted three months; and while it only complicated and delayed the Franco-German settlement which it was meant to precipitate, it did serve to tighten the bonds of the Anglo-French Entente, and to deepen still further the cleavage between the central powers and the Triple Entente.

Upon the conversations, both military and naval, the Agadir crisis had most important effects. It infused into them a new vitality - and gave rise to naval exchanges for the first time since the Casablanca incident. It brought to an end the long-standing feud between the British War Office and Admiralty, which ultimately resulted in drastic organic navy reforms and the advent of Churchill as First Lord. And finally, it brought the conversations to the knowledge of all the Cabinet Ministers, and won their approval and sanction.

## II

The most astonishing thing about the Agadir crisis (from the point of view of the conversations), is that there is not a single trace of France having asked Britain for assurances of military support in the event of war. The Monis Government, as we have seen, had not hesitated, in April and May

to make such a request. Yet, from the beginning of July to the end of September, neither M. Caillaux (M. Monis' successor), nor his new Foreign Minister, M. de Selves, nor M. Cambon in London, seem even to have hinted at the desirability of British assurances.

On first thought, this may appear startling. On closer examination, however, it becomes perfectly plausible. Three main facts explain this silence: Paul Cambon's own view of the matter; the new Prime Minister's attitudes and "policies"; and General Wilson's activities and the resultant Anglo-French staff relations.

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M. Cambon's reasons need not be elaborated at any great length. Over the years, the Ambassador had had occasion to learn of the Liberal Government's reluctance - indeed, of their "internal" inability - to give definite assurances of effective assistance, in anticipation of purely hypothetical eventualities. Early in September, just before the crisis of that month, Cambon, in a conference in Paris with the French Premier and Cabinet, went so far as to warn these men (1) that the British Government's decision to intervene on the side of France would be determined by public opinion when the actual imminence of war arose, and (2) that the French could not expect immediate - if any - British assistance (which was felt to be absolutely indispensable, at this time) if the French appeared responsible, in the eyes of the British, for the break-down of current Franco-German negotiations.<sup>4</sup> This statement provides an adequate summary

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of Cambon's exposé, see: G. & T., VII, 602, No. 617, "Minute by Sir A. Nicolson". - This Minute is quoted in full in the last Section of this Chapter.

of Cambon's stand regarding assurances, and explains why the Ambassador made no effort, either in April and May, when Cruppi himself was broaching the subject, or during the Agadir crisis, when Franco-German tension was far more alarming, to secure British assurances of armed intervention in the event of a Franco-German war.

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M. Caillaux's silence, on the other hand, differs substantially in its motives. - And the explanation, to be adequate, entails some account, albeit brief, of his policy (if we may use the word in his case) throughout the Agadir crisis. As we shall not have further occasion to review this crucial phase of Franco-German relations, we may profit of this occasion to give it a quick glance.

The Caillaux Ministry succeeded the Monis Government on June 28 - three days before the Agadir "coup". From the very outset, M. Caillaux showed a strong predilection for foreign affairs. Under him, the new Foreign Minister, M. de Selves, was to be no more than a figure-head. Caillaux, in fact, took over foreign affairs from the very first day. He had a policy of sorts - or rather, a few basic "principles" and ideas. In the first place, he was determined to put an end to the constant friction between Germany and France, over Morocco. Moreover, he was firmly resolved to effect this settlement without any British help or intervention. While we cannot say that he was anti-British, we can safely affirm that he had no great liking for Britain.... And his Agadir experiences were destined, in the event, only to compound this attitude with petulant irritation...

Caillaux's negotiations with Germany passed through two successive and totally differing phases. The first was characterised by an extremely conciliatory spirit on the part of the Prime Minister; the second, by equally extreme obduracy on the same man's part. In the first phase, Caillaux had reason to know that the despatch of the Panther was not intended to provoke a war with France. In the second phase, he showed a peculiar inability to see that, by then, at any rate, the Moroccan dispute was rife with danger of war.

Caillaux was scarcely more than a day or two in office, when he began his first démarches for a Franco-German settlement. In utter secrecy, and without informing even his Foreign Minister or his Ambassador to Germany, M. Jules Cambon (who was then in Paris), he established contact with the German Government through the intermediary of Franco-German high-financial circles. While we do not know in any detail the terms of the contemplated settlement, it seems probable - from Jules Cambon's thorough disapproval - that they were very onerous for France. In any event, the despatch of the Panther, and the threat conveyed thereby, seems to have been intended to render more acquiescent the French Government, Parliament and nation, to the anticipated settlement which Caillaux would soon have to submit for their approval. In view of this, then, the early days of Agadir did not fill Caillaux with any fear that might have impelled him to seek British promises.

Three weeks after the despatch of the Panther, Caillaux's first negotiations with Germany came to a rude end. On July 21st, Lloyd George made his Mansion House speech (of which more anon), which, in effect, warned Germany, and assured France, that Britain intended to honour her agreement

with France concerning Morocco, and considered any dispute over Morocco as involving her interests and honour - two things that must be preserved even at the cost of war. As a result, the Caillaux scheme fell through: France now had a firm and open ally in Britain, and could negotiate with Germany on equal terms: no question, then, of her granting any inordinately onerous concessions to Germany for undisputed domination of Morocco. To both the German Government and Caillaux, the Lloyd George pronouncement came as a bitter blow. Neither could forgive the British for their untimely intrusion.

But whether Caillaux admitted it or not, Lloyd George's intervention did render, to France, unique service: it strengthened her stand and made possible the fundamentally fair and satisfactory settlement that ultimately resulted. This was accomplished, by causing Caillaux to alter his tactics most radically.

After the British Minister's pronouncement, the French Premier's approach changed from alarming (and almost iniquitous) timorousness to rank temerity. Secure in the support of the whole French nation now galvanized by Britain's open backing, Caillaux knew no bounds: henceforth, he was determined to grant only the most trifling concessions in return for a permanent agreement with Germany, regarding Morocco. Indeed, the Prime Minister became so unbending, that the shrewd and ever firm Jules Cambon became positively alarmed. From Berlin, where he was conducting the negotiations with Kiderlen Waechter, the Ambassador decried the Premier's outlandish attitude: a definite German recognition of French rule in Morocco, Cambon argued, was worth even the concession of the whole of French Congo! To London, through the British Ambassador (Goschen) at Berlin, Jules Cambon

pleaded for British intervention on his behalf: Bertie, he suggested, might recommend, to the French Premier, a more realistic and conciliatory attitude.... While Grey vetoed this last suggestion, Paul Cambon came to the aid of his brother, by rushing over to Paris (in the first days of September - the visit and account thereof, of which we spoke above,) and apprising the Premier and Cabinet of the gravity of the situation, and of the danger, for France, of refusing to grant reasonable concessions. French obduracy could only result in a break-down of negotiations: and a break-down might well result in war, thought Paul Cambon - in a war in which France would not be free from guilt and would therefore have forfeited British sympathy and armed assistance, at least in the first and crucial stage of the conflict.

This real danger of war, however, and the real need, in the event, of prompt British assistance, Caillaux seems to have never fully grasped. - On the other hand, it is possible that he always assumed that British assistance would be forthcoming, if war broke out. For, as Prime Minister, he had had to give his consent to, and to be fully apprised of, Anglo-French military and naval staff conversations and joint planning, that were being pursued throughout the Agadir crisis, under the impetus of General Wilson's efforts.

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Indeed, the activities of the British Director of Military Operations, during the entire course of the Franco-German negotiations, must have been at least, an ample assurance that Britain was doing all she possibly could to prepare for the eventuality of a Franco-German clash of arms, and

her own intervention on the side of France, and by the time the Moroccan negotiations reached their most critical stage (that is in the first three weeks of September), General Wilson's demarches, both in Britain and with the French General Staff, must have left little doubt of British co-operation.

For, the General left no stone unturned, in his efforts (1) to see to it that all arrangements with the French were complete, for the expedition of all six British Divisions; (2) to rally the most important British Ministers to his view that all six infantry Divisions of his Expeditionary Force must be mobilised and sent over at the very outset of hostilities; (3) to have the Admiralty's plans brought into line with the joint Anglo-French military plans, and made to cooperate with the Army's General Staff in laying down the schedules and time tables for the sea transport of the British Force.

### III

The German Emperor had, apparently, authorised the despatch of the Panther to Agadir, under his Foreign Minister's assurance that Britain, currently in cordial relations with Germany, would not think of supporting France. The Emperor and his Minister did not learn of their error until Mr. Lloyd George, three weeks later, let it be known to the City of London's bankers and to the world that there were circumstances when British honour could not be sacrificed even for the cause of peace.

The British Foreign Office had come to this conclusion at the very outset. As early as July 4th, Mr. Eyre Crowe had noted, on hearing that the German Chancellor contemplated a settlement between France, Germany,

and Spain, to the exclusion of Britain<sup>5</sup>, "The remarks of the German Chancellor show clearly that it is the intention of the German government to make use of the 'excellent relations' which he has established with England, in order to detach England from France..." To this Sir A. Nicolson had added: "I think that the Chancellor will soon be aware that England does not intend to stand aside in any discussions which may take place. And also that we intend to remain loyal to our obligations to France."<sup>6</sup>

Sir Edward Grey closed these minutes with the following note: "I have made a communication to Count Metternich which will counteract this..." Indeed, on that same day (July 4), Sir Edward had informed the German Ambassador "that our attitude could not be a disinterested one with regard to Morocco," and that "We must take into consideration our Treaty obligations to France and our own interests in Morocco."<sup>7</sup>

This warning, however, was lost on Berlin. The German Government chose to ignore the British admonition, and continued to be blind to its veiled warning right up to the moment of Lloyd George's declaration.

From the very outset, General Wilson kept in close touch with the Foreign Office. On July 16, he went to see Sir Arthur Nicolson, and together they reviewed the whole situation and "discussed every problem." Under the stress of Agadir, Sir Arthur and the General proved still of one mind regarding British armed assistance to France, should the latter become

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<sup>5</sup> Britain had more interests than Germany, in Morocco.

<sup>6</sup> G. & T., VII, 331-2, No.352, minutes.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 334, No. 356.



involved in a war with Germany.

Convinced of the danger of the situation, and perhaps fortified by this concurrence of opinion with the Permanent Under-Secretary, General Wilson asked the French War Office for a meeting with the French Chief of Staff, Général Dubail, in order to complete all joint military plans.<sup>9</sup> The French War Office agreed, and on the 19th, Wilson left for Paris.

His departure, however, suffered a brief delay.

I had arranged to start with Huguet by the 2.20 (Wilson writes in his diary<sup>10</sup>), but on arrival at the office I found Nick and Haldane had had a fright about something. They wanted to know all sorts of things, and in the end I laid out the forces of the Triple and the Dual Alliances on the frontier for them. No small thing to do in one day.

We do not know the cause of Haldane's and General Nicholson's fright. Was it due to the fact of the meeting itself? - Or to certain items on the agenda, for discussion? - Or again, the fact that the conversation would be so detailed and final in its technical arrangements?

We are led to conclude (by Wilson's entry) that whatever the reason for their fear, his exposé reassured them completely: for, in a few hours he was on his way to Paris. - Moreover, later events seem to indicate that the sudden enquiry proved most valuable in that it gave Wilson a chance to expose in detail his views and plans to his two superiors; for, never again were Lord Haldane or General Nicholson to question the General's plans and convictions. - In fact, in the weeks to come, they were

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Callwell, I. 96.

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Les Armées Françaises, I, 1, 49: here it is clearly stated that the meeting of the 20th was at the request of the British.

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Callwell, I, 96.

to give Wilson their unstinted support.

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Wilson's visit to Paris was completely successful.

I found Huguet waiting for me at the station on my arrival at 5.30 a.m. . At 3 o'clock, after much talk with Huguet I met at the W.O. Gen. Dubail, Chief of Staff, Gen. Regnault, Sub-Chief of Staff, Colonel Hallouin, Chief of 3rd Bureau, Colonel Crepy, Chief of 4th Bureau. We worked till 5.30 in most satisfactory manner, and then Gen. Dubail, Huguet and I called on the War Minister, M. Messimy, who was very pleasant and cordial, and we had another serious talk. <sup>11</sup>

The work accomplished on that afternoon of the 20th was recorded  
<sup>12</sup>

in a Memorandum signed on that very day by both Dubail and Wilson.

The opening paragraphs are of no slight interest:

Le 20 juillet 1911, à 3 heures de l'après-midi, une conférence a eu lieu au Ministère de la Guerre à Paris, entre: M. le Général Dubail, Chef d'Etat-Major de l'Armée française, et M. le Général Wilson, Directeur des opérations militaires au War-Office, en vue de déterminer les conditions de la participation éventuelle d'une armée anglaise aux opérations des armées françaises du Nord-Est, dans une guerre contre l'Allemagne.

Assistaient à cette conférence: . . . . .

Il a tout d'abord été déclaré:

Que les pourparlers engagés, dépourvus de tout caractère officiel, ne pouvaient lier en rien les Gouvernements anglais et français,

Que la conférence avait seulement pour but d'élucider certaines questions essentielles, et de prévoir les mesures préparatoires indispensables, de manière à assurer, le cas échéant, dans les meilleures conditions possible, la co-operation

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<sup>11</sup>

Ibid., I, 96.

<sup>12</sup>

G. & T., VII, 629, No. 640.

effective des Armées coalisées.

Dans cet ordre d'idées, la discussion a porté et l'accord s'est établi sur les points suivants:

- I. Composition de l'Armée anglaise de débarquement.
- II. Transports maritimes.
- III. Débarquements sur le territoire français et séjour dans des camps temporaires.
- IV. Transports en chemin de fer.
- V. Zone de concentration, date de l'achèvement des transports.
- VI. Alimentation.

In this memorandum, all arrangements for the expedition of the British Force to the Continent are completed in detail, and the tasks and responsibilities of each War Office and Admiralty clearly laid down. - With this meeting, Wilson and Dubail brought to a successful conclusion all possible joint planning. It only remained for the Forces of each country to complete their respective preparations. - These preparations, however, (as we shall see,) were far from complete: England in particular suffered in this respect. ...

Wilson left Paris on the afternoon of the 21st. When he appeared at the British War Office, on the following morning, he found his Superiors in a state of near alarm. Lloyd George had set Europe's chancelleries in a flurry, with his speech of the night before.

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At mid-day, on the 22nd, General Nicholson sent for Wilson.

I was asked (runs Wilson's diary) when the Expeditionary Force would be ready. I said I did not know, as the horse difficulty had not been solved. Neither Miles nor Heath could say either. We were told to get out a paper on the subject. During the afternoon I worked with Heath (Director

of Supply and Transport).

...I also saw Ewart about accelerating mobilization. We are unfortunately caught at a time when the proposals which I put forward for accelerating mobilization are not yet completed. We must do the best we can. Our rail and ship arrangements are worked out on my new tables; but the personnel may not be ready....<sup>13</sup>

On the next day, the probing continued:

I was on committee with Miles, Heath, and others, to see how short we are in the Expeditionary Force. It comes out that we can only just make the Cavalry Division, four Divisions and the Army Troops mobile. The 4th and 6th will have no horses, no A.S.C. personnel, no mechanical transport or mechanical transport drivers, and no medical units. Then we are 2,500 officers short, and so on. Still I insisted on sending the whole six divisions across...<sup>14</sup>

And on the 24th:

Another day of semi-scare and scramble. I found some of our stores had no web equipment, and, still worse, that we could only fight our howitzers as four-gun batteries, and then only with half the proper amount of ammunition. Absolutely no medical arrangements made for the 4th and 6th Divisions.

The scandal grows, and I am keeping a diary so that I may write a minute on the whole situation. At about 5.30 news came from Brussels that the Belgians had stopped all leave and thought matters serious.<sup>15</sup>

It had taken Lloyd George's declaration, to make the Military Members of the War Council finally realize "that they were face to face  
<sup>16</sup>  
with a crisis" and that Army preparations must be brought quickly to war

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<sup>13</sup>

Callwell, I, 97-8.

<sup>14</sup>

Ibid., I, 98.

<sup>15</sup>

Ibid., I, 98.

<sup>16</sup>

Ibid., I, 97.

level. In the weeks that followed, Wilson continued to press his enquiry into the state of unpreparedness of his Expeditionary Force. But, in his devotion to the conversations, he also pursued another mission: to make the Cabinet Ministers fully realize the implications and requirements of a Continental War and of British intervention, and to urge them to decide, without further delay, upon a policy for such an eventuality. Both circumstances, and Lord Haldane, greatly abetted the General in his efforts.

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The soldiers were not the only ones to be slow to appreciate the critical nature of the latest Moroccan dispute. Most of the Cabinet Ministers (British) did not become fully aware of the danger inherent in the situation, till after the actual crisis had passed its zenith. There were reasons for this: the struggle between the Lords and the Commons, and the Labour problems, naturally absorbed most of the Government's attention. Only a handful of Cabinet members took pains to follow the danger-fraught course of international affairs, in these busy days: these members included Sir Edward Grey of the Foreign Office, Lord Haldane of the War Office, McKenna of the Admiralty, Churchill of the Home Office, Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and, naturally, the Prime Minister. All these Ministers were wary of the situation from the very start. On July 21st, Lloyd George made his Mansion House Speech, and thus declared himself on the side of the Foreign and War Secretaries. - Then suddenly, four days later, an incident took place, that served to dramatize, for these Ministers, the dangerous state of affairs.

On July 25, after three weeks of absolute silence, on the part of Berlin, to Grey's worried query of the 4th, Metternich finally appeared

with a communication from his Government. A first memorandum read:

"The German Government did not think that a Conference would be necessary....

But if, after the many provocations from the side of France and her free and easy manner in Morocco, as if neither Germany nor a Treaty existed, France should repel the hand which was proffered to her by Germany, German dignity as a Great Power would make it necessary to secure by all means, and if necessary alone, full respect by France for German Treaty rights. ..."

And upon this memorandu, there followed yet another, expressing German astonishment and anger at the British Chancellor of the Exchequer's recent

<sup>17</sup> address. The substance and tone of the interview alarmed Grey. And coupled with a current preoccupation over the location and the intentions <sup>18</sup> of the German Fleet, the communication suggested to the Foreign Secretary - in the heat of the moment - the possibility of drastic German action.

As a result, Sir Edward set out for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as soon as Metternich had left. Lloyd George was finally located "walking by the fountains of Buckingham Palace" with Winston Churchill. The two Ministers hurried over to Grey's rooms in the House. Sir Edward's first words to them were: "I have just received a communication from the German Ambassador so stiff that the Fleet might be attacked at any moment. I have sent for McKenna to warn him!" Grey then recounted his interview with <sup>19</sup> Metternich. "The First Lord arrived while we were talking," writes Churchill ,

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<sup>17</sup>

G. & T., 397, No. 419: Grey to Goschen, 25. 7. 11.

<sup>18</sup>

For these preoccupations, See: G & T, VII, Ch. LIX, (I): The Molde Incident; and Callwell, I, 97-8.

<sup>19</sup>

The World Crisis, I, 44-5.-Churchill is the sole source of this incident of the 25th.

"and a few minutes later hurried off to send the warning orders."

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This alarm did much to bring home, to the Ministers, the absolute necessity for military and naval preparedness. Haldane did not let pass the opportunity: both he and Wilson began what could, indeed, be called a Campaign, to inform the key Ministers of the problems and nature of military and naval preparedness and possible intervention in a war should one arise from the Moroccan negotiations. On August 9, the War Secretary invited Wilson to lunch, to meet Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Eyre Crowe.

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After lunch, (writes Wilson ,) we discussed the present German-Morocco state of affairs. Grey began by asking me if I thought Germany was going to war with France and us. This was a question I ought to have asked him. However, I replied in the negative. He advanced the theory that Russia was a governing factor, which I shattered rather rudely by telling him that Russia in 28 days could only produce 36 divisions in Poland, which Germany could oppose by 27 and Austria by 36, and I said that Russian interference could scarcely relieve the pressure from Paris, the Germans being able (in spite of Russia) to put 96 divisions against the French 66.

After a long and, I believe, ineffectual talk, the chief points I made were three: First, that we must join the French. Second, that we must mobilise the same day as the French. Third, that we must send all six divisions. These were agreed to, but with no great heartiness....

This meeting disappointed Wilson. Even Haldane seemed not to follow his views: "I was profoundly dissatisfied with the grasp of the situation possessed by Grey and Haldane," he concluded, in his entry for that day. Haldane, however, had apparently been more receptive than Wilson

supposed. As a result of this meeting, the War Secretary instructed the General "to prepare a paper on a war between Germany and France"<sup>21</sup>. This, Wilson did; and he followed it up with another paper on Britain's current "state of unpreparedness for undertaking hostility". On handing in this last paper, the General remarked in his diary: "This will not be so popular"<sup>22</sup>. - In this, Wilson was wrong ... at least with respect to Haldane.

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For, on the day Wilson presented his last paper, Lord Haldane had dinner with four fellow-Ministers: Asquith, McKenna, Grey and Churchill.<sup>23</sup> Judging from the account (as told by Haldane to Wilson) of the conversation that ensued, the dinner seems to have been a direct result of Wilson's two reports. - At any rate, this dinner was to prove of inestimable value to both Wilson and the conversations: its outcome was the Imperial Defence Committee meeting of August 23.

24

As Wilson wrote in his diary, the following day:

Haldane sent for me early this morning. I found Nick in the room. Haldane said he had had a useful dinner last night of Asquith, McKenna, Grey and Churchill. He had told these ignorant men something of war, with the result that Asquith arranged for a small special meeting of the C.I.D. for tomorrow week. Haldane and Nick came down to my room and I showed them my map. This was a revelation. Later on, Winston Churchill also came over to my room, and Haldane came a second time, also Nick and

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21  
Ibid.

22  
Ibid.

23  
Ibid.

24  
Ibid.



Ottley. Winston had put in a ridiculous and fantastic paper on a war on the French and German frontier, which I was able to demolish. I believe he is in close touch with Kitchener and French, neither of whom know anything at all about the subject. Still, some good work was done this day.

For Wilson, this day was of unique significance. It brought him the happy prospect of an occasion to air his plans and views of British cooperation on the Continent, to a group of the key members of the Cabinet; and it further assured him of the complete support of his War Secretary, the Chief of General Staff ... and Churchill.

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The meeting of Cabinet Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence took place on August 23, shortly after Parliament had risen. Only six Ministers attended this meeting: Asquith (who took the Chair), Lloyd George, Haldane, McKenna, Churchill, and Sir Edward Grey. Five military and naval Experts completed the group: General Nicholson, General Henry Wilson and Sir John French, for the War Office; Admirals Sir Arthur Wilson<sup>25</sup> and Bethel (Director of Naval Intelligence), for the Admiralty.

The Committee had been summoned, to hear the advice of both the Admiralty and the Army regarding the naval and military nature of Britain's eventual participation in a Franco-German war. What they witnessed on that day, was a thorough conflict between the counsel of the Army and that of the Admiralty: a total absence of basic agreement or common planning, between the two Forces. - And this at a time of crisis!

The Committee sat all day. In the morning, they listened to the Army; in the afternoon, to the Navy.

General Wilson, as Director of Military Operations, stated the views of the General Staff. Standing by his enormous map, specially transported for the purpose, he unfolded, with what proved afterward to be extreme accuracy, the German plan for attacking France in the event of a war between Germany and Austria on the one hand and France and Russia on the other. It was briefly as follows:

In the first place the Germans would turn nearly four-fifths of their strength against France and leave one-fifth to contain Russia. The German armies would draw up a line from the Swiss Frontier to Aix-la-Chapelle. They would then swing their right wing through Belgium, thus turning the line of fortresses by which the eastern frontiers of France were protected...

It was asserted that if the six British divisions were sent to take position on the extreme French left, immediately war was declared, the chances of repulsing the Germans in the first great shock of battle were favourable. Every French soldier would fight with double confidence if he knew he was not fighting alone...<sup>26</sup>

There was of course considerable discussion and much questioning before we adjourned at 2 o'clock. When we began again at three, it was the turn of the Admiralty, and the First Sea Lord, Sir Arthur Wilson, with another map expounded his views of the policy we should pursue in the event of our being involved in such a war. He did not reveal the Admiralty war plans. Those he kept locked away in his own brain, but he indicated that they embodied the principle of a close blockade of the enemy's ports. It was very soon apparent that a profound difference existed between the War Office and the Admiralty view. In the main, the Admiralty thought that we should confine our efforts to the sea; that if our small army were sent to the Continent it would be swallowed up among the immense hosts conflicting there, whereas if kept in ships or ready to embark for counterstrokes upon the German coast, it would draw off more than its own weight of numbers from the German fighting line. This view, which was violently combated by the Generals,

did not recommend itself to the bulk of those present....<sup>27</sup>

The conference separated. Apprehension lay heavy on the minds of all who had participated in it.<sup>28</sup>

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The Committee meeting of August 23 gave rise to the final encounter between the War Office and the Admiralty, over that old question: where, and how, would the British Army be used in the event of a Continental war. This difference, which had begun (as we have seen, in Part I) in the days of Fisher and Grierson, at the very outset of the Anglo-French military, conversations, had continued, under Lord Fisher's successor, Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson. It was only now, six years later, in the teeth of yet another possibility of a Franco-German war, that the dispute was finally resolved.

Though the difference was of long standing, most of the non-military witnesses were shocked and amazed. Haldane and Wilson had not concealed their military plans, whereas - in the words of Haldane<sup>29</sup> - the Admiralty had observed the strictest secrecy about their war plans, such as they were, and I doubt whether the leaders had taken even M'Kenna (sic) much into their confidence." Such a state of affairs was patently intolerable: the very safety of the nation and Empire forbade such divided counsel among those responsible for the planning and conduct of war and defence. Something had to be done to ensure that the War Office and the Admiralty were henceforth of one mind.

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<sup>27</sup>

Ibid., 56.

<sup>28</sup>

Ibid., 62.

<sup>29</sup>

Haldane, Autobiography, 229.

The Committee dispersed, without drawing up a verdict. This was a consultative body, with power only to enquire and recommend. But except for Mr. McKenna, First Lord of the Admiralty, the Cabinet members who attended the meeting, left with the conviction that the Admiralty was at fault. The First Sea Lord had been too reticent, and the brief and sketchy plans which he did choose to disclose were all too easily countered by the arguments of the Army Experts, Haldane, and Churchill.

Immediately after the meeting, the War Secretary and the Prime Minister made provisional arrangements for the implementation of the War Office plans "for the transport and employment of the troups"<sup>30</sup>. The War Office had won the dispute.

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This decision in favour of the Army, however, was not the only outcome of this Committee meeting. The day's deliberations had also served to reveal to all those present, that something was radically wrong with the organisation of the Admiralty. War planning, it transpired, was the exclusive responsibility of the First Sea Lord: no war-planning Body existed, in the Navy. In view of the technical progress in sea weapons, and the evolution of sea warfare, since the days of Nelson and prior, this was a serious anachronism which could only prove fatal in the long run.... This discovery suggested that the Navy was in urgent need of organic reform.

When the meeting broke up, Lord Haldane took the Prime Minister

aside and informed him that he "could not continue to be responsible for the military affairs unless (the Prime Minister) made a sweeping reform at the Admiralty."<sup>31</sup>

Some six weeks later, Churchill would replace McKenna as First Lord of the Admiralty.... And so a new Chapter in the naval conversations would begin.

#### IV

On the evening of that dramatic August 23, Lord Haldane sent General Wilson a note. "My dear General. You did admirably today. Lucid and real grip, your exposition made a real impression."<sup>32</sup> Quoting this note in his diary, Wilson commented: "This was nice, and I think good work was done in convincing the Ministers of the necessity of instant action."<sup>33</sup>

But Wilson's task was far from complete. He had still to keep the Ministers convinced. For, in the last week of August, Franco-German negotiations over Morocco were coming to an impasse. After endless quibbling and shifting, Kiderlen-Waechter was finally demanding of the French what, in effect, amounted to Franco-German economic monopoly and joint political jurisdiction over French Morocco. On September 8, negotiations came to a halt.

The resultant Franco-German tension brought, once more, imminent danger of war. In Wilson's view, hostilities might break out at any time, and the Cabinet, consequently, be called upon to make a final decision for or against immediate participation. The General must, therefore, keep ever

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 227-8.

<sup>32</sup> Callwell, I, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

present, before the Cabinet Ministers, his "three points": - Should War come, (1) Britain and France must secure Belgian active support; (2) Britain must mobilise on the same day as the French; (3) Britain must send all six divisions<sup>34</sup>. These three items were matter of policy: only the Cabinet could implement them, when the time came to act.

Winston Churchill was Wilson's chief agent. This Home Secretary, whose office had nothing to do with war planning, had managed to work his way up to membership in that highly restricted Cabinet group that had, on the 23rd, constituted itself into a Committee of Imperial Defence. For Wilson, Churchill was most useful on two counts: in the first place, he was the most convinced "Wilsonite", and believed, no less than Wilson, in the over-riding importance of the "three points"; secondly, he was Lloyd George's most intimate friend in the Cabinet - and the eventual decision of the Cabinet would depend, for the most part, on Lloyd George's stand.

After the 23rd, and throughout the critical three weeks of September, Churchill and the General were in almost daily communication; and through Churchill - when not directly - Wilson was able to keep his points constantly before the minds of Grey, Asquith, and Lloyd George.

But Lloyd George, as we have said, was the main target of this campaign: under a constant bombardment of letters from Churchill and enclosed memoranda from Wilson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer soon responded most favourably. To Sir Edward Grey, Lloyd George wrote, on September 1st:

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There were those who maintained that at least two of the six Infantry Divisions of the Expeditionary force should be kept at home for security against possible invasion. This thesis was maintained by the Committee of Imperial Defence in 1908. (See: Churchill, I, 170.)

"War is by no means inevitable but it is becoming an increasing probability. It is so much in the recon-  
ning as to render it urgently necessary for us to take every step which would render the issue of war more favourable, always provided that such a step does not increase the chance of precipitating war." 35

36

And on September 11, Wilson recorded in his diary :

I had a long talk with Lloyd George, who was passing through London on his way to Balmoral. I impressed on him the value of a friendly Belgium, the absolute necessity for our mobilising the same day as the French, and of our sending the whole six divisions. I think he agreed to all this. He was quite in favour of a war now.....

Between Wilson and Churchill, no stone was left unturned.

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Meanwhile, the Anglo-French conversations continued.

37

According to the Editors of the French Documents , Anglo-French naval conversations, which had ceased in late 1908, were resumed once again, on August 24, 1911 - that is, on the day following the meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence. These naval conversations led to a verbal agreement, in London, between the British Admiralty and Lieutenant Gignon of the French General Staff, sometime between the third and the seventh of September, on the following points: "1. Proposal of a secret code; 2. Study of terms of a secret agreement; 3. France's role in the

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G. & T., VII, 634, No. 642.

36

Callwell, I, 103.

37

D. D. F., 3eS., I, p. 328: "Note".

Mediterranean."

The date of resumption of these conversations suggests that they, also, were an outcome of the meeting of the 23rd.

The military conversations, on the other hand, showed no particular precipitation after the 23rd. The Wilson-Dubail meeting of July 20 had - as we have seen - completed in detail all the joint arrangements necessary for the expedition of the British Forces.

Nevertheless, Wilson was in close touch with Colonel Huguet, throughout the Agadir crisis. And there are valid grounds for assuming that the General concealed few of his activities or of the Cabinet deliberations on British intentions in the event of war, from the French Attaché. Indeed, the French Government - or at least M. Cambon - must have been kept "au courant" of the Wilson-Haldane-Churchill campaign, the Army-Navy encounter, and the respective attitudes of the "informed few" of the British Cabinet.

On September 9, Wilson made the following entry in his diary, which reveals the General's relations with Huguet during the critical period, the type of exchanges that were being carried on, and also the extent to which the French Army appreciated Wilson's efforts:

Huguet spent an hour with me in the office. I impressed on him the value of Belgian active support. He went straight back and told Cambon, who is going to Paris to-morrow and will lay this before the Ministers.

Huguet came to No. 36 to see me again at 5 o'clock, and we worked from 5.30 to 8 o'clock. I showed him my maps with German and French troops on them. He was immensely struck at all the work and knowledge this meant. He told me where the French G.S. (General Staff) want us to go, and what their plans are. This is the first time I have been told. He told me also that if I had gone to the manoeuvres, M. Messimy was himself going to have invested me with the collar of the Legion of Honour. 38



French enthusiasm for Wilson's devotion and cooperation was indeed sincere; and at one point, the British Prime Minister found cause to be alarmed. The occasion was a report<sup>39</sup> from the British Military Attaché in Paris, Colonel Fairholme, of a conversation on August 24, with General Joffre, newly appointed French Chief of General Staff. In this communication General Fairholme recounted:

I found the General extremely well disposed towards England, and anxious to maintain the cordial and intimate relations which have existed of late between the two armies. He expressed his intention of affording all possible facilities for the interchange of information, and of visits by French and British officers, with a view to mutual improvement and understanding.

. . . . .

The new Chief attaches the very greatest importance to the co-operation of a British expeditionary force, which concentrating somewhere between Douai and Cambrai, and falling on the right flank of the German advance might produce great, and even decisive, results. But it would have to be sent early in the day; its intervention, for instance, on the 18th day of the French mobilisation, might not prove a bit too soon. As regards the provision by the French authorities of the requisite railway transport to convey the British contingent to the points of concentration which might ultimately be fixed on, he anticipates no difficulty, even should all six British Infantry Divisions be dispatched.

He stated that arrangements have recently been made by which the carrying powers of the French railways in War have been considerably increased...

On reading this despatch, Asquith wrote to Sir Edward Grey

(September 5):

My dear Grey,- Conversations such as that between General Joffre and Col. Fairholme seem to me rather dangerous; especially the part which refers to possible British assistance. The French ought not to be encouraged, in the present circumstances, to make their plans on any assumption

of this kind.

Yours always, 40  
H.H.A.

Grey replied to the Prime Minister on September 8. His answer is most interesting. It reveals the difficulties with which he was faced, in trying to keep the military conversations - which were ostensibly "hypothetical" and "non-committal" - from assuming diplomatic significance; and perhaps, also, it discloses, in some measure, Grey's personal attitude, in those tense weeks:

My dear Asquith, - It would create consternation if we forbade our military experts to converse with the French. No doubt these conversations and our speeches have given an expectation of support. I do not see how that can be avoided.

The news today is that the Germans are proceeding leisurely with the negotiations, and are shifting the ground from Congo to economic concessions in Morocco...

To me it looks as if the negotiations are going to enter upon exceedingly tedious but not dangerous grounds.

Yours sincerely, 41  
E. Grey

... In one respect, Sir Edward Grey was wrong: on that very day (September 8) Franco-German negotiations broke down, and he deemed it wise to issue a warning of "war preparedness". This precaution was relaxed only  
42  
on September 22.

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In the last days of September, when the Moroccan negotiations had

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40

Grey, I, 165.

41

Ibid., I, 166.

42

Nicolson, Carnock, 347.

finally entered upon their "dénouement", Wilson was at last able to contemplate a few days' rest. Suddenly, he received an invitation from the French War Office to attend a General Staff Meeting on the 29th.

The meeting was a fitting climax - as well as a fitting tribute - to Wilson's single-minded devotion to the Conversations. There, he found (among others,) Joffre, Castelneau, Dubail, Hallouin and Crépy. His record<sup>43</sup> of the event is a landmark in the history of the military conversations:

They were most cordial and open. They showed me papers and maps, copies of which they are giving me, showing the concentration areas of their northern armies. Intensely interesting. Then they showed me papers and maps, copies of which they are giving me, showing in detail the area of concentration for all our Expeditionary Force. We had a long discussion. Afterwards we went through many other matters. They also showed me a map, and are giving me a copy, showing 15 through roads in lower Belgium.... In fact, by 12.30 I was in possession of the whole of their plan of campaign for their northern armies, and also for ours.

I never spent a more interesting morning...

In his first thirteen months as Director of Military Operations, Wilson had brought about some substantial changes in the military conversations. We have seen how, on July 20, he cast aside the practice (specified by Grey himself in January 1906) of proceeding only through the French Military Attaché in London, and had set up direct contact with the French General Staff. - Now, we see how he has allowed the Expeditionary Force, its zones of concentration, and even its plan of campaign, to become an integral part of the French War Plan. These changes are by no means trivial; yet it is doubtful that they were even noticed in London.

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<sup>43</sup>

Callwell, I, 104-5.

## V

In the fall of 1911, after the Moroccan crisis had passed, a vehement dispute arose in the British Cabinet, over the Anglo-French military conversations. As a result of war preparations, and of Wilson's frenetic activities, during the Agadir Crisis, a considerable majority of the Cabinet came to discover, for the first time, the existence - or at least true nature and extent - of the Anglo-French conversations.

There had been no conspiracy to conceal the conversations from the Cabinet as a whole. True, in the early days of January 1906 it was thought wise not to bring up the subject of the conversations immediately, at a Cabinet. But with the passing of Algéiriras, the occasion for formal disclosure seems, simply, to have vanished.

Yet, in the course of those five years that elapsed between Algéiriras and Agadir, a good many of the Ministers had had ample occasion to discover the existence - as well as the nature - of the conversations. For, (as we have seen in Chapter 5,) these had been brought up for discussion at several meetings of the Committee of Imperial Defence or of its Sub-Committees, particularly in the years of 1908 and 1909; and the meetings had been attended by such Ministers as Crewe, Harcourt, Lloyd George and Morley.<sup>44</sup> If some of these Ministers did not recall the existence of the conversations, or did not grasp their implications, at the time, we may conclude that this was due to the overbearing stress of internal affairs which, in those years, were such as to require the most

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<sup>44</sup>

See: General Nicholson's memorandum, as quoted in Ch. 5, above, and Haldane, Autobiography, p. 228-9.

undivided attention of the most capable Minister.

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Notwithstanding the many sources available, it is impossible, still today, to reconstruct with any certainty, or in any detail, the exact nature and course of that autumn dispute. But from the few traces still extant, certain facts transpire with clarity.

It will be recalled that throughout the crisis, only a few Cabinet Ministers showed any acute concern for Britain's naval and military state of preparedness or for the possibility of the country's becoming involved in a war. The Ministers so concerned, were those invited by Asquith to attend the meeting of August 23.

The other Cabinet members had, apparently, been wholly engrossed in the Constitutional and Labour problems that dominated the attention of Parliament and Public throughout late July, and August. On the seventh of August, Parliament adjourned, and most of the Cabinet dispersed throughout the country, and were still absent from the Capital when the critical September months came to pass.

Thus, it would appear that it was not until October, when the Government reassembled in London for the new parliamentary session, that most of the Ministers - with the exception of the "inner circle" of August 23 - discovered how close Europe had come to war, and to what extent the Army and Navy had prepared for the eventuality.

It seems likely that the Churchill-McKenna exchange of office gave rise to some initial queries from the uninformed. However this may be, there is evidence in support of the thesis that it was Wilson's ac-

tivities that really drew their wrath.

Sometime in October, Lord Hardinge, then Viceroy of India, wired to Lord Crewe, saying that he had heard of General Wilson's "plans and work for bringing troops from India to help in Europe."<sup>45</sup> This news caused Wilson to suspect that "there is some game going on against me, because I am so powerful."<sup>46</sup> Early in November, Wilson's suspicions were confirmed, when General Nicholson informed him "that the peace party in the Cabinet were, as Wilson expresses it 'calling' for his 'head'."<sup>47</sup> As Wilson wrote in his diary on this occasion: "They think I forced the pace during the crisis and they quote all my teaching at the S.C. (Staff College)<sup>48</sup> as evidence of my villainy..."

On the next day, Lord Haldane confirmed General Nicholson's information:

Haldane sent for me this morning (runs Wilson's diary<sup>49</sup>). I found old Nick in his room. Haldane told me there was no question of my being asked to leave the W.O.. On the contrary he twice told me how "amazingly" well I had done, and how I had impressed his colleagues at the meeting of August 23. The fact was, he told me, that there was a serious difference in the Cabinet, Asquith, Haldane, Lloyd George, Grey and Winston on one side, agreeing on my lecture of August 23, whilst Morley, Crewe, Harcourt, McKenna, and some of the small fry were mad that they were not present on August 23 (McKenna, of course, was, and got kicked out for his pains), and were opposed to all idea of war, and especially enrgy with me, Morley and others quoting my teaching at the S.C.

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<sup>45</sup> Callwell, I, 106.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., I, 106-7.

and so forth. The Government fear that there may be a split, but Haldane told me he had informed Asquith that if there was a change of policy he would go....

Thus were the conversations finally brought up for discussion and approval. There is evidence that the "peace party" not only mistrusted Wilson's (and the War Office's) zeal, but also harboured fears that the conversations had, in effect, if not formally, committed Britain to military assistance to France in the event of a Franco-German war.

On November 6, General Nicholson, very probably at the request of Haldane or Asquith, submitted a memorandum<sup>50</sup> entitled: "Action taken by the General Staff since 1906 in preparing a plan for rendering military assistance to France in the event of an unprovoked attack on that Power by Germany." The memorandum was a most effective "Apologia": on the one hand, it gave, in fairly close and very accurate detail, the history and nature of the military conversations right up to the time of writing; on the other hand, it carefully emphasised "that the greatest care had been taken throughout by the General Staff to treat the plans for rendering military assistance to France, should His Majesty's Government determine to render such assistance on occasion arising, as being secret, hypothetical, and non-committal."

If Morley, Crewe, Harcourt, et al., suspected that the French Government nevertheless believed that the conversations did, in effect, assure them of automatic armed support in the event of a Franco-German war, their suspicions were definitely proven groundless, when on November 15, Grey read a statement to the Cabinet, which the French Ambassador had made to Sir Arthur Nicolson some two weeks previous.

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50

G. & T., VII, 626, No. 639. - For text in full, of General Nicholson's memorandum see Appendix to thesis.

Referring to a visit to Paris in the second week in September, to confer with the French Cabinet on the Franco-German negotiations, Cambon had told Nicolson:

"I told M. Caillaux and all the Ministers very clearly that it would be very difficult for any British Government to take any action which was not supported by British public opinion: that in the event of Germany attacking France or wilfully breaking off the negotiations British public opinion would side with France and would enable the British Gov(ern)ment to support France. British public opinion was impetuous and did not reason very deeply, but it had an instinctive sympathy with the party attacked and an instinctive mistrust and dislike of an aggressive and bullying Power. All British history proved this. But if France were to place herself in the wrong, and were to attack Germany or wilfully break off the negotiations, British public opinion, in any case at the outset, would not be on the side of France, and the British Gov(ernmen)t would not, therefore, be able to assist France at the commencement, whatever they might do later. As British aid would be required immediately at the outset, the result would be that France would not be able to count on British support." 51

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This dispute over the conversations had revived the Liberal split of the turn of the Century, between the "Liberal Imperialists" (or Roseberyites) and the "Little Englanders" (or Campbell-Bannerman supporters);  
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and the Cabinet, as we have seen, came very near breaking up. But the split was not complete: for, the "peace party" had lost their most outstanding member, Lloyd George, and his powerful cohort, Winston Churchill,

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G. & T. VII, 602, No. 617: Min. by Sir A. Nicholson (To this Minute are appended two notes by Grey: "M. Cambon states the position quite accurately.- E.G." "I read the whole of this to the Cabinet yesterday. It should be kept for reference. - E.G., 16.11.11.")

52

Callwell, I, 107.



to the other camp. Moreover, the Asquith-Haldane-Grey group had ample proof in support of their contention, that the conversations were merely hypothetical and entirely non-committal, and that the French Government did not interpret them as evidence of British pre-determination to come to their assistance in any event.

The dispute terminated, with the assent of the Cabinet to the Conversations, and, in return, a promise, from Asquith, to keep the  
53  
Ministers fully informed henceforth.

On November 27, in his address on foreign policy, to the House of Commons, Sir Edward Grey let the Cabinet's new unanimous view to be known to the nation in the following words:

"There is one foreign policy different to the one which I have been endeavouring to sketch to the House, and it seems to me to be advocated in some quarters of the country. It seems to me to be simply disastrous. It is that we should give it to be understood that in no circumstances, however aggressively, provocatively, or wantonly, a friend of ours was attacked, we should give our friend any assistance whatever. That would be an attempt to revert to what was once called a policy of "splendid isolation". It would deprive us of the possibility of having a friend in Europe, and it would result in the other nations of Europe, either by choice or by necessity, being brought into the orbit of a single diplomacy from which we should be excluded." 54

Thus did Grey vindicate the Entente - and the conversations.

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Spender & Asquith, I, 349.

54  
G. & T., VII, No. 721 (p.733).

## CHAPTER 8

Agadir aftermath: Tirpitz and Churchill - The "Novelle" and Churchill's counter-plans - Proposed redistribution of British fleet. - Proposal announced in Parliament - Studies by Foreign Office and C.I.D. - Redistribution accepted on assumption of French cooperation - The implications of French cooperation - Grey aware of implications - French oblivious of implications, indifferent to redistribution - French preoccupation over renewed Anglo-German negotiations - Bertie's intervention -- French fears finally allayed - Cambon moots question of Anglo-French "exchange of Notes" - The British Press on British naval evacuation of Mediterranean - Poincaré's proposal: an Italo-Franco-British Mediterranean pact - French Marine informs Admiralty of intention to concentrate bulk of French fleet in Mediterranean - Grey informs Cambon outrightly of British naval dependence on France - Churchill's "Preamble" to Anglo-French joint plans - Preamble awakens Cambon to need for British assurances - July 25: Grey-Cambon conversation: Cambon proposes exchange of notes - Grey rejects idea - September revelations of French move to Mediterranean is only a temporary measure for manoeuvres - September 19: Cambon sees Grey, proposes tentative formula for exchange of Notes - Grey's final consent to Principle of Notes exchange - Grey submits draft proposal of letter - Cambon consults Poincaré and suggests final paragraph - Grey amends French paragraph, gets Cambon's instant approval - November 22 and 23: Grey-Cambon letters exchanged.

## I

The Agadir crisis passed from the scene on November 4, 1911, leaving in its wake bewilderment and irritation. Among the few men who had followed the affair from the start, and who had drawn a clear and definite lesson from the events, were the First Lord of the British Admiralty, Winston Churchill, and the German Naval Minister, Admiral Tirpitz.

For Churchill, Agadir had served to dramatize the fact that the British Navy was, in reality, not ready to cope with a full-scale war at sea. The Imperial Defence meeting of August 23, and subsequent investigation, had shown this clearly. On taking office, in October, Churchill had a definite goal: "I intended", he writes<sup>1</sup>, "to prepare for an attack by Germany as if it might come next day. I intended to raise the Fleet to the highest possible strength and to secure that all that strength was immediately ready. I was pledged to create a War Staff. I was resolved to have all arrangements made at once in the closest concert with the military to provide for the transportation of a British Army to France should war come."

The lesson of Agadir, to Admiral Tirpitz, was quite different. As the Admiral wrote in his Memoirs<sup>2</sup>: "It (Agadir) was our first diplo-

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, The World Crisis, I, 76.

<sup>2</sup> Tirpitz, Memoirs, I, 176.

matic reverse since Bismarck's administration, and it hit us all the harder because the structure of our position in the world was founded not so much on power as on prestige." Had Germany had a navy - Tirpitz argues - capable of challenging the British Fleet, there would have been no question of Britain openly flouting Germany by publicly siding with France. "It was our duty," Tirpitz concludes<sup>3</sup>, "to follow Bismarck's example in similar cases, and bring in a defence Bill quietly and without irritating accompaniments. With such an idea in mind I went down to Berlin in the autumn and told the Chancellor that as we had suffered a diplomatic check it ought to be counter-balanced by a supplementary bill."

The First Lord and the Naval Minister set to work, to implement their conclusions. By the nature of their intentions, a collision was inevitable. It remained for Tirpitz to make the first move - by drawing up a Naval Bill.

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Churchill had just finished his "clean sweep" through the Admiralty's highest échelons, when the first rumours of Tirpitz's projected Navy Bill struck the island. The rumour proved embarrassing to the First Lord: it came just as he was beginning to grapple with the question of Naval Estimates. The Estimates for the year to come would naturally have to take into account - or allow for - any further German naval increase. The pros-

pect of an increase took him, naturally, to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

While Lloyd George had proven "most forward" at the time of Agadir, he now appeared most cautious and conciliatory, in the face of a possible renewal of Anglo-German naval rivalry. As Churchill recounts<sup>4</sup>, "He felt that an effort should be made to heal any smart from which Germany might be suffering, and to arrive at a common understanding on naval strength."

The outcome of Lloyd George's counsel was Sir Ernest Cassell's visit to Berlin in the last days of January 1912. On the evening of January 30, Sir Ernest returned with the Emperor's and the Chancellor's expressions of delight at the prospect of a discussion with a view to an Anglo-German "understanding". - But more important still, the British financier returned with a written statement by Bethmann-Hollweg, outlining the contents of the German "Novelle".<sup>5</sup>

That night of the 30th to the 31st, Churchill spent at the Admiralty, with his chief naval advisors, studying the German Chancellor's summary of the new Naval Bill. The terms, as they revealed themselves, were grim.

The Bill proposed three main modifications to the current German naval programme: first, an increase in the tempo of naval con-

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<sup>4</sup> Churchill, I, 95.

<sup>5</sup> For this account see: Ibid., 95-8.

struction; secondly, the creation of a third Squadron in full commission; thirdly, an increase in standing personnel. The news struck Churchill and his advisors very strongly. Reporting to Grey on Cassell's visit, on the following day, Churchill appended some "Observations" concerning the projected German Naval Bill.<sup>6</sup> This Bill, he wrote, would require the following counter-measures: In the first place, there would have to be an acceleration in British ship construction schedules. Moreover, measures were required, to increase the British naval personnel. Finally, the British Fleets would have to be reorganised and redistributed.

This last point was, doubtless, the most urgent. With three full squadrons in full commission - as the new Bill proposed - the Germans would have, in the North Sea, 25 battleships on a war standing for twelve months of the year. Against this, Britain, under the present organisation and distribution, had only 16 battleships in home waters and in full commission.<sup>7</sup> As Churchill concluded, to Grey: "I agree with you that caution is necessary. In order to meet the new German squadron, we are contemplating bringing home the Mediterranean battleships. This means relying on France in the Mediterranean...." <sup>8</sup>

Lord Haldane's visit to Berlin, a few days later, modified neither Germany's nor Britain's naval intentions. On March 18, 1912, the new Lord of the Admiralty presented his first Naval Estimates to Parliament<sup>9</sup>. In a colourful preamble, he clearly stated his objective: To

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I, 97-8.

<sup>7</sup> Parl. Deb., 5th Ser. (House of Commons,) Vol. 35, Col. 1564-9.

<sup>8</sup> Churchill, I, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Parl. Deb. 5th Ser., (House of Commons) Vol. 35, Cols. 1564-9

keep the British Navy superior to the German, and to see to it that it was at all times ready. One of the means of achieving his objective was, to reorganise and redistribute the Fleet. Henceforth, there would be three Fleets: the First, the Second, and the Third Fleet. As for their distribution: the Atlantic Fleet, hitherto stationed at Gibraltar, would now be based on home ports; while the Mediterranean squadron, previously stationed at Malta, would be moved to Gibraltar. As Churchill explained this Mediterranean change: "This fourth battle squadron will, from its strategic position at Gibraltar, be able to give either immediate assistance in home waters or to operate in the Mediterranean, should naval combinations in that sea render its presence necessary or useful. Its movements will be regulated by the main situation..."

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Of all Churchill's proposals, this matter of fleet redistribution was to become the focal point of public attention in the months to come, and the cause and subject of one of the most signal phases of Anglo-French diplomatic relations in general, and of the history of the Staff conversations, in particular.

Specifically, the point at issue was: the effect of the projected redistribution on Britain's position and strength in the Mediterranean. Churchill's plan, as we have seen, called for the withdrawal of the bulk of the Mediterranean fleet for service off the British Isles. This redistribution would certainly ensure concentrated British naval

superiority and effective British surveillance over the German fleet; but it would also mean that henceforth the Mediterranean - one of the main arteries of the Empire, and the centre of some notable British possessions - would stand exposed to at least three local and potentially hostile naval Powers, with no more than a token British force to meet any combination, or any single one, of these henceforth superior fleets.

This was the controversial problem to which the redistribution project gave rise. British naval withdrawal from the Mediterranean was a source of real and serious danger to Britain and her Empire. The problem could not be ignored; the danger must be mitigated, if not completely eliminated. Churchill himself realized this problem on the very night (January 30) he discovered the terms of the German Novelle and drew up the necessary counter-measures. Moreover, (as we have seen,) the First Lord even proposed a solution to the question: in his note to Grey, written on the 31st, and already referred to, he said: "I agree with you that caution is necessary. In order to meet the new German squadron, we are contemplating bringing home the Mediterranean battleships. This means relying on France in the Mediterranean, and certainly no exchange of system (i.e. change of policy regarding the Entente) would be possible, even if desired by you."<sup>10</sup>

As we shall see, this reliance on French naval cooperation

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<sup>10</sup>

Churchill, I, 98.



in the Mediterranean was to become the sine qua non of Britain's naval redistribution plan. In this chapter, we shall recount Britain's efforts to secure this French cooperation ( - to be effected through Anglo-French naval staff conversations - ), the Anglo-French diplomatic negotiations that ensued, and the outcome of these negotiations - to wit, Britain's "limited commitment" to France, and the exchange of Notes between Cambon and Grey in November of that year; an exchange that finally brought to fruition Cambon's abortive efforts of May, 1905.

## II

Before presenting his naval program and Estimates in Parliament, Churchill had had - as a matter of course - to submit them to the Cabinet for discussion and approval. Evidently, the Cabinet had assented to his plans; but there still remained, for them, to consider in its details, the Mediterranean problem to which the redistribution would give rise. Six weeks passed, before the matter was even broached. Finally, on April 29, the Prime Minister signaled his intention to submit the question of redistribution of the fleet - and particularly the changes envisaged in the Mediterranean fleet, and the effects of these changes - to a thorough study by the Imperial Defence Committee. This Committee would hold a preliminary meeting at Malta on Whitsuntide.<sup>11</sup> The main reason for this study was set down as follows, in an introductory letter:

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### II

G. & T., X (ii), 580, No. 381 and Enclosures.

It is understood that the practical effect of the new naval dispositions is that, in the event of a war with Germany, in which one of the Mediterranean Powers was also opposed to us, the Admiralty could not guarantee the safety of British communications through the Mediterranean until the situation has cleared up in the North Sea, which might be some months after the outbreak of war.<sup>12</sup>

The Agenda for the meeting of the Committee at Malta contained eight points for discussion, covering everything from the scale of defences and the garrison at Malta itself, to the effect of the new fleet dispositions upon India and the Dominions east of the Mediterranean. These points reveal how fully the Prime Minister (at least) appreciated the Mediterranean as a vital link to the Empire. But they also showed something else: the very first point reads:

1. The scale of oversea attack to be provided against in time of war at Malta having regard to --
  - (a) The new naval dispositions in the Mediterranean.
  - (b) The degree of reliance to be placed on the co-operation of the French fleet.<sup>13</sup>

From this notice we see that Churchill's decision of partial naval withdrawal from the Mediterranean was considered definite and irrevocable - at least in its principle - , but that, moreover, French cooperation held a prominent place in the Prime Minister's ideas of British Mediterranean defence.

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<sup>12</sup>

Ibid.: Hankey to Grey, 30.4.12.

<sup>13</sup>

Ibid.: Enclosure 3 : "Agenda ..."

Asquith's decision for an Imperial Defence study set off a flurry of preparatory studies. The Foreign Office was asked to present a paper on "the probable effects on British policy of (Britain's) evacuating the Mediterranean"<sup>14</sup>, by which the Third Sea Lord (for the Admiralty) and the Director of Military Operations (General Wilson) might direct their strategical adjustments. The Foreign Office study was undertaken by Sir Eyre Crowe, whose report passed in review every possible political and military combination and contingency that might impinge upon the Mediterranean question. Passing from the Italian enigma to France's possible rôle, Sir Eyre wrote as follows:<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, the course of Italian policy must largely depend upon the position and attitude of France. If France were certain actually to espouse the British cause in a war between England and the Triple Alliance, and were known to be ready to fall upon the Austro-Italian combination with adequate naval forces, this would undoubtedly make Italy think twice before breaking with her former policy of facing both ways. But unless France, on her part, can definitely rely on British assistance in case she herself is attacked by Germany, it will be impossible to concentrate an overwhelming naval force in the Mediterranean after providing for the defence of her Atlantic coast against the German fleet. The question therefore whether Italy and Austria can be kept in check by the French navy, is seen to depend on there being some definite naval understanding between England and France, amounting in practice to an agreement for mutual assistance in case either is attacked by the Triple Alliance.

Sir Eyre summarised his conclusion in a brief résumé:

The evacuation of the Mediterranean by the British naval forces would tend:

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<sup>14</sup>

Ibid.: 581, No.382.

<sup>15</sup>

Ibid.

(1) To throw Italy completely into the arms of the Triple Alliance and place her in a position of definite hostility to France and Great Britain:....

(2) To detach Spain from her present understanding with France and England;

(3) Seriously to weaken British influence at Constantinople and encourage Turkey to join forces with the Triple Alliance and to attempt the reconquest of Egypt;

(4) To create in Egypt a state of dangerous unrest, which would gravely embarrass the administration of the country, besides inviting Turkish intervention;

(5) To stimulate all efforts directed to a disturbance of the status quo, affecting probably Crete and possibly Cyprus, and to endanger the general peace.

On the other hand -

(6) These consequences could to a certain extent be averted if the place of the British Mediterranean squadron were effectively taken by a powerful French fleet.

(7) If Anglo-French co-operation were assured in the case of either country being at war with the Triple Alliance, and if the French fleet were in a position to beat those of Italy, Austria and Turkey combined, and to win the command of the Mediterranean, Italy would probably continue to refuse allowing her partnership in the Triple Alliance to involve her in a war with the two western Powers, and Spain would have no sufficient inducement to change her present policy. Malta and Gibraltar would be as secure as they are now.

Finally:

(8) It is less certain that the British position in Turkey would remain unaffected; our hold over Egypt might have to be materially strengthened.

In short, then: an evacuation of the Mediterranean would not be seriously detrimental to British interests, if the French could be counted on to fill the naval vacuum created by the British move.

Sir Arthur Nicolson summarised the situation even more succinctly (in a letter to Sir Edward Grey, accompanying Sir Eyre's first draft of the Memorandum quoted above,) when he concluded<sup>16</sup> that the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 585, No. 385.

Admiralty's decision - assumed to be irrevocable - left but three alternatives. Either the British must increase their naval budget to create an adequate Mediterranean fleet; or they must come "to an alliance with Germany so as to free a large portion of the fleets at present locked up in home waters for the purpose of watching Germany"; or, finally, they must arrive at "an understanding with France whereby she would undertake, in the early period of war ..., to safeguard our interests in the Mediterranean." Of the three alternatives, the first would be too costly to Britain, and the second at once repugnant and diplomatically too onerous: Only the last was at all acceptable or desirable: "She (France) would naturally ask for some reciprocal engagements from us which it would be well worth our while to give. This to my mind offers the cheapest, simplest and safest solution."<sup>17</sup>

To Grey, however, this solution did not seem cheap, simple, or overly safe. The Foreign Secretary seems to have readily recognised the wisdom of Churchill's and the Admiralty's decision. Moreover, Sir Eyre Crowe's memorandum received his "imprimatur"; and no doubt Grey thoroughly agreed with Nicolson's summation of the situation as well as its conclusions. But notwithstanding this, the diplomatic dilemma arising from the Admiralty's decision remained intact. As Grey wrote to Kitchener (who was to attend the Malta meeting) on May 8:

The proposal of the Admiralty to withdraw ships from the Mediterranean raises very serious questions. We are on such good terms with France

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<sup>17</sup>

Ibid.

that it is not necessary for us to keep ships in the Mediterranean to counterbalance the French ships; but we have no arrangement with France, such as an Alliance, which would give us a right to assume that France would necessarily be involved in any war in which we were involved, and would protect our Mediterranean possessions or occupations for us.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, it might well have seemed to Grey that the only adequate solution would be an Alliance with France. Yet, an alliance was out of the question: such a proposal would certainly break up the Government, and it was far from certain that the majority of the public would support the idea. What alternative, then, remained?

Meanwhile, the assumption of French cooperation continued to gain root. Reporting the conclusions arrived at, at the Malta meeting in the last days of May, Lord Kitchener wrote to Grey, on June 2:<sup>19</sup>

It was considered essential that a definite agreement should be made with France, if we defend her Northern coasts, that her Fleet in the Mediterranean, together with the permanent British ships stationed there should be sufficient to ensure victory against Italy and Austria combined in case of war with the Triple Alliance.

In this connection France will doubtless consider, whether under the following new arrangements the combined fleets in the Mediterranean will be adequate to enable her to carry out this engagement.

The following are the proposed arrangements:...

And there follows a detailed list of the British ships and establishments that are to remain in the Mediterranean and which the French are expected to "complete". Thus, Anglo-French conversations

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<sup>18</sup>

Ibid., 590, No. 387.

<sup>19</sup>

Ibid., 594, No. 392, Encl....

are assumed, the British basis for joint planning established, and French cooperation taken as a matter of course! - All this while Grey has yet to find the means and form by which he might "assure" the French, in the event of their willingness to cooperate!

When, on July 22, Churchill rose before the House to present his Supplementary Estimates and his decision to abandon British naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, the British Foreign Secretary ~~would~~ still not have found the solution to his riddle.

### III

By May, then, it was clear to Grey: (1) that Britain, if she was to effect her naval redistribution and still safeguard her Mediterranean interests, must secure French cooperation; (2) that effective French cooperation would require France's concentrating the bulk of her fleet in the Mediterranean, to fill the vacuum created by the British departure; (3) that such a concentration would necessarily entail a substantial weakening of French naval defences along those coasts and in those waters most immediately exposed to German naval attack; (4) and that consequently this onerous liability, inevitable to the French should they cooperate with the British, put France in a ~~position~~ to impose conditions, diplomatic or military, upon Britain.

The French, for their part, failed to grasp the diplomatic significance, for them, of the projected British move. On the other hand, the French Admiralty, under the direction of its new Minister, M. Delcassé, lost no time in completing plans for French naval cooperation

with the British, in anticipation of the Mediterranean evacuation. In fact, in early May, (as we shall see, shortly, ) the French Admiralty were pressing for a renewal of Anglo-French naval Staff conversations, in order to draw up joint plans for naval concerting. The French Foreign Office, on the other hand, showed a surprising lack of interest or even awareness. Under M. Poincaré, who held the dual post of President of the Council and Foreign Minister, the Quai d'Orsay remained seemingly blind to the diplomatic and military import of the British naval withdrawal, right up to mid July, when Churchill unwittingly opened their eyes.

For that matter, Paul Cambon himself proved no more perceptive than his colleagues in Paris. For his appreciation of Britain's intended redistribution - as this appreciation was to remain, right up to July, also - we can do no better than to quote his concluding observations, from his report to Paris of Churchill's momentous announcement of March 18:

Dans ce projet de réorganisation, il y a lieu de remarquer particulièrement le transfert de Malte à Gibraltar de la base, c'est-à-dire du port d'attache, de l'escadre de la Méditerranée, destinée à devenir la quatrième escadre de la première flotte. Il est très significatif de voir l'Angleterre, au moment où M. Winston Churchill invoque pour elle la nécessité de maintenir sa supériorité navale sur l'Allemagne, rassembler ses forces actives le plus près possible de ses côtes. On peut se demander, par exemple, si ce transfert de Malte à Gibraltar ne présentera pas d'inconvénients au point de vue de la politique anglaise dans la Méditerranée, notamment dans le bassin oriental de



cette mer.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, although it took the French Foreign Office four months to awaken to the diplomatic implications, for France, of the British resolve and of French naval cooperation, these four months were by no means lost. In this interim, the French unwittingly fell upon a formula that would finally serve to resolve the problem presented by France's indispensable need for some definite British assurance, and Britain's equally vital need to retain her basic independence and freedom of action.

The formula in question was not to be a new one: it dated back to the Spring of 1905 - to the last days of the Lansdowne-Delcassé era; and in its essence, it was a reiteration of an idea taken up by Paul Cambon and submitted to Lansdowne on May 24 of that year.<sup>21</sup> How this idea recurred is of considerable interest.

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When M. Poincaré succeeded M. Caillaux as President of the Council, in mid-January, 1912, the first problem to confront him as Foreign Minister was the Italian "seizure" of the two French boats, the Carthage and the Manouba - an incident arising from the three-months-old Italo-Turkish war. Following upon this major preoccupation over Italy, came the problem of a Moroccan settlement with Spain, a matter that would give rise to long and wearisome negotiations. These two problems - Italy

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D.D.F. 3eS., ii, No. 232: Cambon to Poincaré, 20.3.12.

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For This Idea, see Ch. I, Sect. II, of this Thesis.

and Spain - were to be uppermost in the thoughts of M. Poincaré and the Quai d'Orsay, for the remainder of the winter and all of that Spring. Yet, they were not to monopolize the Minister's attention: Anglo-French relations were to receive their due consideration.

Basically, Poincaré's view and appreciation of Britain coincided in every respect with those of an earlier Foreign Minister, M. Delcassé - whom Poincaré had selected as his Minister of the Marine. After a matter of days in office, the new Premier set himself to a review of Anglo-French relations, paying special attention to the Anglo-French Staff conversations and their political as well as military nature. Thus, under him, the French Chief of Staff, General Joffre, was instructed, to draw up a report for the President of the Republic "sur la coopération éventuelle des forces militaires de la Grande Bretagne aux opérations de nos armées du Nord-Est" - a report "résumant les ententes établies entre les Etats-majors français et anglais et indiquant sous quelle forme ces ententes ont été traduites en vue d'une exécution prévue."<sup>22</sup> The Foreign Minister, then, lost no time in defining, for himself, the exact nature and modalities of the long-standing Entente Cordiale; he would make good use of this knowledge, in the months to come, in his efforts to tighten still more the bonds of that Entente.

Historically, however, his actual relations with Britain began in earnest only in the last days of March, as a result of a new "threat" of an Anglo-German naval settlement. The earlier tentative - the Haldane mission of February - had, in truth, no more than made him wary. The

new attempt, however, was to cause him serious anxiety.

On March 12, the German Ambassador at London, Metternich, invited Lord Haldane to his Embassy to tell him "something of importance and urgency". To Haldane, Metternich confided that he had just received a despatch from the German Chancellor "in reply to his (Metternich's) report that serious exception was taken here (in London) to the magnitude of the changes contemplated by the New(German) Fleet Law, and especially to the large increase of person(n)el". The Novelle, said Metternich, was scheduled to come up before the Reichstag very shortly, but he, Metternich, "gathered from Berlin that if the British Government would offer a suitable political formula the proposed Fleet Law as it stood would be withdrawn." - For, "a statement would have to be made almost at once in the Reichstag about the Fleet Law, and the (German) Chancellor wished to be provided with the offer of a formula from us (i.e., the British Government) as a reason for not proceeding with the original proposals."<sup>23</sup>

On the 14th, Sir Edward Grey himself saw the German Ambassador, and readily submitted a draft-formula of a British declaration of peaceful intentions towards Germany<sup>24</sup>. The draft-formula read as follows:

"England will make no unprovoked attack upon Germany and pursue no aggressive policy towards her.

"Aggression upon Germany is not the subject and forms no part of any Treaty understanding

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<sup>23</sup> G. & T., VI, 710, No. 533: "Memorandum by Lord Haldane of a conversation with Count Metternich", 12.3.12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 713, No. 537.

or combination to which England is now a party nor will she become a party to anything that has such an object."<sup>25</sup>

On the following day, Metternich returned to inform Grey that his formula was unacceptable. An addition should be made: Metternich suggested two alternatives: "England will observe at least a benevolent neutrality should war be forced upon Germany," or, "England will therefore as a matter of course remain neutral if a war is forced upon Germany". Finally, the Ambassador urged Grey for a prompt reply - the following day, if possible: Monday, the 18th, might be too late, as the Reichstag might possibly be seized of the Novelle by then.<sup>26</sup>

Grey replied that he did not think he could possibly consult the Cabinet in time, and added that in any event

"I thought our formula, as it stood, exactly expressed the situation, and need not be added to. I told him (Metternich) quite frankly how the growing strength of Germany had given rise to an anxiety in this country that a day might come when a German Government might desire to crush France. If such a contingency arose, though our hands were quite free, as they were now, we might not be able to sit still: for we should feel that, if we did sit still, and allowed France to be crushed, we should have to fight alone later on. All the military conversations or preparations of which he might have heard had meant simply that, improbably as such a contingency might be, we had considered what we should do if it arose and we decided to take action. On the other hand, I had given France clearly to understand that, if France was aggressive towards Germany or attacked Germany, no support would be forthcoming from us or would be approved by British public opinion. Our formula, as it stood, exactly expressed this situation. I was afraid that the words which he suggested would give an impression going beyond the literal sense of the words, and might be taken to mean that under no circumstances,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., No. 537, "Enclosure".

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 714, No. 539.

if there was war on the Continent, could anything be expected from us...<sup>27</sup>

That same day, Sir Edward informed Paul Cambon of Metternich's démarche, and showed him the British draft-formula. To the British Ambassador at Paris, Sir Francis Bertie, Grey concluded: "M. Cambon read the words, and appeared satisfied with them. He took away a copy of them which I had given him."<sup>28</sup>

If Cambon showed no misgivings at the news of renewed Anglo-German negotiations, Sir Francis Bertie, on the other hand, became greatly alarmed. The British Ambassador promptly sought an audience with the French Premier, to confide his fears and warn the French Government of the perilousness of Grey's course. On March 28 - the day after Bertie's visit - Poincaré wrote the following account to Cambon:<sup>29</sup>

Après m'avoir dit qu'il désirait me parler "comme s'il n'était pas Ambassadeur", Sir Fr. Bertie a ajouté: "Sir Ed. Grey vient de m'écrire que M. Cambon avait été très satisfait de ses assurances sur la déclaration de neutralité qui nous a été demandé par l'Allemagne. J'en suis surpris; car, si cette déclaration n'a pas été accordée, il ne s'en suit pas qu'elle soit définitivement écartée. Ce que l'Allemagne sollicitait de nous ce n'est pas seulement une promesse de simple neutralité; elle voulait que cette neutralité fût bienveillante, ce qui est absurde, une neutralité bienveillante n'étant plus la neutralité. Sir Edward Grey a eu quelque mérite à répondre par un refus: il est, en effet, tout entouré actuellement de gens qui souhaitent un rapprochement avec l'Allemagne ... Je vous avoue que je ne comprends plus sa politique; j'en suis même inquiet. Il faut

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<sup>27</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>

Ibid., 716, No. 540.

<sup>29</sup>

D.D.F., 3eS., ii, No. 269. - For a "Note" written by Poincaré immediately after his conversation (above) of the 27th with Bertie, and recounting Bertie's words - in substance the same as the above, written on the 28th, to Cambon - see: Ibid., No. 266.

empêcher que cette déclaration de neutralité soit accordée, et elle risque de l'être, d'ici peu, si le Gouvernement allemand revient à la charge. On ne nous demande, à la vérité, que de nous engager à rester neutre, au cas où l'Allemagne serait attaquée. Or, qui peut garantir que la France, provoquée et menacée par une mobilisation de l'armée allemande ne sera pas forcée à prendre l'offensive? Non, il ne faut pas que M. Cambon paraisse satisfait. Si vous-même vous faites parler à Londres avec fermeté, on hésitera à commettre la faute que je redoute."

Having quoted Bertie, Poincaré now continued, with his own comments and instructions.

Ce conseil s'inspire d'un sentiment trop amical et de considérations trop fortes, pour que je manque à le poursuivre. Je vous serai donc obligé de reprendre, sans retard, la question avec le Principal Secrétaire d'Etat des Affaires Etrangères, en évitant naturellement de mettre Sir Francis Bertie en cause. Il importe essentiellement que l'Angleterre ne s'engage pas à rester neutre entre la France et l'Allemagne, même dans l'hypothèse où l'attaque semblerait venir de notre fait. Pour ne prendre qu'un exemple, pourrait-on nous imputer légitimement la responsabilité d'une agression, si une concentration de forces allemandes dans la région d'Aix-la-Chapelle nous contraignait à couvrir notre frontière septentrionale en pénétrant sur le territoire belge?<sup>30</sup>

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This question of a possible French "defensive" aggression against Germany through Belgium, in the event of imminent war and of a German concentration in the northern region, arose in January, 1912, as a result of certain information gathered by the French Army, to the effect that Germany "would not hesitate, in the event of war, to extend her armies' zone of action right to Belgium". This news led the General Staff to ask, that month, "si les armées françaises pourraient pénétrer sur le territoire belge à la première nouvelle de violation de ce territoire par les Allemands". The Government's answer was "yes" .... In February, however, the French Chief of General Staff, General Joffre, went further: at a special meeting attended by the Premier, the War Minister (Millerand), the Minister of the Marine (Delcassé), and the Director of Political Affairs (perhaps M. Paléologue), Joffre, "après avoir exposé les conditions d'un plan d'opérations en cas de guerre avec l'Allemagne, crut devoir ajouter que les chances de victoire seraient accrues si l'armée française était libre de porter l'offensive sur le territoire belge. Le Président du Conseil répliqua que cette initiative risquerait d'indisposer contre la France non

D'autre part, nous fiant à la loyauté de l'Angleterre et sans que nulle convention écrite ait lié les volontés réciproques des deux Gouvernements<sup>31</sup>, nous avons consenti à ce que notre Etat-major entrât en conversation secrète avec l'Etat-major anglais et l'initiat ainsi aux combinaisons les plus importantes de nos plans stratégiques. Le Gouvernement britannique sait que nos dispositions à son égard demeurent invariables. Pas plus aujourd'hui qu'hier, nous ne lui demandons d'aliéner en notre faveur sa liberté d'action; nous admettons parfaitement qu'il veuille la garder jusqu'au dernier instant. Mais c'est bien le moins qu'il ne l'aliéne pas à notre détriment, par une déclaration de neutralité qui ne pourrait qu'inciter l'Allemagne à renouveler, contre la France, sa tactique traditionnelle de provocation.

On the following day (March 29) Cambon cabled to Paris, after a conversation with Grey, that the latter had just consulted with the Cabinet, and that they had agreed that Grey's original draft-formula should suffice for the Germans. Cambon added:

Je l'ai (Grey) mis en garde contre la tendance de certains Ministres qui auraient pu être tentés d'admettre la neutralité pour le cas d'agression contre

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30 (Cont'd)

seulement l'Europe, mais les Belges eux-mêmes: "Il faudrait à tout le moins, déclara-t-il, qu'elle fût justifiée par la menace positive d'une invasion allemande." Il ajouta: "C'est d'ailleurs, la crainte d'une invasion de la Belgique par l'Allemagne qui a été la cause de nos accords secrets avec l'Angleterre. Il faudrait donc en tout état de cause s'assurer qu'un plan de ce genre ne déterminerait pas le Gouvernement britannique à nous retirer son concours." Aucun document (the Editors of the French Diplomatic Documents continue,) n'indique que cette question ait été de nouveau soulevé dans une délibération postérieure." (D.D.F., 3eS., ii, p. 244, Footnote "(1)". -- On March 21, Cambon touched upon this very possibility or necessity of an initial violation of Belgium by France, in a conversation with Sir Arthur Nicolson. Sir Arthur apparently limited his comment to "C'est bien grave", and Cambon did not persist. (Ibid., No. 240: Cambon to Poincaré, 21.3.12.) -- There is no evidence, in the D.D.F., that the French ever brought up this suggestion again, after April, 1912.

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The underlined passage is in Italics, in the French documents.

l'Allemagne et j'ai insisté sur l'impossibilité de reconnaître le véritable agresseur. Il n'a pas paru s'inquiéter de pareilles tendances.<sup>32</sup>

This telegram, however, failed to reassure Bertie and the Premier. In a cable to Cambon, next morning, Poincaré informed the Ambassador that Bertie was chiefly worried over the sentence: "Britain will make no unprovoked attack upon Germany...": to Bertie, the word "unprovoked" was dangerously ambiguous. Moreover, the British Ambassador had now made it clear to Poincaré that the formula was not to be merely a verbal statement, but that "il s'agit d'une déclaration à échanger entre l'Allemagne et l'Angleterre comme point de départ d'une conversation sur les armements" - and that therefore "les conséquences pourraient être trop graves pour que nous nous désintéressions de la formule employée"<sup>33</sup>. Poincaré continued:

Sir Francis Bertie considère, et avec raison, je crois, que, le cas échéant, l'Allemagne pourrait équivoquer sur cette rédaction. Si l'Allemagne masse brusquement ses troupes à Aix-la-Chapelle et si la France menacée est obligée de déclarer la guerre, l'Angleterre pourra-t-elle dire que l'Allemagne est provoquée?

Il serait bon que vous puissiez attirer l'attention de Sir Ed. Grey sur cette question. Sauf avis contraire de votre part, je télégraphierai à Saint-Petersbourg pour que votre collègue de Russie, à qui la déclaration a été communiquée confidentiellement, présente séparément une observation identique.

Cambon quickly wired back, asking that all action be postponed for the moment, and announcing that he had failed to see Sir Edward and would not now have an opportunity to do so, as he (Cambon) was returning

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<sup>32</sup>

D.D.F., 3eS., ii, No. 271.

<sup>33</sup>

Ibid., No. 276.



to Paris for a few days, a fact that would allow him to review the whole matter with the Premier <sup>34</sup>. The following day, Cambon was in Paris and within the next two days he had an occasion to review the question with Poincaré. After this talk, Cambon instructed his Chargé d'affaires in London to warn Sir Edward Grey of the dire effects that any declaration whatsoever would inevitably have on French public opinion and Anglo-French relations <sup>35</sup>. On April 4, the Chargé d'affaires, M. de Fleuriau, went to the Foreign Office and - Grey being absent - presented Cambon's plea to Sir Arthur Nicolson. Nicolson, for his part, expressed his own dislike for these Anglo-German negotiations, but felt that there was little danger of an agreement being reached.

"... Sir Ed. Grey connaît parfaitement la situation" (M. de Fleuriau quotes Nicolson as having replied,) "et, s'il a continué la conversation avec le comte Wolff-Metternich, c'est de sa part affaire de tactique. Il voudrait que la rupture ne vînt pas de son fait; les Allemands sont très forts dans l'art de faire peser sur leurs adversaires les responsabilités qui, en réalité, n'incombent pas à ces derniers. Sir Edward désire qu'en la circonstance on ne puisse pas l'accuser, comme on l'a déjà fait, d'avoir causé l'échec des pourparlers anglo-germaniques." <sup>36</sup>

But still another week passed, and the Grey-Metternich conversations continued. By April 11, Bertie was in a state of near frenzy: his confidences to Poincaré now absolutely unrestrained. Thus Poincaré could write to Cambon on that day:

Au moment de partir pour Nice, où je vais rejoindre Sir Francis Bertie, je crois nécessaire de vous mettre au

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., No. 281.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., No. 295.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., No. 300.

courant de la conversation nouvelle que j'ai eue hier avec lui. Il m'a communiqué officieusement:

1. La dépêche qu'il a écrite à Sir Ed. Grey pour le mettre en garde contre le projet de déclaration anglo-allemand.

2. Une lettre privée qu'il a écrite dans le même sens à Sir A. Nicolson;

3. Un télégramme qu'il a reçu en réponse de Sir Ed. Grey.

Ce dernier l'a prié de rassurer le Gouvernement français, de rappeler que le Gouvernement anglais a refusé de souscrire à une déclaration de neutralité et d'expliquer dans le sens le plus inoffensif les mots: "n'attaquera pas sans provocation". Mais Sir Ed. Grey ne dit pas encore que tout projet de déclaration soit abandonné et Sir Fr. Bertie continue à craindre qu'on n'aboutisse à une formule équivoque. Il m'a dit et répété que, si la France parlait avec un peu d'énergie, il était convaincu que son Gouvernement renoncerait à un projet que lui, personnellement, il déplore et trouve très dangereux. Je partage tout à fait son sentiment, vous le savez, sur les graves inconvénients d'une déclaration. L'opinion française en sera très déroutée et l'Entente Cordiale en pourra subir une atteinte irrémédiable. Sir F. Bertie a indiqué tout cela avec une netteté parfaite, dans sa lettre à Sir Ed. Grey. Mais il me dit qu'il faut armer celui-ci contre ses collègues et lui permettre de leur démontrer qu'une déclaration illusoire et décevante ne vaut pas la peine pour eux de risquer de compromettre l'entente franco-anglaise. Vous pouvez, en tout cas, donner à Sir Ed. Grey l'assurance qu'un papier de ce genre, si atténuée qu'il soit, sera interprété en France comme un abandon volontaire de toute la politique suivie depuis 1904. Notre entente n'est consacrée par aucun acte diplomatique; elle ne repose que sur l'opinion et sur les conversations de nos Etats-majors. Tout ce qui déconcerterait le sentiment public serait donc de nature à la détruire. L'Angleterre a le même intérêt que nous à la maintenir et elle sait avec quelle loyauté nous l'observons. <sup>37</sup>

On the very next day, however, and before Cambon had had occasion to act on these latest instructions, the affair came to an end. The French Chargé d'affaires cabled home to Paris that Metternich had brought the

negotiations to a close: since Britain would not give a promise of unconditional neutrality, there could be no political basis for discussion with a view to a naval understanding. Hence, the Novelle would be submitted<sup>38</sup> unaltered, to the Reichstag.

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In retrospect, it would seem that Sir Francis Bertie and the French Premier were unduly apprehensive of the Grey-Metternich negotiations. True, the most innocuous British declaration would certainly have shaken most Frenchmen's confidence in Britain. Yet, from March 15, at least, it seemed fairly certain that no formula would ever be arrived at, that would be satisfactory to Germany yet acceptable to Britain.... Yet, be this as it may, Bertie's and Poincaré's alarm was in fact real and earnest. And this earnestness was significant: it underlined the fact that Anglo-French relations in particular, and British foreign relations in general, had now reached the point where Britain could scarcely afford to complete her policy of universal entente - or at least to extend it to Germany - lest, in so doing, she alienate France....

But, by now, no one could possibly pretend that France was - or could be - responsible in any substantial manner for the Anglo-German rift. This rift was, fundamentally, the result of Germany's naval policy and Britain's wish to preserve her traditional supremacy on the seas; and it was made definitive and irreparable by Tirpitz' "Novelle" and Churchill's counter-measures. Bertie's and Poincaré's cries, then, during these days,

were basically but an instinctive reflex pointing up the formal tenuousness of the Entente and expressing the need, for France and Britain equally, of some "consolidation" of that Entente Cordiale. Paul Cambon was to voice this need, just two days after the Grey-Metternich relations had come to an end, (i.e., on April 15th,) in a talk with Sir Arthur Nicolson,<sup>39</sup> at the British Foreign Office.

After quoting Sir Arthur as saying "que Sir E. Grey n'en avait pas moins éprouvé un grand soulagement l'orsqu'il a entendu mon collègue d'Allemagne renoncer à tout projet de déclaration," and as having feared "que le Gouvernement de Berlin ne sacrifiât ses dernières prétentions pour obtenir quelque arrangement incolore et sans portée lui permettant de proclamer qu'il était parvenu à conclure un accord avec le Cabinet de Londres", Cambon then quoted his own observations on the lesson to be drawn from the events of the past month:<sup>40</sup>

Pour en revenir à la période inquiétante que nous venons de traverser, j'ai répété à Sir A. Nicolson ce que j'avais déjà dit dans une lettre qui lui a été montrée, et dont Sir E. Grey et lui-même ont fait leur profit au sujet des préoccupations que des échanges de vues trop prolongées entre Londres et Berlin inspiraient à Votre Excellence (i.e., M. Poincaré).

Je lui ai dit que, quelle que fût la popularité de l'Entente Cordiale entre nos deux pays, elle ne reposait que sur la communauté des intérêts et sur la confiance réciproque des deux nations, mais qu'elle était toujours à la merci des tendances plus ou moins favorables d'un Cabinet.

"C'est la faiblesse de la situation de M. Poincaré, ai-je ajouté; il est, plus que personne, partisan de l'entente avec l'Angleterre et il l'entend la pratiquer avec confiance et loyauté; mais aux hommes politiques

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For Cambon's account of this conversation, see: D.D.F., 3eS., ii No. 363; for Nicolson's account, see: G. & T., VI, No. 576.

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D.D.F., 3eS., ii, No. 363.

d'importance, à ses collègues du Cabinet, aux directeurs de l'opinion française qui l'interrogent, il ne peut pas laisser entendre qu'il existe entre nous d'autres liens que ceux de la sympathie. C'est assez entre deux Gouvernements sûrs de leurs intentions réciproques; ce n'est pas assez pour l'opinion, et les adversaires de l'Angleterre en France (il y en a peu, mais il y en a) proclament que nos rapports avec vous n'offrent aucune sécurité.

"Je me suis donc demandé si nous ne pourrions pas chercher ensemble une formule pouvant nous permettre de rassurer les esprits inquiets ou incrédules. Je sais que le Gouvernement britannique ne peut s'engager sans l'assentiment du Parlement; mais il n'est pas besoin d'accord en partie double, de traité signé et paraphé: nous pourrions nous contenter d'un échange de déclarations verbales qui feraient l'objet de notes. C'est ce que nous aurions fait, en 1905, avec Lord Lansdowne, si la démission de M. Delcassé n'avait pas coupé court à nos conversations."

"Je le sais, m'a répondu le Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat permanent, et, comme vous, je voudrais voir notre entente consolidée par un écrit. Je crois que Lord Lansdowne ne s'y serait pas refusé, quitte à chercher une forme compatible avec les obligations du Cabinet vis-à-vis du Parlement, mais Sir E. Grey, pas plus que M. Asquith, ne pourrait prendre d'engagements par écrit sans les communiquer au Cabinet, or, je suis sûr que ce ministère radical-socialiste n'osera pas ratifier un tel engagement."

"Cependant, ai-je repris, il s'est produit un profond changement dans les idées de quelques-uns des Ministres les plus importants. M. Lloyd George et M. Winston Churchill qui, au début de l'Administration libérale, étaient partisans du rapprochement avec l'Allemagne, ont été éclairés par les événements; ils sont plus que personne partisans de l'Entente Cordiale et ils jouent dans le ministère un rôle prépondérant."

"Je ne le nie pas, a répliqué Sir Arthur, les événements de cet automne ont modifié les tendances des ministres les plus intelligents; mais il reste d'autres qui regardent toujours du côté du "Labour Party" et qui n'oseront prendre aucune responsabilité. Il vaut mieux rester comme nous sommes; s'il survient un à-coup, l'opinion forcera le Gouvernement à marcher. Et puis, le Cabinet ne durera pas, il est à bout de forces, et, avec les conservateurs, vous pourrez arriver à quelque chose de précis."

Je résume cette conversation (Cambon conclut,) parce qu'il est toujours bon de savoir où l'on en est et que, le jour où les conservateurs reviendront aux affaires, il ne faudra pas, comme en 1905, laisser échapper l'occasion de conclure un accord formel.

M. Poincaré received Cambon's idea of an "échange de déclarations verbales qui feraient l'objet de notes" with great enthusiasm. He cabled to London on April 31st<sup>41</sup>:

La conversation que vous avez eue ... aura certainement éclairé le Gouvernement britannique sur le prix que nous attachons à l'entente Cordiale et qui nous ferait souhaiter de la voir affirmée par écrit, afin que son existence même ne puisse plus être mise en doute. J'ai été heureux de constater que Sir A. Nicolson partage personnellement notre opinion.

Paul Cambon had revived his idea of May, 1905. On that first occasion, as we have seen, even Lord Lansdowne, Francophile that he was, looked askance upon such an idea. By now, however, times had changed, and the latest Anglo-German episode, slight as it actually was, had clearly underscored that change; and in both camps, French and British, the Cambon idea was now received (by a limited group, it is true, but an important one, however) without shock or fear, but almost as a matter of course, and as something eminently desirable.

On May 6, Nicolson wrote privately to Bertie, relating his conversation with Cambon<sup>42</sup>. On the 9th, Bertie answered<sup>43</sup>:

I should have been surprised if the French Government had not made advances for a clearer understanding with us. The sympathies more or less avowed of some members of the British Cabinet and the advocacy in certain political and newspaper circles of a general understanding and cooperation with Germany make political people here nervous. The French Government would like to know how they are likely to stand in the event of war. I think that they would accept to leave to be settled between the two Governments when a

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D.D.F. 3eS., ii, No. 396.

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G. & T., X(ii), 583, No. 384.

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Ibid., 388, No. 590

question of hostilities seems near whether the two Countries are to act as allies, but they would desire to be arranged now and to be re-arranged periodical-ly as changing circumstances may dictate exactly what assistance the British Army should give and where, and what the mutual support should be navally so that when a critical moment politically comes there should be an organized plan instead of confusion. Last Autumn the French Government knew that if France and England became active allies the British Army would render certain services. They would like to know that the arrangements between the British and French War Offices will hold good in the event of the two countries being war Allies. It would be necessary in an exchange of notes to define generally the respective and joint interests of England and France and to say that in the event of their appearing to either to be in danger the two Governments will consult together.

Then came an uncanny forecast of what was to take place in the months that followed:

I think that we shall have to do something of the kind before long unless we prefer to run the risk of being stranded in splendid isolation. We cannot expect the French not to make use of our desertion of the Mediterranean as a lever to extract something tangible from us...

Thus, Bertie was the first to link the idea of an exchange of notes with the British quandary arising from Britain's abandonment of the Mediterranean.

#### IV

But the insight that was Bertie's, on that May 9th, was to remain absent, in the French, right up to the fourth week in July. The two months and a half that ensued, saw the British press and Parliament and Foreign Office, and the Quai d'Orsay as well, grow acutely aware of the political implications and dangers of the British naval move from

the Mediterranean, while all the while the two Admiralties, French and British, toiled ceaselessly (albeit separately) to find a suitable naval formula to preserve Entente supremacy in those crucial waters... Moreover, by late April, (as we have recounted in Section II,) Asquith had finally taken up the Mediterranean problem in earnest, setting in motion those studies that gave rise to the Malta meeting in late May, and to the Cabinet discussions (yet to be mentioned) of early July ... Yet, through all this activity, Cambon, in London, and Poincaré, in Paris, remained blind to the only effective, (and perhaps possible, and in any event ultimately realized,) solution.

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Cambon's blindness, in fact, is most surprising. For in early May, he was requested by M. Delcassé's department, the Ministry of the Marine, to seek the British Foreign Office's consent to naval Staff conversations with a view to drawing up plans for joint cooperation in keeping with Britain's new redistribution scheme.

Thus, on May 4, Cambon paid a visit to the Foreign Office and notified Sir Arthur Nicolson that the French naval authorities "were desirous, through their naval attaché, to renew conversations with our Admiralty in regard to certain arrangements which should be made in possible eventualities." Continued Sir Arthur to the Foreign Secretary:<sup>44</sup>

... I understood from M. Cambon that these conversa-

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<sup>44</sup> G. & T., X (ii), 582, No. 383: Nicolson to Grey, 4.5.12.



tions had originated in the days of Lord Fisher - and had arisen from an enquiry made by the latter as to whether the French Gov(ernmen)t would undertake the "care of the Mediterranean" should British fleets be employed elsewhere. The French Gov(ernmen)t, after examining the question, had replied that they would be responsible for the western basin of the Mediterranean - but could not answer for the eastern. Later conversations were to have taken place between the present Lord of the Admiralty and M. Delcassé through the respective naval attachés in London and Paris. These conversations have not yet, I understand, reached a conclusion, though the French Gov(ernmen)t desire that the British navy will look after the Channel and the northern coasts of France, if the latter, as with her renovated fleet is now possible, will undertake the "care of the whole of the Mediterranean." The French Naval auth(orities) and ours have left over for discussion details as to dispositions of submarines, destroyers and the "mobile defence" of French coasts. I told M. Cambon I knew nothing absolutely about all these arrang(emen)ts and I made no other remark.

A week later, the Foreign Secretary informed M. Cambon that the British Government (or Admiralty) "were considering certain redistributions of our Fleet, especially in connection with the Mediterranean, and that till these were finally decided we could hardly go into questions with the French Naval Attaché"<sup>45</sup>. This answer had been given after Grey had consulted with Churchill. Three days later, Churchill himself saw the French Naval Attaché, the Comte de Saint-Seine, and told him that the Admiralty "had been reconsidering the whole question of the Fleet redistribution and our naval plans, that this work was now nearly completed, and that after Whitsuntide I (Churchill) expected to be in a position to discuss with him the special arrang(emen)ts wh(ich) w(oul)d be necessary in certain contingencies"<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 591, No. 389: Grey to Churchill, 11.5.12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 591, "Ed. Note" - which quotes a note from Churchill to Grey, recounting the First Lord's interview with Saint-Seine.

In fact, however, it would be mid-July before the French Naval Attaché received word of Britain's new naval plans ... Meanwhile, Cambon - although now fully cognizant of the French Admiralty's intention to cooperate with the British, and of Britain's implicit reliance on this French cooperation - still failed to perceive that which was already, at this date, clearly apparent to Grey: namely, the onerousness, for France, of such cooperation, and the need of some specific British assurance.

Moreover, one week after Grey's and Churchill's reply to his request for naval conversations, new developments arose, that were to lead French diplomatic thought still farther astray, on this Mediterranean question - and to cause Cambon and his Foreign Minister even to contemplate the formation of a Mediterranean "pact of entente" as a solution to the quandary. A fresh Italian "coup", and an article in a London paper, set them off on this new tangent.

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On May 20, the Morning Post published an article reviewing the international situation and the British position, and concluded by demanding that the Entente Cordiale be made more precise and binding, by a formal alliance.<sup>47</sup> The suggestion set off a wave of polemics over Anglo-French relations, Anglo-German relations, and the British Admiralty decision regarding the Mediterranean.

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D.D.F., 3eS., III, pp. 75-9, Nos. 56 & 57: M. de Fleuriau to Poincaré, 30.5.12.

The Morning Post article, as well as the public reaction, had been occasioned by the announcement of the Italian "invasion" or occupation of the Sporades Islands and the news of the Prime Minister's impending visit to Malta and Gibraltar with the First Lord.<sup>48</sup> It had taken this Italian "coup" in the extreme Eastern Mediterranean to awaken the British public to the "Mediterranean" problem; now, of course, it was suddenly recalled that Italy was - at least formally, if not in spirit - a member of the Triple Alliance, and that should Britain abandon her naval superiority in the Mediterranean, Italy as well as Austria and Germany might find it to their mutual advantage to "extend the Triple Alliance" to the Mediterranean...

These same thoughts also occurred to the diplomats on the occasion of the Sporades occupation. On May 14, Sir Rennel Rodd, British Ambassador to Rome, informed his French colleague, M. Barrère, that on his visit to London, shortly, he proposed to inform Sir Edward Grey and the Permanent Under-Secretary of the new Anglo-Italian situation created by the British intention to evacuate the Mediterranean, and "the need to give a new form to their relations".<sup>49</sup> Sir Maurice de Bunsen, Ambassador at Madrid, also expressed anxiety: Italy was installing herself in the eastern basin, where the Entente, even with French cooperation, would naturally be weak.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., No. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., No. 57.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.43-5, No. 36: Geoffrey to Poincaré, 24.5.12.

In Paris, the news from M. Barrère of Sir Rennel Rodd's ideas and intention, suggested to M. Poincaré (or Paul Cambon) a proceeding that might effectively neutralise all possible danger from Italy, as a result of the British evacuation from the Mediterranean. On May 18, Cambon, recounting to Sir Arthur Nicolson how "M. Poincaré was uneasy as to the future situation in the Mediterranean", put forth M. Poincaré's suggestion:<sup>51</sup>

The Ambassador (M. Cambon) said that M. Poincaré was revolving in his mind some project whereby an arrangement could be made with Italy providing for the maintenance of the "status quo" along the whole seaboard from the Suez Canal to the entrance of the Straits of Gibraltar. His idea was for some mutual engagement between France, Italy, and Great Britain that each country would respect and maintain the integrity of the possessions of the others.

A few days later, Sir Rennel Rodd, home for a brief visit, spoke to Sir Edward Grey of his ideas and made the same suggestion as had M. Cambon on the 18th.<sup>52</sup> The outcome of these démarches was Grey's assent, to Cambon, on June 5. As Cambon wrote to Poincaré:<sup>53</sup>

"Pour empêcher l'Italie d'aller chercher la garantie de l'Allemagne, m'a dit Sir Edward Grey, nous devons aussitôt la cessation des hostilités lui proposer un accord pour le maintien du statu quo avec garantie éventuelle en Tripolitaine, en Egypte et en Tunisie."

The idea of an agreement, between France, Britain and Italy, for the preservation of the Status Quo, now seemed, in the eyes of the French Government, the only adequate and the most complete answer to

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<sup>51</sup> G. & T., X, ii, 593, No. 391: Grey to Bertie, 24.5.12.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., III, 119, No. 96, 13.6.12

the British evacuation of the Mediterranean. Indeed Cambon, quite taken with the prospect, even went so far as to suggest to Nicolson, on June 21, that the "~~Mediterranean~~ agreement", as it was now called, might be extended to Spain.<sup>54</sup>

In effect, the matter of a Mediterranean agreement, seemed to have blinded the French still more completely to the implications (as a result of the sacrifice it entailed, on the part of the French) of Anglo-French cooperation, as anticipated in the French request for further naval conversations. Yet, the French Government had assurances from no less a person than Sir Maurice de Bunsen, that the British were counting on French cooperation. The British Ambassador had attended some Imperial Defence discussions held by the Prime Minister and the First Lord, at Gibraltar, after the Malta meetings, and he informed M. Geoffrey that:

Il avait constaté avec la plus grande satisfaction que le principe d'une entente complète avec la France avait dominé toutes les discussions. Il était facile de se rendre compte que toutes les solutions examinées prenaient pour base une collaboration absolue avec la marine française.<sup>55</sup>

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Meanwhile, in London, the naval question continued on its course, both as a project and an issue, in the full view of the French - and at times with their active participation. By June 24, the French Military Attaché could report to Paris that Churchill had already effected a partial withdrawal from the Mediterranean: eight battleships had already

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 181, No. 145: Cambon à Poincaré, 27.6.12.

<sup>55</sup> D.D.F., 3eS, iii, No. 102: Geoffroy (Madrid) to Poincaré, 14.6.12

effected a partial withdrawal from the Mediterranean: eight battleships had already joined the Home Fleet, and four more were on their way from Malta to Gibraltar.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Parliament was, at that time, showing considerable interest in the whole matter; and some questions put to Churchill in the House of Commons<sup>57</sup> (which the First Lord refused to answer in view of the anticipated debate on his forthcoming Supplementary Estimates Bill), caused Cambon to write to Poincaré that "en ce qui nous concerne, la solution du débat que je viens de relater ne peut nous laisser indifférents" and that "Dans l'état actuel de nos relations avec l'Angleterre, nous avons tout intérêt à ce que sa puissance dans la Méditerranée ne subisse d'éclipse ni totale, ni partielle."<sup>58</sup> Finally, M. Delcassé and his Admiralty continued, for their part - and independently, it would seem - their pleas to the British, for naval conversations that would enable the French to cooperate with the British in accordance with the British redistribution. On July 10, the French Naval Attaché, Saint-Seine, called on the First Sea Lord (Admiral Bridgeman) and, after being told that the matter of naval redistribution had now passed from the mere competence of the admiralty to that of the Government and was at that very moment under discussion, went on, nevertheless, to inform the Admiral of the French projects for naval cooperation.<sup>59</sup>

J'ai appris alors à l'amiral Bridgeman, (writes Saint-Seine to M. Delcassé,) ainsi que vous m'avez autorisé, votre projet de concentrer nos trois escadres cuirassées dans la Méditerranée, y formant ainsi une

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Ibid., No. 137.

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Parl. Deb. 5th Ser., (House of Commons), Vol. 39, Cols. 844-849.

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D.D.F., 3eS, iii, No. 145.

59

Ibid., No. 189.

armée navale de 18 cuirassées et de 5 croiseurs-torpilleurs et de sous-marins avec les croiseurs-cuirassés type "Gloire" pour les conduire à l'ennemi...

L'amiral Bridgeman n'a demandé si, dans ces conditions, nous pouvions nous considérer comme plus forts que la coalition des flottes italienne et autrichienne. J'ai répondu que, pour le présent, cela ne faisait aucun doute, et, en ce qui concerne l'avenir, que nous avions à l'heure actuelle sept cuirassés en construction ou commandés et que vous proposiez d'en commencer quatre en 1913.

Cambon's only reaction to Saint-Seine's express declaration of French intention to cooperate, was to dwell - in a conversation with Grey, on the following day<sup>60</sup> - "on the importance, from the political point of view, of (Britain's) retaining a squadron at Malta". To this Grey replied:<sup>61</sup>

I said that, though our final decision might not be announced till the Navy Vote on the 22nd instant, we should undoubtedly keep a squadron based on Malta; and the force which we should keep there should be at least sufficient to ensure that the Naval strength of France and ourselves was superior to that of Italy and Austria combined. We did not anticipate war in the Mediterranean, but a maintenance of this strength was necessary to preserve diplomatic equilibrium there. I added that, when we were in a position to make a communication, the French Naval Attaché would be informed by the Admiralty; but he should wait until he heard from Churchill or the First Sea Lord about it.

To this straightforward avowal of British dependence on - and expectation of - French naval cooperation in the Mediterranean, M. Cambon apparently made no observation whatever. Thus, the French Ambassador (and the French Government) still failed to perceive the

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<sup>60</sup> G. & T., X (ii) 600, No. 398: Grey to Carnagie (Paris), 11.7.12.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

liability to be incurred by France in the event of French cooperation. It would take a "blunder" on the part of Churchill, one week later, to awaken Cambon to the diplomatic-military realities of the matter, long perceived by Grey and the British.

## V

On July 17, Mr. Churchill summoned the French Naval Attaché, and, in the presence of the First Sea Lord, informed the Comte de Saint-Seine that the Admiralty had now completed - and the Cabinet approved - the plans for naval redistribution; that indeed, Britain had resolved to withdraw a good part of her Mediterranean fleet, but would leave some ships based on Malta; that the new policy would be formally announced in Parliament, on the 22nd, when he submitted his Supplementary Estimates; and that a British project for Anglo-French naval cooperation, already complete, would be handed to the Attaché by the First Sea Lord, after the 22nd, for consideration by the French Admiralty.<sup>62</sup>

On July 22, Churchill made his naval announcement in Parliament, as he had planned.<sup>63</sup> And on the following day the French Naval Attaché went to the Admiralty, and was handed, by the First Sea Lord, a draft of the British Admiralty proposals for Anglo-French cooperation in the Channel and the Mediterranean. The text contained the following preamble<sup>64</sup>:

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<sup>62</sup>

Ibid. No. 399: Memorandum by Churchill 17.7.12. See also D.D.F. JeS, iii, No. 207: St.-Seine à Delcassé.

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Parl. des 5th Ser., (House of Commons) Vol. XLII, Cols. 845-6.

<sup>64</sup>

G. & T., X(ii) 602, "Ed. Note".



1. The following agreement relates solely to a contingency in which Great Britain and France were to be allies in a war, and does not affect the political freedom of either Government as to embarking on such a war.

2. It is understood that France has disposed almost the whole of her battle fleet in the Mediterranean, leaving her Atlantic sea board to the care of the Flottillas.

Great Britain on the other hand has concentrated her battle fleets in home waters, leaving in the Mediterranean a strong containing force of battle and armoured cruisers and torpedo craft. These dispositions have been made independently because they are the best which the separate interest of each country suggests having regard to all the circumstances and probabilities; and they do not arise from any naval agreement or convention.

3. In the event of a war in which the Governments are allies the following arrangements are agreed upon between the respective Admiralties.

Mediterranean.

General Principles.....(etc.)

Churchill's preamble was eminently logical. It assumed that the two Governments would not be bound by either the plan for co-operation, or its basis, British Fleet concentration in home waters and French concentration in the Mediterranean. This assumption required the postulation that this French and British redistribution had been the result of independent decision dictated by the sole consideration of optimum naval protection, on the part and in the interest of each country separately. ~ Unfortunately, this preamble, while logically impeccable, was diplomatically unwise.

True, M. Delcassé had, of his own accord, and without British solicitation, offered (through his Naval Attaché, on July 10,) to concentrate three battleship squadrons in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Churchill's claim, that the French move to the Mediterranean was an independent French decision and not the result of the British evacuation,

was, politically, untenable. The French, having still not acted - nor even, for that matter, made any formal announcement - could, by word as well as deed, contradict the First Lord's claim. In point of fact, the French were in a position to "put a price" to their co-operation, since Britain had acted first. - And, as Grey had perceived as early as May, the price exacted might even go so high as a demand for an alliance. For, the French, to co-operate, would have to denude their northern and western coasts.

As we have amply shown, the French Government appeared not to have appreciated this fact. Now, however, - and for the first time - Cambon grasped the matter. Speaking to Nicolson on the following day (July 24), the French Ambassador clearly exposed the French case; "In short," Nicolson records him as having said, "the engagement to be taken was really unilateral -- France was to move practically all her naval force to the Mediterranean and leave her other coasts unprotected, and England was free to aid France or not as she liked, and be under no obligation to do so...." Although he had no instructions from his Government, Cambon felt that, before such proposed French naval dispositions were agreed to the French would have to have "some assurances that British naval aid would be forthcoming for the Channel and Atlantic coasts."<sup>65</sup>

On the next day - and still without instruction from Paris - Cambon saw the Foreign Secretary himself. By now, he had had time to

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<sup>65</sup>

Ibid., 603, No. 401: Minute by Nicolson, 24.7.12.

give the whole matter close thought. Evidently, the French case was strong. - How strong it was, and how fully he appreciated this, is clearly seen in his "verbal brief" to Sir Edward - and its ultimate results.

M. Cambon began by showing Sir Edward a copy (in English) of the Admiralty document handed to his Naval Attaché on the 23rd. "It was based" - Cambon pointed out to Grey - "on a disposition of forces by which the French left their Atlantic and Channel coasts unprotected by their ships, and concentrated all their Fleet in the Mediterranean."

Such a document, (Grey's record of Cambon's argument continues<sup>66</sup>) headed by this explicit declaration of non-committal, would certainly, though M. Cambon had not yet heard anything from his Government on the subject, provoke in Paris the Question of what assurance France would have that, if she was attacked on her unprotected northern and western coasts, we should provide protection for her there.

Hereupon, Cambon went on to demolish Churchill's basic premise, and to show that the French decision to concentrate in the Mediterranean had not been an independent decision dictated solely on French self-interest:

Mr. Churchill had explained to the Naval Attaché that the document was founded on the assumption that this disposition of naval forces had been made independent of the other, to suit their own interests and that all that was being done was to arrange what use should be made of the naval forces so disposed, if one Government came to the assistance of the other. Mr. Cambon said that this as-

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<sup>66</sup>

Ibid., 604, No. 402:

sumption was an error. As long ago as 1907 there were verbal communications with Sir John Fisher, in which the French had said that they could assure only the western part of the Mediterranean, and we had said that we could undertake the eastern part. Eventually, the French had said that they could look after the whole of the Mediterranean, and Sir John Fisher had said that we would look after the North Sea and Channel. It was in consequence of these conversations that France had concentrated her fleet in the Mediterranean. Therefore, if this written declaration of non-committal, which seemed out of place in an arrangement between experts, remained at the head of the Admiralty document, it would be essential that there should be some understanding between the two Governments that they would at least communicate with each other if there was menace, and concert beforehand.

Now, having (seemingly) invalidated Churchill's key premise, Cambon proceeded to suggest the form of assurance that might be provided by the British, to meet the minimum requirement for French safety:

M. Cambon suggested that private Notes might be exchanged to this effect, and he referred to a note which Lord Lansdowne had given him on the 25th of May 1905. The fall of M. Delcassé came soon afterwards, and nothing further had followed at the time; though there had been verbal statements by me in January 1906. If private Notes such as he suggested were exchanged, we should still be able to say truthfully that no binding agreement existed between us, to take action.

Thus was it that Cambon finally managed to resume, after a lapse of seven years, diplomatic discussion of his 1905 proposal. The idea, as we have seen (in Section III of this chapter), had recurred to him just three months before; yet, at that time (mid-April 1912), he had dared to express to M. Poincaré, only the vague hope that "le jour où les conservateurs reviendront aux affaires, il ne faudra pas, comme en 1905, laisser échapper l'occasion de conclure un accord formel."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., ii, No. 363. - Cambon's letter is quoted in full in Section III of this chapter.

At last, however, the Ambassador perceived - as Bertie had, in early May - that here was an ideal occasion to press, once again, for his "exchange of notes". This time, Cambon had a specific and concrete reason, for such a diplomatic transaction: to wit, French naval cooperation. What was more, he had "bargaining power" - in the cost, for France, of such cooperation, in terms of her northern and western coast defences; and in the indispensability, for Britain, of this French naval cooperation in the Mediterranean. Never before had Cambon's hand been so strong.

Doubtless, Sir Edward realised the justice and strength of Cambon's request. But diplomatic wisdom and political considerations forbade any ready submission; and there were certain repugnant features in the proposal.

I said, (Grey continues, in his account of July 26<sup>68</sup>,) that there were great objections to exchanging any Note which was secret. At the present moment, if by some indiscretion the conversations between our experts were revealed, and I was asked a question on the subject, I should be prepared to say openly exactly what the state of things was between the two Governments. It was now what it had been for several years past, why could not it be left as it was?

M. Cambon then pressed that the declaration should be omitted from the naval paper or that if it remained there should be given some assurance that, in the event of menace, each Government would ask the other what they were going to do.

I observed that, as a matter of fact, as things were now each Government would of course consult with the other in the event of menace, and ask whether the other Government were prepared to give assistance. I understood that what M. Cambon meant was that, as there was no Alliance between the two Governments, and as France might be menaced by Germany,

we should promise to discuss the situation with France, if there was a menace, in order that, if we were not prepared to come to her assistance, she would have time to withdraw her Fleet from the Mediterranean to defend her Atlantic and Channel coasts by herself. Similarly, if we were menaced, we might ask France what she was going to do so that if she was not going to assist us we should be able, if need be, to alter the disposition of our naval forces. But under the existing state of things, there would undoubtedly be conversations between the two Governments in the event of either being menaced, and I could not exchange a Note containing an engagement unless it was to be made public.

Finally, we separated, agreeing to reflect upon the matter during the holidays.

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The French Ambassador and the Foreign Secretary were not to meet again until September. Meanwhile, matters were to remain at a standstill.

In Paris, Cambon's démarches undertaken on his own initiative met with Poincaré's whole-hearted approval. To Bertie, the Premier asserted: (1) that Churchill's preamble was out of place, in a technical document, and that such reserves should be made between Diplomatic Representatives; (2) that the French Fleet would not move solely in accordance with France's own interests, and that, therefore, France had a right to assurances from the British; and finally (3) that the proper for such assurances was an exchange of notes ensuring that the two Governments would converse together as to common measures to be taken should either or both suddenly be menaced with war.<sup>69</sup>

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See: Bertie's despatches to Grey, dated July 30th and August 13: G. & T., X (ii), Nos. 404 & 409.

Churchill, for his part, made a tardy discovery, on reading Grey's record of the Conversation of the 26th with Cambon: "I was not aware", he writes in a note referring thereto<sup>70</sup>, "of the extent to wh(ich) the Admiralty had been committed under my predecessor"; - yet he still thought the non-committal proviso "desirable and perfectly fair". Apparently exasperated by the French "quibbling", he finally propòsed the following rewording of his preamble: "Both Powers will make such dispositions of their naval strength as shall best conduce to the preservation of their own national interests. They will exchange full information as to these dispositions, actual or prospective."<sup>71</sup> This new formula differed in no substantial way from the original; it still retained intact the objectionable idea (which would have deprived France of all rights to British assurances,) that France had acted on her own national interests alone. The French naturally rejected this new formula<sup>72</sup>. When, that autumn, naval conversations were resumed, the idea of a preamble was to be dropped entirely.<sup>73</sup>

## VI

In the beginning of September, there occurred an incident that set the Grey-Cambon negotiations once more in motion.

On September 6, the French department of Marine decided that the third French Naval Squadron should be transferred from its base at Brest, to Toulon. The date of transfer was not set down: for the moment, the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., No. 403.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., No. 406.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., No. 409.

<sup>73</sup> For these technical negotiations, see: Ibid., No. 458; and D.D.F., 3eS., iii, No. 420, & iv, Nos. 398 and 544.

French Admiralty, merely drew up the "order", which would require the signature of the French Minister of Marine before its despatch to the third Squadron. By some error, the order was sent unsigned to the Vice-Admiral commanding the Squadron, on the very day it was drawn up. Four days later, the Temps learned of the despatch of the order, and announced the decision of the French Admiralty to move part of the French Fleet to the Mediterranean.<sup>74</sup>

The British press reacted promptly. With the exception, perhaps, of the Times, it concluded unanimously that this measure, taken by the French Government, was a manifestation and proof of a naval understanding between France, Britain and Russia.<sup>75</sup> The conclusion arrived at, the near unanimity of the British press, and the tone of certainty, caused Paul Cambon to be seriously troubled: for, in his mind, this threatened to jeopardize his negotiations with Grey. To the French Premier he wrote;

Cette conclusion présentée comme indubitable à l'opinion anglaise, m'a paru ne pas être sans inconvénients pour nous. En laissant supposer que nous avons, d'ores et déjà, définitivement transféré de Brest à Toulon notre escadre de l'Atlantique, nous risquons de nous démunir du principal avantage que peut offrir à l'Angleterre un accord naval avec nous.<sup>76</sup>

The British Government, therefore, must not be allowed to think that the French had already decided on - and were already effecting -

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<sup>74</sup> D.D.F., 3eS, III, p. 523, footnote (1).- Actually the 3rd Squadron left Brest only on October 16, (Ibid.).

<sup>75</sup> See: Ibid, 523, No. 431

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



permanent concentration of the bulk of their fleet in the Mediterranean. To make certain that they did not harbour any such thoughts, the French Ambassador, making use of a despatch sent out from Paris to Rome,<sup>77</sup> in which it was asserted that the announced move was not definitive or immediate, paid a visit to the Foreign Office on September 17, and assured Sir Arthur Nicolson that the projected transfer of the third Squadron

was merely a temporary measure taken in order to enable those vessels to take part in certain manoeuvres in the Mediterranean while there was no intention, for the present in any case, of definitely transferring them to the Mediterranean command. The Ambassador stated that explanations in this sense had already been given to the Italian Gov(ernmen)t, and added that of course no decision could be taken by the French Gov(ernmen)t in regard to their Atlantic Squadron until they knew exactly what the position was as between them and H(is) M(ajesty's) G(overnmen)t.<sup>78</sup>

According to Cambon,<sup>79</sup> Sir Arthur was somewhat surprised to learn that the move was not definitive, but perfectly understood and appreciated the reason why it could not yet be definitive.

Two days later, Cambon saw the British Foreign Secretary himself, and repeated his correction: the transfer of French warships from the Channel and the Atlantic coasts was not yet definitely decided

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 492, No. 403, and 524, No. 431.

<sup>78</sup> G. & T., X, ii, 611, No. 411; and D.D.F., 3eS., III, 525, No. 431.

<sup>79</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., iii, 523, No. 431.

on, "and could not be so until France knew where she stood with us"<sup>80</sup>.

An agreement would have to be arrived at, first; and not merely a verbal agreement. Cambon thought it not impossible to find some formula which might serve as a basis for an exchange of notes, and that would not have to be brought up before Parliament: a formula, that is, which would leave the two Governments entirely uncommitted and free to decide whether to co-operate or not, in the event of a threat of war. Thereupon, the French Ambassador drew up a tentative formula:

"Dans le cas où l'un ou l'autre des deux Gouvernements aurait des raisons d'appréhender un acte d'agression de la part d'une tierce Puissance ou des complications menaçantes pour la paix, ils se livreraient ensemble à une discussion sur la situation et chercheraient les moyens d'assurer de concert le maintien de la paix et d'écarter toute tentative d'agression."<sup>81</sup>

This time, Cambon did not meet with a categorical refusal. Indeed, neither in Grey's account<sup>82</sup> nor in Cambon's<sup>83</sup>, do we find a trace of Grey's objection that Parliament would have to be informed. In fact, Grey seems to have presented little more than a token argument: Cambon recounts<sup>84</sup>:

Après l'avoir lu, Sir Edward Grey m'a dit que ce projet ne modifiait en rien l'état de fait actuel, puisque nous nous entretenions constamment de toutes les éventualités politiques et que nous n'avions jamais cessé de nous tenir au courant de nos appréhensions. Je lui ai répondu que cet état de fait ne résulterait que de son bon vouloir et que mon Gouvernement tenait avec

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<sup>80</sup> Grey to Bertie, 19.9.12: G. & T., X (ii), 611, No. 410.

<sup>81</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., iii, No. 448; and G. & T., X (ii), 611, No. 410.

<sup>82</sup> G. & T., X(ii), No. 410.

<sup>83</sup> D.D.F., 3eS, iii, No. 448.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

raison à être assuré du concours de tout le Cabinet britannique. Sir Edward Grey me dit (Cambon conclues,) qu'il montrerait ce projet à M. Asquith et que nous en parlerions au retour du Premier Ministre à Londres, c'est-à-dire au commencement d'octobre.

Two days later, M. Cambon informed M. Poincaré of his démarche of the 19th.<sup>85</sup> Cambon's efforts met with the French Premier's wholehearted approval: Poincaré merely suggested a rewording of Cambon's proposed formula.<sup>86</sup>

"Le Gouvernement de la République et le Gouvernement de S.M. britannique, prévoyant le cas où l'un d'eux aurait un motif grave d'appréhender, soit l'agression d'une tierce Puissance, soit quelque événement menaçant pour la paix générale, conviennent qu'ils délibéreront immédiatement sur les moyens d'agir en commun à l'effet de prévenir l'agression et de sauvegarder la paix."

Poincaré's formula was in substance identical with Cambon's. At the British Foreign Office, the French Ambassador quickly substituted the new draft for the old one.<sup>87</sup>

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During the four weeks that followed the conversation of the 19th, the fate of Cambon's proposal remained uncertain. The main opposition came from the British Prime Minister. Early in October, Asquith considered Poincaré's formula:

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<sup>85</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>

For Poincaré's Approval, See: D.D.F. 3eS, IV, No. 301. For the Premier's formula, See: Ibid, p.319, Footnote (2)

<sup>87</sup>

Ibid., No. 301.

to the terms of this formula, he apparently saw no objection; and on the 11th, he wrote to Grey: "I don't see any harm in Cambon's formula; indeed, it is almost a platitude."<sup>88</sup> Yet, on the 16th, the Foreign Secretary informed Cambon that Asquith "found an exchange of notes impossible without communicating them to the House, and that, after the British Government's so often reiterated verbal declarations, he considered it useless to submit the agreement to writing."<sup>89</sup>

But Cambon was determined. - As he later related to Poincaré,

Je revins à la charge et je fais grâce à Votre Excellence de mon argumentation qui détermina Sir Edward Grey à retourner auprès du Premier Ministre. Il me fit savoir, peu de jours après, que ce dernier admettait un échange de documents à deux conditions: la première, que ces documents ne revêtissent pas la forme de notes diplomatiques officielles, mais prissent celles de lettres privées; la seconde, que leur rédaction fût approuvée par le Cabinet.<sup>90</sup>

To these conditions, (and without waiting for instructions from Paris,) Cambon immediately assented; these conditions he himself had proposed in April and again in July. Yet, although he agreed, he did have doubts: "Je n'avais pas d'objection (he continued to Poincaré,) contre une consultation du Cabinet, qui devait engager le Gouvernement et donner à nos lettres privées un caractère officiel; mais il était

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<sup>88</sup> G. & T., 612, No. 412. - This note contains one more sentence: "I am not sure that he (Cambon) and Lansdowne were quite ad idem in their correspondence in May 1905": an interesting observation which would, by the way, suggest that Grey had submitted, along with Cambon's formula a fairly complete "brief" on the history and nature of Cambon's proposal.

<sup>89</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., IV, 319, No. 301.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

à craindre que le Conseil des Ministres n'amendât tellement le projet qu'il ne lui fût perdre toute signification."

His fears were not entirely ill-founded.

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On October 30, Cambon's proposal was submitted to the Cabinet for their approval. The proposal apparently gave rise to few objections - but to some scepticism and suspicion.<sup>91</sup> In the end, it was approved. After the meeting, Grey saw Cambon, and gave him a draft of a letter, which, he said, had been read to the Cabinet. The letter differed markedly from the Cambon formula.

As Grey wrote to Bertie, later on in the day,<sup>92</sup>

I told Cambon today that, in thinking over his proposal for a draft letter as to our naval negotiations, it had seemed to me well to embody the three points which described the situation. One was that consultations took place between our experts; another was that these consultations did not bind the Governments to action; and the third was that, in the event of a threatening situation, the Governments would consult together as to whether they were prepared to take action in common, and if so what it should be.

The draft handed to Cambon read as follows:

"From time to time in recent years the French and British naval and military experts have consulted together. It has always been understood that such consultation does not restrict the freedom of either Government to decide at any future time whether or not to assist the other by armed force. We have agreed that consultation between experts is not and ought not to be regarded as an engagement that commits either

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<sup>91</sup> See: Grey, I, 166-7.

<sup>92</sup> G. & T., X, ii, 612, No. 413.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Government to action in a contingency that has not arisen and may never arise. The disposition, for instance, of the French and British Fleets respectively at the present moment is not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war.

"You have however pointed out that if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power it might become essential to know whether it could in that event depend upon the armed assistance of the other.

"I agreed that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power or something that threatened the General peace it should immediately discuss with the other, whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so, what measures they would be prepared to take in common."<sup>93</sup>

Cambon's reaction to this letter is rather enigmatic. In front of Grey, "M. Cambon made no adverse comment on it, and took it away for consideration"<sup>94</sup>; while in his letter to Poincaré, on the following day, the Ambassador merely remarked that, with the exception of the first paragraph, where it is affirmed "que ces arrangements entre spécialistes ne constituaient pas pour les deux Gouvernements une obligation d'agir", "C'est la rédaction que j'avais d'abord soumise à Sir Edward Grey; celle de Votre Excellence était de forme plus française. Je regrette" Cambon concludes, "qu'elle n'ait pas été employée, mais sa précision et sa brièveté même l'ont peut-être fait écarter, car les Anglais sont insensibles à l'art de tout dire en peu de mots."<sup>95</sup>

It can seriously be questioned whether Cambon's formula -

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<sup>94</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>.

D.D.F., 3eS., IV, 320, No. 301.

for all its brevity - was really more precise ... or indeed, precise at all. At best, it no more than implied the three points which Grey thought the letters should embody. The only thing Cambon had made clear, in his formula, was that in the event of war, the two countries would get together and discuss the situation, and look for means of concerting, so as to maintain the peace and avert the war. Nowhere was it stated that, even should they promise to discuss together, ~~in~~ the event of imminent danger, each country would none the less remain absolutely free to decide to co-operate, or not, to co-operate, with the other. Moreover, Cambon's draft had passed under complete silence the conversations military and particularly naval - the very reason and pretext for his request for a British promise.

We may legitimately assume that M. Cambon perceived, fully, the omissions in his own formulation. And, although we cannot say for certain that his reticence regarding Grey's draft arose from some slight discomfort at seeing his claims, arguments and wishes, so frequently and copiously pressed over these past months, suddenly given such thorough and careful expression, it does transpire that Cambon had no strong or basic objection to the British proposal.

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On November 1st, the Ambassador went to Paris and managed to have a few moments with the President du Conseil.<sup>96</sup> The latter, seized

of Grey's draft, observed "que ce projet, bien qu'un peu vague, était acceptable" - but "qu'il convenait d'y ajouter une phrase relative aux accords militaires de nos Etats-majors"<sup>97</sup> The sentence agreed to, ran as follows: "si ces mesures comportaient une action les ententes de nos Etats-Majors produiraient leur effet,"<sup>98</sup>

The proposed addition was significant. It was no mere reference to the conversations. In point of fact, it was intended to alter completely the terms on which Grey had accepted the conversations, in the first place. Up to now, it had always been clearly understood that the conversations remained non-committal, even in the event of the two Governments deciding on armed co-operation. Now, such a decision of co-operation would automatically bring into effect, and make unalterable, the plans arrived at through the conversations.

On November 7, Grey received the proposed addition without comment. The draft of the 30th, Cambon informed him, was acceptable to M. Poincaré.<sup>99</sup> Grey proposed to refer the addition to a Cabinet, and promised to communicate their decision to him.<sup>100</sup> Two weeks passed. Finally, on November 21, the French Ambassador was apprised of the British decision.

As Grey recounted to Bertie, on the day of the interview:<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> See: G. & T., X, ii, 613, No. 414.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., IV, 535, No. 534.

<sup>101</sup> G. & T., X, ii, 614, No. 415.



I explained to M. Cambon that the words he had suggested in our conversation on the 7th instant would bind the two Governments, if they decided to co-operate to carry out plans made by the General Staffs. But the plans drawn up at one time might be impracticable or undesirable if an emergency arose two or three years hence under conditions which could not be foreseen.

.... I thought therefore that the words used must leave it open to the Gov(ernmen)ts, even if they decided to co-operate to reconsider plans previously made by the General Staff.

Consequently, Grey suggested the following words: "If these measures involved action the plans of the General Staffs would at once be taken into consideration and the Governments would then decide what effect should be given to them."

Once again, Cambon made absolutely no criticism, and this time gave his immediate assent. "M. Cambon said that it would do perfectly and he accepted the words. He asked me if I would not write a letter in these terms."<sup>102</sup>

And with this, negotiations came to a successful conclusion. It had taken the French Ambassador seven years to achieve his goal. Now, at last, he would have his "guarantee". True, its terms would be cluttered by what appeared to him to be "incidental" matter; but in its substance it was the exact formula he had sought from Lord Lansdowne on May 24, 1905.

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<sup>102</sup>

Ibid. - For Cambon's account, see: D.D.F., 535, No. 534.

On the following day, Sir Edward Grey despatched his private note to Mr. Cambon:<sup>103</sup>

Foreign Office, November 22nd, 1912.

Private.  
My dear Ambassador,

From time to time in recent years the French and British naval and military experts have consulted together. It has always been understood that such consultation does not restrict the freedom of either Government to decide at any future time whether or not to assist the other by armed force. We have agreed that consultation between experts is not, and ought not to be regarded as an engagement that commits either Government to action in a contingency that has not arisen and may never arise. The disposition, for instance, of the French and British fleets respectively at the present moment is not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war.

You have, however, pointed out that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, it might become essential to know whether it could in that event depend upon the armed assistance of the other.

I agree that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other, whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so what measures they would be prepared to take in common. If these measures involved action, the plans of the General Staffs would at once be taken into consideration, and the Governments would then decide what effect should be given to them.

Yours, &c.  
E. GREY.

Cambon replied on the 23rd:

Ambassade de France, Londres  
ce 23 novembre, 1912.

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For the text of both Grey's and Cambon's letter, see: G. & T., X, ii, 614-5, Nos. 416 & 417; and  
D.D.F., 3eS., IV, 536-8, No. 534, Annexe I & II.

Privé.

Cher Sir Edward,

Par votre lettre en date d'hier 22 novembre, vous m'avez rappelé que, dans ces dernières années, les autorités militaires et navales de la France et de la Grande Bretagne s'étaient consultées de temps en temps; qu'il avait toujours été entendu que ces consultations ne restreignaient pas la liberté, pour chaque Gouvernement, de décider dans l'avenir s'ils se prêteraient l'un l'autre le concours de leurs forces armées; que, de part et d'autre, ces consultations entre spécialistes n'étaient et ne devaient pas être considérées comme des engagements obligeant nos Gouvernements à agir dans certains cas; que cependant je vous avais fait observer que, si l'un ou l'autre des deux Gouvernements avait de graves raisons d'appréhender une attaque non provoquée de la part d'une tierce Puissance, il deviendrait essentiel de savoir s'il pourrait compter sur l'assistance armée de l'autre.

Votre lettre répond à cette observation et je suis autorisé à vous déclarer que, dans le cas où l'un de nos deux Gouvernements aurait un motif grave d'appréhender soit l'agression d'une tierce Puissance, soit quelque événement menaçant pour la paix générale, ce Gouvernement examinerait immédiatement avec l'autre si les deux Gouvernements doivent agir de concert en vue de prévenir l'agression ou de sauvegarder la paix. Dans ce cas, les deux Gouvernements délibéreraient sur les mesures qu'ils seraient disposés à prendre en commun; si ces mesures comportaient une action, les deux Gouvernements prendraient aussitôt en considération les plans de leurs états majors et décideraient alors de la suite qui devrait être donnée à ces plans.

Votre sincèrement  
dévoué,

Paul Cambon.

## CHAPTER 9

The significance of 1911-12, in the evolution of the Conversations - An appreciation of Grey's note of November 22nd - A decisive change in the nature of the Conversations - Technical progress of Anglo-French planning, 1913-1914 - Naval cooperation becomes immediately effective - Extension of Conversations from Entente Cordiale to Triple Entente - Russia's first overtures for naval conversations with Britain - Russian knowledge of Conversations - April 1914: renewed Russian request for Anglo-Russian Staff conversations - Royal visit to Paris: French urge Grey for Anglo-Russian naval Conversations - May: British Government consents - Russian appreciation of these Conversations - Role of Conversations in the Triple Entente.

## I

With the Grey-Cambon exchange of notes, in November 1912, the conversations reached a term in their formal development. This diplomatic act brought to a close, as it were, the formative period in their diplomatic, political and even technical evolution. After December 1912, the conversations continued, but in full maturity.

Prior to Agadir, Anglo-French staff relations had proceeded almost furtively, handicapped by the apparent ignorance of a majority of the British Cabinet, and threatened on discovery - by the possible disapproval of a majority of this body. Agadir, however, had brought the conversations to the full knowledge of the British Cabinet Ministers, and wrung from these their full (if reluctant) consent. The naval redistribution, for its part, had given rise, at long last, to the formal (albeit unofficial) declaration of non-commitment. - Together, these two events served to give the conversations their formal and definitive political and diplomatic status, which was to remain unaltered right up to the eve of the war.

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The Grey-Cambon notes, then, were the culmination of this evolution. - What, exactly, was their diplomatic significance? M. Poincaré provides us with one evaluation, in a communication sent out on November 25 (1912) to his Ministers for War and Marine:

L. Secret.

L'Ambassadeur de la République à Londres vient de conclure la négociation que je l'avais chargé de poursuivre avec le Gouvernement Britannique à l'effet d'établir le principe d'une coopération éventuelle des forces militaires et navales de la France et de l'Angleterre.

Vous trouverez ci-joint une copie des lettres qui ont été échangées entre Sir Edward Grey et M. Paul Cambon. L'importance de ces documents ne vous échappera pas; les études stratégiques, auxquelles procèdent secrètement les Etats-majors des deux pays, ont désormais l'approbation explicite du Gouvernement britannique.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Edward Grey had seen, in these letters of November 22 and 23, a written admission, by the French, that the conversations in no way committed the British. Paul Cambon, on the other hand, had prized the letters, above all for the promise which they contained, of Anglo-French conversing, in the event of imminent danger. But it can truly be doubted whether either of these appraisals, true though they be, came as close as does Poincaré's, in defining the effect and significance of the November Letters, upon the Anglo-French Entente.

True, the "principle of possible cooperation" in arms, is an elusive principle, and, in itself, a very tenuous assurance. But in the context of the Entente, the principle takes on unique significance. For the British, the first rule dominating Anglo-French relations, had been that their cordiality should not give rise to a written compact, and that British freedom should remain inviolate, and her non-commitment absolute:- in brief, that nothing should ever be undertaken that might jeopardize in the least - even by the shadow

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D.D.F., 3eS., iv, 560, No. 563. - Not underlined in the published text.

of a doubt - this absolute diplomatic freedom.

But Agadir, followed by a resurgence of the German naval threat, had finally elicited from the British that shadow of a compromise: the written confirmation of a possible assistance in the event of a war with Germany. From Britain, even such a slight concession as this, was of considerable worth. The French could, in all justice, consider it as a formal British avowal of her favorable predisposition towards France.

Finally, before 1911, only the British military and naval authorities had formally been cognizant of the conversations and joint planning. Now, France was certain that this knowledge extended formally to the British Cabinet as well. If this Cabinet did not feel able to make the joint plans (arising from the conversations) automatically binding in the event of an Anglo-French alliance in war, at least the Cabinet had given them their seal of approval, and were therefore (or so the French thought) more likely to accept the pre-laid plans if and when the need for common action arose.

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As for the conversations themselves - here, too, the German naval pressure had made itself felt, by changing the very nature of the staff talks and joint plans.

Up to 1912, the conversations both military and naval, had proceeded on the hypothesis of a Franco-German war, and on the assumptions (a) that Britain would have a vital interest in helping the French

block German hegemony over the Continent, (b) that a war between Britain and Germany was, in view of Britain's naval superiority, unlikely, and that the German threat to Britain - in the event of Britain's joining France - would be negligible on land while more serious on the seas, and (3) that, as a result, Britain could well afford - without jeopardizing her own safety - to count on lending some assistance to France, on the Continent. Thus, the British offer to France was, in reality, a gratuitous offer of possible assistance, incurring no liabilities to Britain and no obligations to France.

In 1912, however, the basis and tenor of the Conversations changed in a very essential way. For one thing, a "dichotomy" (as we may properly call it,) occurred: the military and the naval conversations became two separate entities. The military retained their original hypothesis: a Franco-German war. The naval, however, underwent a radical change; their underlying hypothesis became: an Anglo-German war. This new hypothesis engendered a whole new set of problems. In the first place, an Anglo-German war remained, in the minds of most people (and especially the French) less likely than a Franco-German one; therefore, any plans for French cooperation with a view to an Anglo-German collision, must inevitably incur, to France, some liability with regard to her defences. Moreover, naval cooperation in time of war, if it is to begin at the very outset, requires not only prior planning, but also some amount of prior action.

With these problems in mind, we are better able to appreciate



the actual nature and meaning of the Anglo-French negotiations from July to November, 1912, and to fully understand the outcome. - France chose to accept the British request for joint naval planning and cooperation. She did so, partly in her own interests, and partly to accommodate the British. Her cooperation required her moving the bulk of her fleet to the Mediterranean. In effecting this move, France suffered a weakening of her naval defences in her northern and western coastal waters. And because the underlying hypothesis (i.e., an Anglo-German war) was, in the French view, more remote than a Franco-German conflict, she could reasonably demand (and expect) that Britain offset her weakened defences in some way.

This demand, the British readily met. They recognized their obligation - or responsibility - regarding the denuded French coasts, and promised to confer with the French Government in time of danger, so as (mainly) to advise the French in time, whether or not they (the British) would assume the defence of those French waters. - The French did not bind them to assume this defence: they only demanded sufficient notice, in the event that the British should - for any reason - refuse the charge. Thus, the British commitment was, in reality, slight; nonetheless, it did exist.

In view of all the above, then, it could not be said of the French - as it could still be said of the British, in the military sphere - that, through the naval conversations after 1912, they had "made a gratuitous offer of possible naval assistance to Britain, this offer entailing no liabilities to France, and no obligations to

Britain". For, France did incur a liability, and Britain an obligation. - To this extent, the political nature of the conversations had changed.

## II

From November 1912, right up to the last critical days of July 1914, the conversations themselves - both military and naval - continued with unabated intensity.

As for the naval: - In September 1912, the French Naval Attaché in London resumed communications with the British Admiralty, and plans progressed rapidly for the Anglo-French fleet redistributions in the Channel and the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup>

Anglo-French plans for naval cooperation, however, were not to be limited to the North Sea and the Mediterranean. In July, 1912, Admiral Kerillis, France's Far Eastern naval commander, and the Chief of Staff to Admiral Winsloe (Britain's Far Eastern counter-part), had begun to elaborate a plan, under the Frenchman's initiative, for Anglo-French co-operation in certain Chinese ports and in Indo-China, in the event of war. The plan was finally completed and approved by the two naval commanders on January 31, 1913.<sup>3</sup>

But in one location, at least, Anglo-French naval cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> For these negotiations, see: G. & T., X (ii), 671, No. 458; and D.D.F., 3eS., iii, No. 420, and Ibid., iv, Nos. 398 & 514.

<sup>3</sup> For these Far Eastern naval negotiations, see: D.D.F., 3eS., Vols. iii, No. 170; v, No. 303; and vi, No. 198.

went beyond the stage of mere planning. We have seen how the agreement on eventual cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Channel led to an immediate redistribution of the two fleets. In 1913, however, the French and British went beyond this single, indispensable measure of redistribution - and some considerable way towards actual fleet coordination.

On June 17, 1913, the French Naval Minister sent a note to M. Pichon (who was once again France's Foreign Minister), asking the latter for permission to withdraw a certain number of battleships from the Mediterranean, for manoeuvres along the Atlantic and Channel coasts. The move, the Naval Minister assured Pichon, would be only temporary.<sup>4</sup> The French Foreign Minister referred this request to the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre;<sup>5</sup> and on July 11, 1913, the Naval Minister was apprised of this body's verdict through the Secretary of the Naval General Staff. The answer was: no.

The Secretary pointed out<sup>6</sup> that, at that very moment the British Admiralty were withdrawing their 3rd battleship squadron: **should** the French also evacuate some ships, the combined British and French naval forces remaining in the Mediterranean would be inferior in number to any other possible Mediterranean combination. Anglo-French safety in the Mediterranean forbade such simultaneous (albeit temporary) evacua-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3eS., vii, No. 143.

<sup>5</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., vii, No. 344.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

tion. The French ships would have to await the return of the British 3rd battleship squadron.

The Secretary's notice then continues:

Puisqu'il existe une convention entre les Etats-majors généraux français et britanniques pour une action commune, en cas d'alliance, des flottes des deux pays, il semble que dans le temps de paix cette convention doive constamment pouvoir être appliquée...

Tel ne serait pas le cas si, par suite de mesures prises indépendamment dans les deux pays, l'ensemble de leurs flottes maintenues dans la Méditerranée était par trop réduit.

Pour éviter cette situation qui pourrait présenter de sérieux dangers, il serait nécessaire que tout mouvement apportant une modification sensible dans la composition de la flotte de l'un des deux fût à l'avance communiqué à l'autre.

Il est prévu dans la convention que, dans le cas où l'Angleterre alliée à la France se verrait amenée à retirer ses forces navales de la Méditerranée, l'avis de ce retrait serait donné à la France.

Il semble que cette mesure pourrait être étendue au temps de paix et qu'il y aurait lieu d'en faire la proposition au Gouvernement britannique.<sup>7</sup>

M. Pichon duly communicated this letter to the French Ambassador in London. M. Cambon, however, did not seize Sir Edward Grey of the Admiralty's request; rather, he left it to his Naval Attaché to discuss the matter with the British Admiralty. As a result it was quietly agreed that the British and French Admiralties would keep each other posted as to their respective battleship movements to and from the Mediterranean, and would seek to "coordinate" these movements, so as to preserve at all times a combined naval superiority.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., - Letter not underlined in original.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., viii, No. 56: Fleuriau (London) to Pichon, 20.8.13.

Thus, Anglo-French naval coordination, due to become effective only in the event of war (and only on the approval of both Governments), was actually being implemented - admittedly in a very limited degree - from mid-1913 on.

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Meanwhile, military planning also continued apace. General French, who succeeded General Nicholson as Chief of the Imperial General Staff, in the spring of 1912, gave General Wilson fullest support and unprecedented assistance. But, while staff conversations still took place, and French and British Staff officers grew to know one another through ever more frequent exchanges of visits, the main efforts were of an internal order - that is, efforts to implement the arrangements jointly agreed to. After 1912, Wilson's preparations became a matter of such absolute secrecy, that not even his diary received his confidences.<sup>9</sup> In France, on the other hand, preparations for the British Expeditionary Force became so "real" that they now warranted special transportation arrangements: from 1911 on, railway transportation facilities, capable of handling the full Expeditionary Force, were daily set aside in the railway yards of the Channel ports where the British troops would be landing.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of all their efforts, both joint and separate, the French and British War Offices managed to have everything in complete

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9

For these preparations, see: Callwell, I, 151.

10

See: Huguet, 22.

readiness by the turn of 1914, for the despatch of the Expeditionary Force. Indeed, so thorough were the preparations, that in the last days of June 1914, some British officers from General Wilson's office, especially concerned with joint Anglo-French plans, were invited to attend a special French rehearsal of railway movements for the transportation of British troops from the ports of debarkation to the area of concentration. "French railway staff officers occupied their war stations, and steps that would have to be taken in the event of various mishaps, such as might occur, were practiced."<sup>11</sup> This practice went off with magnificent smoothness and precision, and revealed amazing thoroughness in both planning and execution. Yet, no one attending this trial operation even suspected that scarcely one month later, this same exercise would be repeated - this time, however, in earnest...

### III

The important diplomatic developments relating to the conversations, in this period from 1912 to 1914, concerned the extension of these conversations, from the original confines of the Anglo-French Entente, to the broader camp of the Triple Entente.

The chief protagonist of this movement was Russia. In 1907, her "settlement" with Britain had brought her into the fold of the Entente.

This Anglo-Russian friendship, though, had continued weak - not

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<sup>11</sup>

Callwell, I, 150.

to say precarious - : from Persia, through to India, the map was dotted with points of friction. But the Balkan episodes between 1908 and 1913 had taught Russia that outside the Entente, there was no circle to receive her. Though Britain was no "natural ally", the Triple-Alliance - because of Austria-Hungary - could be no friend. Wisely, Russia determined to make the best of the camp in which she found herself. With France, she had an alliance; with Britain, however, there were but the tattered remains of an unrealistic colonial treaty - in truth, more an impediment to friendly relations, than an aid. If the Triple Entente, and her position therein, was to be strengthened, (with, in view, the day when she would be engaged in a war with the Central Powers, over the Balkans,) Russia must consolidate her friendship with Britain.

How was she to effect this? An alliance was out of the question. But, having heard of the Anglo-French military and naval conversations, she elected to press for similar relations with the British: this would supply the "tangible bond" of friendship and intimacy...

The story of Russia's struggle to obtain these staff conversations with Britain, is the story of the final stage of the political evolution of the conversations.

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It would appear that the Russian Government were informed of the Anglo-French staff conversations some time before 1912. In any

event, in 1912, there occurs the first proposal - from the French, as it happens - that Anglo-Russian naval conversations be initiated. This suggestion came through Paul Cambon, on May 5th, in a conversation with Sir Arthur Nicolson. A military convention, Cambon recalled, had, for some time now, existed between Russia and France. "Quite recently", Cambon continued, to Nicolson, "the Russians had intimated that they would like a Naval Convention also to be drawn up, and the French Gov(ernmen)t are disposed to accede but have suggested to Russia that it would be preferable if Great Britain were also asked to become a party to the Naval Convention."<sup>12</sup>

At the time, strangely enough, neither the French, nor the Russians, nor the British, seem to have pursued the matter any further. - At any rate, there is no further mention of the idea in any documents relating to that spring or summer.

In September of that year, however, Sazonof, in the course of his visit to Britain, suggested, in a confidential talk with Grey, that he would welcome "staff conversations between British and Russian military and naval experts". Grey was careful to avoid answering this proposal: he merely confined himself to saying that, if Germany ever sought to crush France, Great Britain would be obliged to come to the latter's assistance.<sup>13</sup>

It is impossible to say just how informed - and how accurately

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<sup>12</sup>

G. & T., X(ii), 582, No. 383: Nicolson to Grey, 4.5.12.

<sup>13</sup>

Grey, II, 130-139 (3 vol'd ed.).



so - the Russians were, in the spring of 1912 and at the time of Sazonof's visit to Balmoral. In early December of that year, however, the Russian Ambassador at Paris, Isvolsky, sent off to Saint Petersburg a despatch reviewing French foreign relations, in which he set down with considerable accuracy the diplomatic nature of Anglo-French naval and military relations:<sup>14</sup>

Depuis le commencement de la présente crise<sup>15</sup>, M. Poincaré n'a cessé, en toute occasion, d'inciter le Cabinet de Londres à des conversations confidentielles dans le but d'éclaircir la position qui serait adoptée par l'Angleterre dans le cas d'un conflit européen général. Du côté anglais il n'a été pris, à ce sujet jusqu'à présent, aucun engagement. Le Cabinet de Londres répond invariablement que cela dépendra des circonstances et que la question de la paix ou de la guerre sera décidée par l'opinion publique. D'autre part, entre les Etats-majors français et anglais, non seulement l'examen de toutes les éventualités qui peuvent se présenter n'a pas été interrompu, mais les accords militaires et navals existants ont reçu ces tout derniers temps, un développement encore plus grand, de sorte qu'à la minute présente, la convention militaire Anglo-Française a un caractère aussi achevé et complet que la convention franco-russe; la seule différence consiste dans le fait que la première porte les signatures des chefs des deux Etats-majors, et, pour cette raison, n'est pour ainsi dire pas obligatoire pour le Gouvernement. Ces jours-ci en France, dans le secret le plus vigoureux, est venu le chef de l'Etat-major général anglais, général Wilson, et, à cette occasion, divers détails complémentaires ont été élaborés; en outre, apparemment pour la première fois, à ce travail, ont participé non seulement des militaires, mais encore d'autres représentants du Gouvernement français.

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<sup>14</sup>

Un Livre Noir, I, 366-7: despatch dated 5.12.12.

<sup>15</sup>

Isvolsky here refers to the Anglo-German naval crisis of 1912 which began (for the world at large) with Haldane's visit to Berlin in February of that year.

It is to be noted that less than two weeks before Isvolsky wrote this letter, Grey and Cambon had exchanged their "notes". The Russian Ambassador was to learn of this only gradually, in the course of the following year; and some sixteen months would pass before he wrote to Saint Petersburg an account of the Grey-Cambon transaction.<sup>16</sup> But when, at last, he did so, on March 18, 1914, his news proved most timely and fruitful; two months later, Russia obtained from Britain her long-sought staff conversations.

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The story of this final stage, in the genesis of the Anglo-Russian conversations, is almost enlightening one. It brings out in sharp relief the actual contribution of the conversations (Anglo-French), to the tightening of the bonds of the Triple Entente in the closing months of peace.

After his Balmoral visit, Sazonof seems to have dropped, entirely, the idea of Anglo-Russian naval conversations similar to those between France and Britain. At the turn of 1914, however, he began to be deeply concerned over the Triple Entente and the tenuousness of its bonds and relations. On February 12, he wrote to his Ambassador at London, Benckendorff:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>

Un Livre Noir, II, 149: Isvolsky à Sazonof.

<sup>17</sup>

Siebert-Schreiner, 712, No. 840.

Of late, we have frequently been able to convince ourselves, that we lack an organ which would unite the views, and the common action of the Powers, an organ such as the Ambassadorial Conference in London last year. The correspondence resulting from this lack, leads to delays, which have an injurious effect on the progress of affairs. As the London Cabinet does not desire again to convene last year's Conference, we shall not further insist upon it, but Grey, perhaps, will not object to the proposal that, at least, the three Powers of the Entente should through their representatives in London, establish the community of their views. For, while the Powers of the opposite group are acting, we are merely deliberating, and our coherence, weak enough in itself, thereby loses more of its force. I beg you, to speak to Grey in this sense as soon as your French colleague receives instructions as to this matter.

Sazonof, then, was deeply preoccupied with the problem of tightening the bonds of the Triple Entente. This first proposal, however, proved utterly ineffective: Cambon received favorable instructions from Paris, and Grey readily consented; but one month later, the latter was able to write (in a minute to a despatch from his Ambassador at Saint Petersburg<sup>18</sup>): "All that happens about discussions in London is that Cambon and Benckendorff come to see me together about Near Eastern questions when they have similar instructions. They have come once so far."

Perhaps, however, the Russians themselves did not put too much stock in this solution. In any event, in this same month (February), the Tsar met the new French Ambassador, M. Paléologue, for the first time, and in this first conversation, allowed himself to dwell, principally, on "la question du rôle de l'Angleterre dans la Triple

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18

G. & T., X (ii), 776, No. 534.

Entente et de la désirabilité d'amener le Cabinet de Londres à reconnaître la nécessité de prendre sur lui des engagements plus précis et plus formels à l'égard de la Russie."<sup>19</sup> In the first days of March, Isvolsky, in Paris, learnt this from Paléologue himself (who was back home for a brief sojourn): these words, coupled with Sazonof's own wishes, moved Isvolsky to action. On March 18, Isvolsky wrote a long letter to his Foreign Minister. First, he recounted this conversation between the Tsar and Paléologue; then he plunged straightway into an exposé of the Anglo-French Conversations:<sup>20</sup>

Il y a environ un an, j'ai eu l'honneur de vous écrire (dans une lettre très confidentielle du 3/15 février 1913<sup>21</sup>) au sujet de l'actif échange de communications produit alors entre les Cabinets de Paris et de Londres sur les questions se rapportant aux accords secrets entre les Etats-Majors généraux français et anglais. Cet échange de vues, ainsi que j'ai pu m'en convaincre depuis lors, a abouti à la signature d'une convention politique spéciale dont le texte exact ne m'est pas connu, mais dont le sens consiste en ceci, que les deux Gouvernements déclarent que, dans le cas où les circonstances amèneraient la France et l'Angleterre à des interventions actives concertées, ils s'engageraient à prendre en considération les accords militaires élaborés par les Etats-Majors.

Ainsi à l'heure actuelle, les relations anglo-françaises sont déterminées par deux actes, savoir: une convention militaire et navale et une convention politique. La première, la convention militaire et navale, d'après ce qui m'a été dit par l'ancien ministre des Affaires Etrangères M. Jonnart, est, au point de vue technique, approfondie encore plus que la convention analogue entre la France et la Russie, mais d'autre part, à la différence de la convention militaire russo-française (et la convention navale qu'elle complète), elle n'a qu'un caractère facultatif. La convention politique, bien que revêtue de la forme écrite, n'a pas non plus de portée

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<sup>19</sup>

Un Livre Noir, II, 249: Isvolsky to Sazonof, 18.3.14.

<sup>20</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>

No trace could be found of the despatch referred to, here.

obligatoire; la question de savoir si l'Angleterre prendra ou non part à la guerre sera décidée par le Gouvernement britannique, d'après les circonstances. Mais si au cours des événements, l'Angleterre se décidait à des opérations actives de concert avec la France, la convention militaire et navale entrerait automatiquement en vigueur.

At this point of the letter, we may pause, for a moment, to make two important observations. From the account above, and from the earlier one of December 1912, it would seem that the French Cabinets, for the most part, made little effort to keep the Russians abreast of this particular facet of Anglo-French relations. Isvolsky, for one, seems to have secured his information mainly from occasional indiscretions and limited confidences, filling in the lacunae by sheer (though apparently shrewd) deduction and surmise. As a result, his accounts to Saint Petersburg were as likely as not, to be inaccurate. - And to illustrate this last point, we need only compare his letter of 1912 with that of March 1914. On the earlier occasion, the Ambassador had not even suspected the existence of the Grey-Cambon "political convention" (as he was to call it); yet he had correctly concluded that the staff conversations both military and naval involved absolutely no obligations for either France or Britain. On the latter occasion, however, he gave a basically accurate account of the Grey-Cambon convention, but went astray on the question of the "military and naval convention": in the event of an Anglo-French alliance in war (he now asserted), the military and naval arrangements would be "automatically binding".

But to continue with Isvolsky's letter. - In the next paragraph, the Ambassador treats general Anglo-French diplomatic relations. "Je

vous ai déjà écrit", he continues to Sazonof, "que les dirigeants de la politique extérieure française considèrent que, étant donné la structure étatique aussi bien française qu'anglaise, il n'est guère possible de conclure entre la France et l'Angleterre un accord liant d'avantage les deux parties." Nevertheless, he goes on, a year ago, the French were certain of Britain's assistance in the event of war; now, however, "le Cabinet de Londres, sous la pression de difficultés intérieures, est apparemment moins enclin à une politique extérieure active et écoute plus aisément la voix des partisans d'un rapprochement avec l'Allemagne." In the opinion of Mm. Doumergue and Poincaré (who is now President of the Republic), though, the recent anti-Russian campaign of the German press has produced a great impression on the British Government - as can be seen in a Times article of this very day (March 18), which warns the public of the German threat to European peace and stresses the need "d'offrir une sérieuse résistance aux tentatives d'hégémonie allemande."

Hereupon, Isvolsky returns abruptly to the question of Anglo-Russian relations:

J'ai profité de mes dernières entrevues avec M. Doumergue et le Président de la République pour toucher la question des rapports russo-anglais; l'un et l'autre sont apparus pleinement informés de ce que Sa Majesté avait daigné exprimer à M. Paléologue. M. Doumergue m'a dit qu'il partageait pleinement l'idée qu'après la récente expérience de la crise balkanique et vu l'homogénéité et l'unité de l'action témoignées par les Puissances de la Triple-Alliance, il serait désirable d'amener l'Angleterre à prendre vis-à-vis de nous des engagements plus précis; il a ajouté que la prochaine venue de Sir Grey, qui accompagnerait le Roi George, lui donnerait personnellement l'occasion de soulever cette question dans ses conversations avec le Ministre anglais. M. Poincaré

s'est exprimé dans le même sens et il m'a dit son intention d'appeler sur cette question l'attention du Roi George. L'arrivée des Hôtes Royaux anglais est fixée au 8/21 avril; c'est pourquoi, si vous estimez que MM. Doumergue et Poincaré pourraient sous ce rapport exercer une influence profitable sur le Cabinet de Londres, je vous demanderai de me munir en temps voulu de vos instructions quant à la façon dont vous comprenez la dite question; personnellement il me semble que les entretiens qui vont avoir lieu entre les dirigeants de la politique extérieure française et anglaise pourraient fournir une occasion très propice pour éclaircir jusqu'à quel point le Cabinet de Londres serait enclin à s'engager dans la voie d'une entente plus étroite avec la Russie, mais que la question de la forme et du contenu d'une pareille entente doit être discutée directement entre nous et les Anglais.

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In this momentous letter, Isvolsky had assembled all the elements necessary for the final request to Britain. The Anglo-French staff conversations had been analysed - a tacit suggestion that Russia should ask as much of Britain. The diplomatic approach had been laid down; France should intercede, on the occasion of the Royal Visit to Paris. - It now remained only for Saint Petersburg to join these elements, formulate her wish, plan its diplomatic conveyance, and begin the execution thereof. Sazonov lost no time: on April 2 - probably the very day Isvolsky's despatch arrived in Saint-Petersburg - the Russian Foreign Minister wrote back to Isvolsky:<sup>22</sup>

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22

Siebert-Schreiner, 713-715, No. 842.- This same despatch is to be found in the Livre Noir, II, p. 255.

In your letter of March 5/18, you mentioned the question of a closer union between Russia and England, and expressed the wish to ascertain my views upon this subject... I therefore consider it my duty, to inform you, that a further reinforcement and development of the so-called Triple Entente, and if possible, its transformation into a new Triple Alliance, appears to me to be a demand of the present hour. Whilst thoroughly ensuring the international position of France, Russia and England, an alliance of this nature would, because of its lack of any thought of conquest, on the part of the powers mentioned, threaten no one, but signify the best guarantee for the preservation of the peace of Europe.

Certain steps have already been undertaken by France and England with regard to working out a plan for the most uniform action possible and for a more precise definition of mutual obligation. Obviously, we too must work in the same direction, whereby a number of incidental questions might be joined to a whole series of subjects which are ripe for discussion, - subjects which impinge heavily upon Russian and English interests and in numerous fields.

As you are aware, the inner situation of England is at present such that it wholly absorbs the attention of the Royal Government and of the public...

In spite of this, I share your opinion that it would not prove inexpedient if Poincaré and Doumergue, on the occasion of the meeting with King George and his Minister, would in confidence indicate to them, that a closer agreement between Russia and England would prove equally desirable to all three partners in the Triple Entente. The establishing of the conditions, upon which a political convention of this sort might be concluded, would, naturally, have to be the subject of direct negotiations between St. Petersburg and London; but it is possible, that the French Government would consider it useful, to propose to Grey to communicate to us in common the contents of the political convention, which you speak of as having been concluded between England and France. This might then serve as a basis for working out a similar convention between Russia and England.

With this, the Russian démarche was formally engaged. On the very next day - April 3 - the Russian Emperor himself took a hand in the matter. To the British Ambassador, Sir G. Buchanan, His



Majesty stated<sup>23</sup> "that He would like to see a closer bond of union established between England and Russia, such as an alliance of a purely defensive character." On the British Ambassador's remarking that this was impracticable at present, "the Emperor said that we might at any rate conclude some arrangements similar to that which existed between His Majesty's Government and the Government of the French Republic." The Ambassador replied that he was ignorant of the terms of this arrangement. To this, His Majesty said "that He also was unacquainted with them but that He believed that, if we had not actually a military convention with France, we had discussed and agreed on what each country was to do in certain eventualities."

Thus was Britain warned of Russia's return to the 1912 idea of Anglo-Russian staff conversations. - In France, meanwhile, the Russian Ambassador was assiduously paving the way: on April 9, he was able to write back to Sazonov<sup>24</sup> :

Après avoir reçu votre lettre très confidentielle du 20 mars<sup>25</sup> No. 23, j'ai profité de la première occasion pour parler une fois de plus à M. Doumergue de la question d'un accord plus intime entre la Russie et l'Angleterre.

M. Doumergue m'a confirmé de la manière la plus positive son intention de se prononcer en faveur d'un tel accord à sa prochaine entrevue avec Sir Ed. Grey; il croit pouvoir trouver facilement les arguments convaincants, car il est évident que la France ayant des conventions militaires et navales

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23

G. & T., X (ii), 780, No. 537.

24

Un Livre Noir, II, 256-7.

25

March 20, according to the Russian calendar: the letter in question is that of April 2, reproduced above.

avec la Russie et l'Angleterre, le système doit être coordonné et complété par la conclusion d'un accord analogue entre la Russie et l'Angleterre. M. Doumergue croit que l'accord russo-anglais doit prendre la forme d'une convention navale et des discussions navales seront probablement nécessaires. En ce qui concerne la décision prise par lui et par Sir Edward Grey de nous faire un communiqué relatif à l'accord politique existant entre la France et l'Angleterre, M. Doumergue me confirma qu'il n'y avait aucun engagement politique entre les dites Puissances, mais que, dans le cas où elles seraient amenées par les événements à des interventions actives, elle tiendraient compte de l'accord conclu entre les Etats-Majors sur les questions techniques. M. Doumergue ajouta qu'il ne se rappelait pas bien si tout ce qu'il venait de me dire avait revêtu une forme plus ou moins précise, mais il m'a promis de vérifier aux Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et de tenir compte de notre désir.

Je n'ai pas encore eu la possibilité de renouveler ma conversation à ce sujet avec le Président de la République, qui est allé passer les vacances de Pâques dans le midi et ne reviendra à Paris, que la veille, peut-être le jour même, de l'arrivée des Hôtes Anglais, mais je tâcherai de le voir aussitôt après son arrivée et de m'expliquer avec lui au sujet de votre lettre.

On April 21, Sir Edward Grey arrived in Paris, accompanying the King and Queen on their first Royal Visit to France. On the 23rd, M. Doumergue finally had a chance to broach the question of the French request. As Sir Edward Grey recounts<sup>26</sup>:

M. Doumergue spoke at length and with great emphasis on the necessity for doing something to make relations with Russia more secure. He evidently assumed that Germany would make great efforts to detach Russia from the French Alliance, and might possibly be successful. In that case, France and England would be left alone... The French knew that an Alliance between Britain and Russia was out of the question, but could not we at least promise to discuss matters with Russia, if necessary?

I said that I thought it not impossible, if the French agreed, that we should communicate to the Russian Government exactly what the state of things was between France and ourselves...

M. Doumergue agreed with this, and said that Russia did not want any military arrangement as far as we were concerned.

I said that the matter would then be reduced to a conversation between the Russian and the British Naval Staffs. It could not amount to very much, but it would be something, and I would consult the Prime Minister about it on my return to London, and see whether we could agree to such a conversation...

By mid-May, both the British Prime minister and the Cabinet agreed to Anglo-Russian Staff conversations; and on the 21st of that month, Sir Edward Grey and the French Ambassador, M. Cambon, jointly communicated the texts of their letters of November 1912, to the Russian Ambassador - thus clearly establishing the non-committal nature of the staff conversations that would now ensue.<sup>27</sup> ... Five days later, the first Anglo-Russian Naval Staff conference took place, in London<sup>28</sup>.

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On the day of the joint communication to Benckendorff, Cambon wrote, to Paris, an account of the proceedings, and made the following comment on the anticipated Anglo-Russian conversations: "C'est là un résultat considérable, moins par sa portée militaire que par sa portée politique. L'entente anglo-russe ne peut que s'en trouver renforcée

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27

Ibid., No. 543.

28

See: Siebert-Schreiner, 725-7, No. 850: "Copy of the resolutions passed at this conference."

et la Russie est prémunie contre la tentation d'évoluer du côté de l'Allemagne..."<sup>29</sup>

No doubt, Grey also held a similar view: if he had consented to these conversations, it was certainly not for their technical value, but for their diplomatic effect. Indeed, it transpires, from all the diplomatic correspondence both French and English on the subject, that the ultimate objective of these conversations was, to tighten the bonds of the Triple Entente by bringing Russia into intimate relations with Britain.- And the sole means at the disposal of France and Britain, were the conversations. For, by this time, the conversations had become, to Russia - as to France and Britain, - the symbol of Anglo-French intimacy and solidarity.

As for Russia's final appreciation of the Anglo-Russian conversations, we have one account - written by the Russian Ambassador at London, Benckendorff, on May 8, some days before the Government formally authorised the conversations and allowed the Grey-Cambon notes to be communicated. Wrote Benckendorff, in anticipation of this final consent:<sup>30</sup>

After the results which have just been described have been achieved<sup>31</sup>, we, as I believe, will have obtained the main object in view,

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<sup>29</sup>

D.D.F., 3eS., X, 373, No. 241.

<sup>30</sup>

Siebert-Schreiner, 719-721: Benckendorff to Sazonof, 8.5.14.

<sup>31</sup>

By this, Benckendorff means the British Cabinet's expected acquiescence to Anglo-Russian naval conversations.

namely, to substitute for the hitherto far too theoretical and peaceable basic idea of the Entente something more tangible. My sojourn in Paris, and the spectacle which I there witnessed, have anew substantiated my opinion, that an alliance or any other form of public agreement is impossible, and that, even if the British Government should permit itself to agree to this, the results would be quite different from those expected. The reception which was accorded the King and Queen was no doubt an extraordinarily hearty one, much heartier, I was told there, than was the case with former English visits. If, in spite of this, the impossibility of concluding a formal alliance between England and France had been recognized, then this will, in a still greater degree, be the case between Russia and England.

I doubt whether a more powerful guarantee for common military operations could be found in the event of war, than this spirit of the Entente, as it reveals itself at present, reinforced by the existent military conventions.

If we review the various phases of the Entente, it cannot be denied that England has never hesitated, in threatening moments, to place herself on the side of France; the same holds good for Russia on every occasion on which English and Russian interests were simultaneously affected, and this, despite the difficulty of reconciling the policies of both countries in questions that arise day after day...

To recapitulate in brief, I would like to say, that even those Englishmen who are firmly convinced that, sooner or later, a conflict with Germany will prove inevitable, would be frightened by the idea of binding England by means of decisive treaties of alliance which would impose obligations upon her, the conditions and consequences of which cannot as yet be foreseen.

#### IV

With the story of this final Anglo-Russian negotiation, we have concluded our account of the evolution of the Anglo-French military and naval staff conversations. From this last episode, we see clearly, how these conversations came to symbolize, from 1912, onwards, - to the Russians as well as to the French and British - the unity and intimacy of the Entente cordiale.

If Russia strove to participate in those non-committal conver-

sations, it was less for the sake of the military benefits which might accrue to her, than for the purpose of consolidating the Triple Entente and her position therein. To her, the conversations had become the expression of solidarity and mutual confidence - and the only adequate substitute (tenuous as this substitute might be) for an alliance deemed unobtainable.

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On June 24, in a conversation with the German Ambassador at London, Sir Edward Grey described the nature and status of the Triple Entente, as this Entente stood, following the institution of Anglo-Russian conversations. The occasion arose, as a result of Prince Lichnowski's expansive comments on Grey's refutation, in Parliament, of the rumour that an Anglo-Russian naval convention existed or was being drawn up<sup>32</sup>. Grey's candid answer to Lichnowski, the Foreign Secretary recorded to Goschen, as follows:<sup>33</sup>

.... I felt some difficulty in talking to him about our relations with France and Russia. It was easy for me to say, and quite true, that there was no alliance; no agreement committing us to action; and that all the agreements of that character that we had had with France and Russia had been published. On the other hand, I did not wish to mislead the Ambassador by making him think that the relations we had with France and Russia were less cordial and intimate than they really were. Though we were not bound by engagement as allies, we did from time to time talk as intimately as allies. But this intimacy was not used for

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<sup>32</sup> For these Parliamentary queries and Grey's reply, see: Parl. Deb., 5th Ser., (House of Commons), vol. 63, cols. 457-458.

<sup>33</sup> G. & T., XI, pp. 4-5, No. 4: Grey to Goschen, 24.6.14.

aggression against Germany. France, he knew, was now most peacefully disposed....

This account provides a fair summation of the Triple Entente, and the place of the Staff conversations within its bounds, on the very eve of the First World War.

PART III

THE CONVERSATIONS  
AND THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

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July 31 - August 5, 1914:  
The diplomatic nature  
of the Conversations  
defined.



## Chapter 10

Introduction: the final European crisis and the  
Conversations - July 29: Grey defines Government  
stand and personal view - July 30: Cambon invokes  
letters of November 1912, and asks assurances of  
assistance - July 31: Cabinet turns down Cambon's  
request - August 1st: Cabinet refusal renewed -  
Cambon brings up British naval commitment -  
Grey's position and stand: the Cabinet majority's  
attitude - August 1-2: Cabinet concedes naval  
assurances to France - August 2-3: Anglo-French  
naval preparations - August 3: Grey's address to  
Parliament: Parliament's unanimous approval -  
August 4: British naval assurances to France con-  
firmed; Britain enters war against Germany -  
August 5: British War Council studies advisability  
of adhering to Anglo-French joint plans for expe-  
dition of British Force: joint plans approved -  
August 9-20: British Expeditionary Force trans-  
ported to Continent.

## I

The murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, on June 28, 1914, brought to an end Europe's long era of troubled peace and expanding prosperity. At the time of the incident, few people foresaw, or even considered, the ultimate outcome of that tragic act. Days passed into weeks, before the full implications of the murder began to dawn on Europe's leading statesmen; and it was only when Austria was known to be drafting a note to Serbia, that certain persons (among them, Sir Edward Grey,) began to have serious misgivings. The Austrian note, when it was finally despatched (July 23), showed these misgivings to have been only too justified: if the matter had ever been strictly Austro-Serb, the note made it European - a Balkan issue of the most explosive sort. From July 24 on, Europe was quivering with the sense of an impending Continental conflagration. And, in less than ten days, war was upon them: the spark of Sarajevo had found dry tinder.

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In our story so far, we have traced the Conversations right up to the eve of the war. Our present - and final - chapter extends over the week of transition from peace to war - July 29 to August 5. By the 29th, war (on the Continental scale) had become well-nigh certain and imminent; and the main question haunting both Paris and London, was whether Britain would join France against Germany. Most of the action of this drama took place in London, between Sir Edward Grey and the French Ambassador, on the one hand, and Sir Edward and the Cabinet, on the other. The

drama itself arose from Grey's and Cambon's struggle to have Britain intervene on the side of France, if and when Germany attacked the latter. By following the story of this tense struggle, we gain an insight into the motives, reasons, and circumstances, that led Britain into the war ... and, at the same time, an insight into the true meaning of the Anglo-French military and naval Conversations.

For, it happens that the events of this hectic and historic week serve, as nothing else can, to define the true diplomatic nature of the Conversations, and their true political implications and significance. ... Did the Conversations commit Britain to France in any way? - Did they oblige her, either directly or indirectly, to join France in the struggle against Germany? - In short: to what extent (if at all) did the Conversations - by their nature, or even by their very existence - contribute to Britain's final decision to intervene? ... In so far as these questions can be answered at all, we find them answered most decisively and emphatically, in this final pre-war phase of Anglo-French diplomacy.

## II

When, in the last week of July 1914, Sir Edward Grey found himself confronted with the immediate eventuality of a Continental conflict, he was not wholly unprepared. Two years before, the Balkan uprising had given rise to similar possibilities, and Sir Edward, wary though not unduly alarmed, had given careful thought to Britain's eventual position and course of action. These thoughts had led, not to the formulation of a set policy, but to a determination of certain principles by which Britain's course must ultimately be guided. In the final crisis of 1914, these principles

were to direct Grey in his diplomacy with France and Germany, and to be the corner-stone of Britain's ultimate policy. Without a full understanding of these principles - and thereby of Grey's views and attitude in July - August 1914 - we cannot hope to arrive at a just appreciation of the role and significance of the Military and Naval Conversations in Britain's last hours of pre-war diplomacy, and of their contribution to Britain's final decision to come to the help of France. For this reason, then, it is necessary for us to cast a quick glance at their original formulation in December 1912.

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In the Fall of that year, Europe had been shaken by the Balkan uprising against the Turks. While the possible démise of the "sick man of Europe" proved, for some time, the most acute source of worry, a second danger - that of an Austro-Russian conflict arising out of Austro-Serbian friction - troubled the major Capitals no less. From the earliest days of Bismarck's Germany, Europe had been fully aware of Austro-Russian rivalry in the Balkans and of its terrible danger; but it took this Balkan revolt to make them fully realize how delicate and explosive the Balkan problem really was, and how the whole system of Alliances, once held to be a guarantee of peace, had by now become an actual menace, threatening to convert the least outbreak of armed hostility into a Continental conflagration.

In Berlin, this train of thought led the Kaiser and the more thoughtful of his entourage to wonder about the German position, should such a Continental war - ultimately a life-and death struggle between

Germany and France - ever take place. The outcome of such a struggle might well depend on whether or not the British threw in their lot with the French. The Germans thought it worth their while to inquire as to Britain's eventual course. Prince Henry of Prussia (the German Emperor's brother) put the question to King George, in the course of his visit to Sandringham on December 6. The answer was prompt and forthright: King George wrote the following account to Sir Edward Grey soon after:

'... In the course of along conversation, (Prince Henry) asked me point blank, whether, in the event of Germany and Austria going to war with Russia and France, England would come to the assistance of the two latter Powers. I answered "undoubtedly, Yes - under certain circumstances". He expressed surprise and regret, but did not ask what the certain circumstances were. He said he would tell the Emperor what I had told him ...<sup>1</sup>

The King's answer met with Grey's unqualified approval. The Foreign Secretary wrote back:<sup>2</sup>

'Sir Edward Grey thinks it would be dangerous and misleading to let the German Government be under the impression that under no circumstances would England come to the assistance of France and Russia, if Germany and Austria went to war with them, and he thinks it very fortunate that your Majesty was able to give an answer to Prince Henry that will prevent him from giving that impression at Berlin.

Hereupon, Sir Edward set down "the certain circumstances" which might impel Britain to come to the assistance of France and Russia:

'Your Majesty's Government is not committed in the event of war, and the public opinion of this country is, so far as Sir Edward Grey can judge, very adverse to a war arising out of a quarrel about Servia. But if Austria attacked Servia aggressively, and Germany attacked Russia if she came to the assistance of

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolson, King George V, 206.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Servia, and France were then involved, it might become necessary for England to fight (as the German Chancellor said that Germany would fight) for the defence of her position in Europe, and for the protection of her own future and security.'

These words, written on December 10, 1912, when the first Balkan war had just come to an end and the danger now lay in Austria's irritation at Serbia's swaggering acquisitiveness, cannot but amaze one in their uncannily accurate prediction of the fatal developments two years later. But for us, their importance lies elsewhere: it lies in Grey's forthright statement that in the event of a war between Austria and Germany on the one hand, and Russia and France on the other, Britain might well be obliged to join France (and Russia); that British intervention would not be the result of any commitment to France (for no such commitment existed), and would not essentially be due to British involvement or concern in the immediate origins and cause of the struggle, but would result primarily (if not solely) from Britain's need to defend her own "position in Europe" and to protect her own "future and security". In short, Grey feared that a Continental war might well result in German hegemony over the entire Continent; and he believed (on excellent grounds) that such an hegemony would constitute a real threat not only to Britain's prestige and world position, but perhaps even to the very existence of her Empire and freedom of her isles. - For, nothing in the Anglo-German relations of the past eight years - and least of all the German naval policy - could lead one to believe that Germany, unopposed by any substantial Continental Power, would leave Britain unchallenged for long.

It was this fear that convinced Grey of the necessity of British intervention, in the event of a Continental war ... and this led him to look upon France as the main Continental check against the German threat.

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Twenty months later, the Foreign Secretary's dread misgivings began to materialise. The long-sputtering Austro-Serb feud burst forth, once again - but this time, in a manner that soon threatened to involve all Europe. This final crisis caused Grey to take up, again, his considerations of December 1912.

The crisis, provoked by the death of the Austrian Archduke (and his wife) at the hands of Serbian nationals, came to a head on July 23, with the despatch of the Austrian "Note" to Belgrade. During the four preceding weeks, Vienna, outraged by the murder, had sought in vain, through diplomatic channels, to have the Serbian authorities bring the culprits to justice. The Note of the 23rd, drawn up in an atmosphere of humiliating frustration and violent determination, showed a total lack of cool reflection. It was, in substance, an ultimatum framed to inflict the utmost humiliation upon the Slavic State. The terms of the Note shocked every Capital in Europe: they were an outrage against the most elementary notions and instincts of national sovereignty. No State - especially a Slavic one - could possibly submit to such terms, even if its refusal meant certain extinction. On July 25, minutes before the deadline expired, Belgrade communicated its reply. As expected, the reply was not an unconditional submission: Vienna lost no time in declaring it

"unsatisfactory". Thereupon, the struggle was definitely engaged.

From the moment Grey learned of the terms of the Austrian Note, he strove without cessation, to avert the ultimate clash. To the Austrians, he urged calmness and moderation: his plea only became more urgent, after the Serbian reply. But all his efforts and proposals finally came to naught. The Austrian Note had converted the whole issue to a clash of amours propres: on this ground, a settlement became impossible. Three days after Serbia's answer, Austria officially declared war.

The Austro-Serbian conflict, though quick in its final genesis, was even quicker in its effects. Wednesday, the 29th - the day following the declaration of war - found Russia ponderously engaged in military preparations for intervention against Austria, and Germany and France quietly but feverishly pressing to a war-footing their military installations along the whole length of their common frontier. Faced with these ominous developments, Sir Edward Grey, in his conversations, on that day, with Paul Cambon and Prince Lichnowski, turned his attention, briefly, from the new and gigantic task of bringing a détente between Austria and Russia, to the diplomatic need of forestalling all possible misapprehensions and illusions regarding Britain's policy both current and eventual.

M. Cambon was the first to be advised. No summary can convey so effectively Sir Edward's mind, purpose and deed, that day, as does his account of the interview to his Ambassador at Paris :

3  
Sir Edward Grey to Sir F. Bertie

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3

G. & T. XI, 180, No. 283. - For Cambon's account of the same day to Paris, see: D.D.F., 3eS., XI, 228, No. 281.



Foreign Office,  
July 29, 1914

Sir,

After telling M. Cambon to-day how grave the situation seemed to be, I told him that I meant to tell the German Ambassador to-day that he must not be misled by the friendly tone of our conversations into any sense of false security that we should stand aside if all the efforts to preserve the peace, which we were now making in common with Germany, failed. But I went on to say to M. Cambon that I thought it necessary to tell him also that public opinion here approached the present difficulty from a quite different point of view from that taken during the difficulty as to Morocco a few years ago. In the case of Morocco the dispute was one in which France was primarily interested and in which it appeared that Germany, in an attempt to crush France, was fastening a quarrel on France on a question that was the subject of a special agreement between France and us. In the present case the dispute between Austria and Servia was not one in which we felt called to take a hand. Even if the question became one between Austria and Russia we should not feel called upon to take a hand in it. It would then be a question of the supremacy of Teuton or Slav - a struggle for supremacy in the Balkans; and our idea had always been to avoid being drawn into a war over a Balkan question. If Germany became involved and France became involved, we had not made up our minds what we should do; it was a case that we should have to consider. France would then have been drawn into a quarrel which was not hers, but in which, owing to her alliance, her honour and interest obliged her to engage. We were free from engagements, and we should have to decide what British interests required us to do. I thought it necessary to say that, because, as he knew, we were taking all precautions with regard to our fleet, and I was about to warn Prince Lichnowsky not to count on our standing aside, but it would not be fair that I should let M. Cambon be misled into supposing that this meant that we had decided what to do in a contingency that I still hoped might not arise.

M. Cambon said that I had explained the situation very clearly ... He seemed quite prepared for this announcement and made no criticism upon it. ...

The interview with the German Ambassador, which Grey had anticipated, took place a short time later. - Again, we cannot do better than

to record Sir Edward's own account to the British Ambassador in Berlin (an account which, though written on the same day, was never despatched)<sup>4</sup>:

Sir,

After speaking to the German Ambassador this afternoon about the European situation, I said that I wished to say to him, in a quite private and friendly way, something that was on my mind. The situation was very grave. While it was restricted to the issues at present actually involved, we had no thought of interfering in it. But if Germany became involved in it, and then France, the issue might be so great that it would involve all European interests; and I did not wish him to be misled by the friendly tone of our conversation - which I hoped would continue - into thinking that we should stand aside.

He said that he quite understood this, but he asked whether I meant that we should, under certain circumstances, intervene?

I replied that I did not wish to say that, or to use anything that was like a threat or an attempt to apply pressure by saying that if things became worse, we should intervene. There would be no question of our intervening if Germany was not involved, or even if France was not involved. But we knew very well that if the issue did become such that we thought British interests required us to intervene, we must intervene at once, and the decision would have to be very rapid, just as the decisions of other Powers had to be. I hoped that the friendly tone of our conversations would continue as at present and that I should be able to keep as closely in touch with the German Government in working for peace. But if we failed in our efforts to keep the peace, and if the issue spread so that it involved practically every European interest, I did not wish to be open to any reproach from him or his Government into supposing that we should not take action, and to the reproach that, if they had not been so misled, the course of things might have been different.

The German Ambassador took no exception to what I had said; indeed, he told me that it accorded with what he had already given in Berlin as his view of the situation.

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In these two conversations of the 29th, Sir Edward, (as we have said,) apparently wished to prevent any misapprehensions and false expectations on the part of both the Germans and the French. Unfortunately, this clear statement only served to mislead M. Cambon - as the latter was to discover three days later. For, Sir Edward's communication, professing to be an exposé of Britain's current stand, was, in reality, far more.

True, Sir Edward very likely voiced the Cabinet's opinion at that moment, when he stated that Britain was bound by no obligations or pre-determined policies, either to intervene or to remain neutral; that she remained absolutely free to decide upon her ultimate course of action only when absolutely compelled to do so - that is, free to withhold all decision till she judged the moment opportune or imperative; and that she would then decide, only in the light of her interests - for the preservation of her "position" and the safeguard of her homeland and Empire.

In Grey's communications to both Cambon and Lichnowski, however, this statement was no more than a preface to his primary purpose, which was: to warn the German Government that Britain might well see, in a Franco-German conflict, a serious threat to both European and British "interests", and might, in consequence, be constrained to intervene (on the side of France, of course) in such a conflict.

Here, Sir Edward expressed, not the Cabinet's views, but his own personal convictions as set down in his letter of December 1912 to King George. Behind this warning to Germany lay his fear of German hegemony.

over Europe, and his conviction that such hegemony would be a serious threat to Britain and her Empire, and must therefore be prevented at all costs. Surely, neither Cambon nor Lichnowski could fail to perceive this basic premise. Cambon, for his part, could not but be expected to draw his premise to its logical conclusions - to wit, that France could count on Britain's ultimate assistance in the event of a Franco-German clash of arms.

Unfortunately, the French Ambassador failed to understand that this stand was a "private" one, held only by the Foreign Secretary and a very small segment of the Cabinet. The majority of the Cabinet Ministers shared no such basic apprehension and convictions; in all likelihood, they would have disagreed vehemently.

In this misunderstanding lay much of the drama of the coming days.

### III

Grey's interviews of the 29th opened the final chapter of Britain's pre-war diplomacy. The week that followed saw Europe pass from peace to war - and Britain finally join forces with France and Russia. This passage from a long-standing position of peace and non-entanglement, to partnership in war alongside France, constituted, for Britain, the main drama of these closing days. The main protagonists in this struggle were M. Paul Cambon and Sir Edward Grey.

Paul Cambon dominated the first phase of the drama; his rôle was simple and his approach direct. His was the task of securing from

the British Government a promise of assistance to France in the event of a Franco-German outbreak. His efforts, in their most dynamic period, extended from the 30th to the 1st. On the 30th, events were of such a nature and pace that a Franco-German conflict appeared not only probable but imminent; consequently, the Ambassador began urging Sir Edward for assurances. Two days later, however, Cambon was brought up short: from Sir Edward he suddenly learned the devastating fact that the Cabinet, on the very eve of war had, as yet, shown no intention of coming to the aid of France, and seemed to consider the idea most repugnant.

From this point on, it is the British Foreign Secretary who assumes the main burden of the action. His is the titanic struggle to bring to their senses a purblind, recalcitrant Cabinet majority ... But before passing on to this story, we must follow Cambon's démarches; for, only from these can we derive a true picture of the nature, extent - and rôle - of British commitments arising from the Conversations.

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On Wednesday, the 29th, the French Ambassador received the British Foreign Secretary's exposé with apparent equanimity. The situation, though serious, did not perturb him unduly, and Grey's statement, in its essence, was almost reassuring. Was not Sir Edward, in his warning to Lichnowski, paving the way to an eventual alignment with France? In any event, Cambon had, in reply to Grey, limited himself to a brief statement of the French position, which Grey recorded thus for Bertie<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> G. & T., XI, 180, No. 283.

He (Cambon) said that French opinion<sup>s</sup> was calm, but decided. He anticipated a demand from Germany that France would be neutral while Germany attacked Russia. This assurance France, of course, could not give; she was bound to help Russia if Russia was attacked.

For the moment, this sufficed.

The next day, however, Cambon suddenly considered the situation most urgent. From Paris came a detailed account of German and French military preparations<sup>6</sup>: French and German troops were now massed along the entire length of the common frontier - from the Luxemburg border, right down to the limits of the Vosges; but most alarming of all, German preparations (including the erection of fortifications, and systematic mobilisation,) were outstripping those of France. The nature and tempo of these German activities did not suggest mere defensive measures, or military ventures of any vague and distant future. The question of a Franco-German "evolvment", in view of all this, could no longer be viewed with academic detachment: the time had come for the British to give this eventuality careful consideration.

In his interview of the 30th with Grey, Cambon, therefore, saw fit to invoke the British promise of November 1912. - As Grey wrote to Bertie, on that day, <sup>7</sup>

M. Cambon reminded me to-day of the letter I had written to him two years ago, in which we agreed that, if the peace of Europe was seriously threatened, we would discuss what we were prepared to do. He said that the peace of Europe was never more seriously threatened that (sic: than) it was now. He did not wish

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6

G. & T., XI, 201, No. 319, Encl..

7

Ibid., No. 319. Also: D.D.F., 3eS., xi, No. 363, for Cambon's account of the same interview.

to ask me to say directly that we would intervene, but he would like me to say what we would do on certain hypotheses, i.e., if certain circumstances arose. The particular hypothesis he had in mind was an aggression by Germany on France. He gave me a paper ... showing that the German military preparations were more advanced and more on the offensive upon the frontier than anything France had yet done. He anticipated that the aggression would take the form of either a demand that France should cease her preparations or a demand that she should engage to remain neutral if there was war between Germany and Russia. Neither of these things could France admit.

I said that the Cabinet was to meet to-morrow morning, and I would see him again to-morrow afternoon.

On the following morning, Friday the 31st, Sir Edward Grey duly submitted M. Cambon's request to the Cabinet. After the meeting, he saw the Ambassador and transmitted the Cabinet's answer. "I said," Grey wrote to Bertie,<sup>8</sup> "that we had come to the conclusion, in the Cabinet to-day, that we could not give any pledge at the present time." Two points had dictated this decision: in the first place, "the commercial and financial situation was exceedingly serious; and there was danger of a complete collapse that would involve us and everyone else in ruin"; secondly, "up to the present moment we did not feel, and public opinion did not feel, that any treaties or obligations of this country were involved." Yet, "further developments might alter this situation and cause the Government and Parliament to take the view that intervention was justified. The preservation of the neutrality of Belgium might be, I would not say decisive, but an important factor, in determining our attitude..."

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G. & T., XI, 226-7, No. 367; - See also: D.D.F., 3eS., xi, No. 445.

At this reply, M. Cambon "expressed great disappointment". "He repeated his question", Grey continues, "of whether we would help France if Germany made an attack on her. I said that I could only adhere to the answer that, as far as things had gone at present, we could not make any engagement..." Against this, M. Cambon launched a final appeal, observing "that Germany had from the beginning rejected proposals that might have made for peace," and that "it would not be to England's interests that France should be crushed by Germany", for, Britain "should then be in a very diminished position with regard to Germany."

Finally, the Ambassador asked Grey whether he could not submit his question to the Cabinet again. Grey assured him that he could, "as soon as there was some new development."

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Although M. Cambon had seen fit to invoke the Foreign Secretary's letter of November 1912, and to insist that the French request for assurances of eventual armed support be submitted once again to the British Government for reconsideration, not once, in the interviews of the 30th or 31st, did he even suggest that Britain had any commitments or obligations in this matter, towards France. His sole argument for British cooperation in the event of war, was based on an appeal to British self-interest, and this British self-interest would remain the basis of



all subsequent pleas<sup>9</sup>.

But if the French Ambassador no more than implied (by abstention) his recognition of British non-commitment, the French President of the Republic, on the other hand, made an explicit and formal avowal. On July 31, M. Poincaré sent a private letter to King George, pledging France's continued cooperation with Britain in her efforts to preserve peace, but stating, at the same time, that the best deterrent to German aggressiveness would be a public proclamation, by Britain, of her intention to come to the assistance of France and Russia should the Central Powers engage in war. - Wrote M. Poincaré:<sup>10</sup>

De toutes les informations qui nous arrivent, il résulte que, si l'Allemagne avait la certitude que le Gouvernement anglais n'intervint pas dans un conflit où la France serait engagée, la guerre serait inévitable et qu'en revanche, si l'Allemagne avait la certitude que l'Entente Cordiale s'affirmerait, le cas échéant, il y aurait les plus grandes chances pour que la paix ne fût pas troublée.

Sans doute, nos accords militaires et navals laissent entière la liberté du Gouvernement de Votre Majesté, et dans les lettres échangées en 1912 entre Sir Edward Grey et M. Paul Cambon, l'Angleterre et la France se sont simplement engagées, l'une envers l'autre, à causer entre elles en cas de tension européenne et à examiner ensemble s'il y aurait lieu à une action commune.

Mais le caractère d'intimité que le sentiment public a donné, dans les deux pays, à l'entente de l'Angleterre et de la France, la confiance avec laquelle nos deux gouvernements n'ont cessé de travailler au maintien de la paix, les sympathies que Votre Majesté a toujours témoignées à la France m'autorisent à lui faire con-

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With the exception of one instance - on August 1st, when, more by a slip of the tongue than by intention, he made some allusion to "obligations" and was promptly corrected by Sir Edward and withdrew the unfortunate word (See: G. & T., XI, 260, No. 447: Grey to Bertie, Aug. 1st, 1914).

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D.D.F., 3eS., xi, 372-3, No. 457.

naître en toute franchise mes impressions, qui sont celles du Gouvernement de la République et de la France entière.

C'est, je crois, du langage et de la conduite du Gouvernement anglais que dépendent désormais les dernières possibilités d'une solution pacifique...

This letter was delivered to the King on the evening of the 31st.

In keeping with France's unimpeachable conduct in these tense and desperate days, the communication constituted a most correct statement of Anglo-French relations and bonds on the eve of the war ... Indeed, one might say that M. Poincaré had gone to excess, in his clear affirmation of British non-commitment: for, in point of fact, Britain was most definitely committed to France in one respect - the naval sphere.

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In 1912, (as we saw in Chapter 8,) the British had recalled their Mediterranean Fleet to home waters, and the French, after some hesitation, had agreed to transfer their own naval forces from their northern and western coasts to the Mediterranean. The necessary denuding of France's northern and western waters had given rise to the Grey-Cambon letters of 1912, which, in effect, guaranteed that, either Britain would undertake the defence of these French coasts, or France would be notified in time to assure their protection herself. Clearly, this agreement did constitute a commitment, for Britain; though not necessarily a commitment to join France in war, should a war involving France arise. The commitment came into effect in 1913, when the actual Anglo-French "redistribution" was completed. At the end of July, 1914, the Anglo-French naval arrangement was still in operation -

and the British obligation, therefore, still effective.

In his conversations of the 30th and 31st, with Grey, the French Ambassador made no reference whatsoever to this naval commitment. We can suppose that this was not due to forgetfulness or neglect, on his part: he had too good a memory for such things; moreover, there were people at the Embassy - among them the Naval Attaché - who could be counted on to have reminded him. It is more logical to conclude that M. Cambon was, at this time, still certain of immediate British intervention in the event of war, and felt it therefore unnecessary to press the naval point, which would automatically be taken care of upon Britain's intervention.

On Saturday, August 1st, however, Cambon's apparent assumption of British intervention was utterly shattered, and the Ambassador suddenly found himself obliged to bring up the naval problem. How this came about is a matter of no small interest.

On the previous day (July 31st), Grey had promised Cambon that the question of British assurances to France would be referred again to the Cabinet "as soon as there was some new development". Within a matter of hours, the Foreign Secretary had been deluged with "new developments": Germany issued a decree of "Kriegsgefahrzustand", and her military preparations became still more pronounced; Russia and Austria gave the order for General Mobilisation; and from the Franco-German border came rumours and accounts of hostile German acts. But the worst news of all arrived from St. Petersburg, where shortly before midnight (St. Petersburg time) the German Ambassador at the Russian Court called

upon the Russian Foreign Minister to warn him officially that if Russia did not begin to demobilise within twelve hours, Germany would be obliged to resort to total mobilisation herself<sup>11</sup>. The ultimatum left it clearly understood that war was the alternative.

It was in the wake of this news, that the French Ambassador appeared at the Foreign Office at mid-day, on Saturday, the 1st, to see the Foreign Secretary after the morning Cabinet. The events of the past twenty-four hours had, evidently, altered the situation considerably, and there were sound grounds for hoping that the Cabinet would be moved, thereby, to a more sympathetic consideration of Cambon's request.

M. Cambon, however, was in for a rude shock. The British Cabinet, proved more adamant than ever, and Sir Edward Grey's communication, following the ministerial meeting, did nothing to attenuate their decision.

After the Cabinet to-day, (wrote Grey to Bertie<sup>12</sup>), I told M. Cambon that the present position differed entirely from that created by the Morocco incidents. In the latter, Germany made upon France demands that France could not grant, and in connection with which we had undertaken special obligations towards France. In these, public opinion would have justified the British Government in supporting France to the utmost of their ability. Now the position was that Germany would agree not to attack France if France remained neutral in the event of war between Russia and Germany. If France could not take advantage of this position it was because she was bound by an alliance to which we were not parties, and of which we did not know the terms. This did not mean that under no circumstances would we assist France, but it did mean that France must

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<sup>11</sup> G. & T., XI, p. 241, Nos. 397-8; and pp 244-5, No. 407.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 253, No. 426.

take her own decision at this moment without reckoning on an assistance that we were not now in a position to promise.

M. Cambon said that he could not transmit this reply to his Government, and he asked me to authorise him to say that the British Cabinet had not yet taken any decision.

I said that we had come to a decision; that we could not propose to Parliament at this moment to send an expeditionary military force to the Continent. Such a step had always been regarded here as very dangerous and doubtful. It was one that we could not propose, and Parliament would not authorise unless our interests and obligations were deeply and desperately involved.

M. Cambon said that the French coasts were undefended. The German fleet might come through the Straits any day and attack them.

I said that that might alter public feeling here, and so might the violation of the neutrality of Belgium. He could tell his Government that we were already considering the Belgian point, and that I would ask the Cabinet to consider the point about the French coasts. He could say that the Cabinet had not yet taken any decision on these points.

This telegram to Bertie, here rendered in toto, gives some idea of the Grey-Cambon relations on this day. But it is only a partial account: in a further communication to Bertie, bearing the same date, Grey added some pertinent details:<sup>13</sup>

M. Cambon to-day, in the conversation that is partially recorded in my telegram No. 299 of the 1st August, urged upon me very strongly our obligation to help France if she was attacked by Germany. He even said that, for the sake of public opinion in England, France had drawn her forces back from her German frontier, so that she was now in a position to take only the defensive, and not the offensive against Germany. She had concentrated her fleet in the Mediterranean and had left her northern and western coasts exposed.

I said that, as long as we did not give Germany any promise of our neutrality - and as a matter of fact we

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Ibid., 260, No. 447.

had hitherto definitely refused to give such a promise - the French might be sure that the German fleet would not pass through the channel, for fear that we would take the opportunity of intervening, when the German fleet would be at our mercy. I promised, however, to see whether we could give any assurance that, in such circumstances, we would intervene.

As to the question of our obligations to help France, I pointed out that we had no obligation. France did not wish to join in the war that seemed about to break out, but she was obliged to join it, because of her alliance. We had purposely kept clear of all alliances, in order that we might not be involved in difficulties in this way. I had assured Parliament again and again that our hands were free. It was most unreasonable to say that, because France had an obligation under an alliance of which we did not even know the terms, therefore we were bound equally with her, by obligation in that alliance, to be involved in war.

M. Cambon admitted that there was no obligation of this kind, but he urged very strongly the obligation of British interests. If we did not help France, the entente would disappear: and whether the victory came to Germany or to France and Russia, our situation at the end of the war would be very uncomfortable.

I admitted the force of this, but I said that it was for us to consider the point of what British interests required, and to deal with it in Parliament. I was aware that very grave considerations were involved.

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While Sir Edward's two accounts give us a clear idea of his and Cambon's respective stands and main arguments, they afford very little insight into the dramatic and emotional development of the interview. In point of fact, the conversation of that Saturday left the two men utterly - and literally - shaken with emotion<sup>14</sup>. Cambon in particular was most affected. Grey's statement left him with the

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<sup>14</sup>

See: Nicolson, Carnock, 418-9.

distinct impression that the Cabinet was now driven by an all-dominant fear of becoming involved in the conflict now imminent. Britain, in this hour of dire<sup>st</sup> crisis, seemed now to be fleeing behind her wall of isolation ...

The shock of this discovery (apparently unexpected) left Cambon utterly dazed. A few minutes after leaving Sir Edward, the Ambassador "staggered into Nicolson's room", "white and speechless". The Permanent Under-Secretary hurried over to him, and took his hands to guide him to a chair. "Ils vont nous lâcher, ils vont nous lâcher," was all that the Ambassador could say<sup>15</sup>.

It had taken this, for Cambon to bring up Britain's naval commitment.

#### IV

Indeed, on that afternoon of the 1st, there were sound reasons for fearing that Cambon's shocked words, "ils vont nous lâcher", might prove true. The situation, as Cambon saw it, he summed up in an exceptional, undiplomatic comment to the Foreign Editor of the Times, who visited him at the French Embassy in the course of the afternoon. "Que faites-vous, M. Cambon?" Mr. Wickham Steed asked the Ambassador. "J'attends de savoir", Cambon replied, "si le mot honneur doit être rayé du vocabulaire anglais."<sup>16</sup>

As it happened, this view, so bluntly stated, was shared by a

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<sup>15</sup> This account is given by Nicolson in Carnock, p. 419.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolson, Carnock, 420, quoting from an article by Charles Roux, entitled "Veillée des d'Armes à Londres", published in the Revue des Deux Mondes, Aug. 15, 1926 (p. 739).

a significant - in fact, it would seem, the most significant - segment of the higher personnel of the Foreign Office. Just the day before, Sir Eyre Crowe, troubled in the extreme by the swift and ever accelerating degeneration of international relations, had taken the liberty of addressing, to Sir Edward Grey, "some simple thoughts" - as Sir Eyre called them - "which the grave situation suggested to my mind."<sup>17</sup> These "simple thoughts" comprised a memorandum embodying a systematic and highly persuasive argument against British neutrality and in favour of British assistance to France in the event of a Franco-German war. His main plea ran as follows:

"The argument that there is no written bond binding us to France is strictly correct. There is no contractual obligation. But the Entente has been made, strengthened, put to the test and celebrated in a manner justifying the belief that a moral bond was being forged. The whole policy of the Entente can have no meaning if it does not signify that in a just quarrel England would stand by her friends. This honourable expectation has been raised. We cannot repudiate it without exposing our good name to grave criticism."<sup>18</sup>

In substance, Crowe's view was identical with that of the French Ambassador, whose shock from the interview with Grey sprang precisely (or at least in part) from his belief in that "honourable expectation" so carefully nurtured over the years of cordial entente ... And to Crowe's and Cambon's insistence, that Britain's honour was at stake, there was added yet another voice: that of Nicolson, the Permanent Under-Secretary.

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<sup>17</sup>

G. & T., XI, 228, No. 369; Crowe to Grey, July 31, 1914.

<sup>18</sup>

Ibid., Enclosure: "Memorandum by Sir E. Crowe, July 31st, 1914."



When, immediately after the Grey-Cambon interview of the 1st, Nicolson learned, from the shaken Cambon, the tenor of Grey's reply, the Under-Secretary in turn was taken aback. Leaving the Ambassador alone in his office, Nicolson hurried over to Grey, to seek confirmation of Cambon's account from the Secretary himself. He found Sir Edward "pacing his room, biting at his lower lip". Was it true, he asked, coming straight to the point, "that we had refused to support France at the moment of her greatest danger?" To this, "Grey made no answer beyond a gesture of despair." This silent avowal apparently astounded Nicolson: "You will make us," he said angrily, "a by-word among nations." - And on these words the Under-Secretary left the room.<sup>19</sup>

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But if Sir Edward was troubled, that afternoon, it was not solely because of his interview with Cambon, not merely because of a feeling of leaving France in the lurch. Grey's problem was far greater, went far deeper. It sprang, basically, from his view and estimation of the German menace, from the immediacy of this menace, and from his fear that the Cabinet, Parliament and Nation might awaken too late to the peril at hand ... Beside this preoccupation, Crowe's thesis of "moral obligation" and Nicolson's question of "honour" must have seemed almost trivial.

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<sup>19</sup>

Nicolson, Carnock, 419.

Earlier in this chapter (i.e., section II), we paused, for a moment, on Grey's concept of the "German peril". For Grey, this fear of German hegemony was no passing misgiving; it was a fear deeply rooted in his mind - a fear which German diplomacy had sown at the very outset of his term of Office and had carefully (if unintentionally) nourished over the years. Grey had assumed the direction of the Foreign Office just in time to witness, at close hand, the last stage of the pre-Algéciras crisis. His first vivid impression was of a bullying Germany, fired by imaginary grievances (such as the illusion of an "Einkreisung") into a diplomatic assault upon the Anglo-French entente, quite evidently under the operational dictum: "Divide et impera". This first experience, no doubt, left a deep (if not indelible) impression upon Grey's mind; at least, it awakened in him a dislike and distrust of Germany, which the years that followed - the naval race, the Agadir crisis, the constant diplomatic friction and tension - did nothing to banish, but - on the contrary - only served to galvanise into a fundamental and all-dominating fear of German power and dread of German domination over Europe. Thus was it that he came to see Germany, and German hegemony over the Continent, as the one great threat, not only to the European "balance", but to Britain's very security - to her position and her most vital interests.

It can be maintained, I think, that this "German Spectre", together with Grey's abiding love of peace and quest for universal good relations, formed the foundation of his foreign policy. Furthermore, it can be maintained that this "German Spectre" established the limits of his

pursuit of peace and good relations; for, dominating this double pursuit, was Grey's prime duty - to safe-guard and to further Britain's interests: in short, to preserve intact Britain's position and her empire.

But the German threat had other and more manifest effects upon Grey's policy. Its chief achievements were the intensification of Anglo-French friendship and the struggle to realise and to preserve the rather tenuous Anglo-Russian entente. It was, however, in the Anglo-French realm, that its effects were most significant.

Sir Edward, having sensed the German danger from the outset, had immediately fastened upon France, through the already existent Anglo-French entente, as the only adequate buttress against this threat. France alone, he early perceived, stood in the path of German hegemony; she alone, of all the Continental Powers, could be counted on to challenge, with any measure of effect, a German "Napoleonic venture". - In short, only France stood between Germany and Britain.

Grey's concept of the German menace, and of France's importance in the light of this menace, led inevitably to certain unavoidable conclusions. - Should Germany ever venture forth, and France ever be allowed to fall before Germany's might, the German threat would then be brought to Britain's very shores. Britain must therefore see to it that in the event of a Franco-German conflict, everything necessary was done to bolster French resistance - even if this meant (as it well must) British armed assistance ...

... And with this final reference to British armed assistance, we are left to face the question of the Anglo-French Staff Conversations - to wit: was it because of the German spectre, and because of Grey's resultant conviction that Britain must join France in the event of a Franco-German struggle, that the Foreign Secretary sanctioned and abetted the conversations and joint planning?

With regard to Grey's original sanction, in 1906, we know, from our study of the genesis of the Conversations, that this was not so. At the time of Algé-ciras, Grey consented to the Conversations, not because of an overriding fear of German hegemony, but because (1) he felt that Germany had challenged France over a question (Morocco) in which Britain was diplomatically committed to France; because (2) he was certain that if Germany pushed the quarrel to the point of war, British public opinion would be righteously insensed at such coercion, and would authorise the Government to join France in arms, in resisting German military force; and finally (3) because British armed assistance, should it ever be required and authorised, would have to come at the outbreak of hostilities, to be effective, and such promptness would be impossible unless military (and naval) arrangements had been drawn up in advance through Anglo-French Staff conversations.

Thus, then, was the line of reasoning that lay behind Grey's original assent. But with the Algé-ciras settlement, this reasoning lost its validity. The conversations, however, continued; and Sir Edward Grey never attempted to put an end to them, even though he was apprised of their continuation, and informed (directly, as well as through the Imperial Defence Committee's deliberations) of their

nature ... This tolerance, though, need not surprise us. On the one hand, Grey, having given his consent, left the responsibility of their supervision and control to Haldane, head of the War Office, and a person in whose sagacity Grey had utter confidence. Furthermore, as early as 1908, there is evidence that the idea of the German menace had already taken root, not only in Grey's mind, but in that of the Ministers and Officers who regularly attended the Imperial Defence Committee discussions; and that, already, at this stage, the Conversations had come to be viewed as an integral part of Britain's "precautionary measures". In any event, the Cabinet deliberations of November 1911, and the naval decisions of 1912, lifted the Staff conversations and the joint military and naval planning most definitively to a quasi-official (though secret and non-committal) policy status - thereby consecrating the German threat Britain's chief danger and preoccupation.

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But to return to the main thread of our story: Uppermost in the mind of the Foreign Secretary, after the Austro-Serb outburst of July 28, was the thought of the German peril. As was to be expected, this preoccupation left its mark on Grey's appreciation of the final crisis.

To him, the origins of the crisis - the issues that gave rise to it, the responsibilities and guilt of the parties involved, and the question of Britain's commitment, or involvement of interests, in the dispute - mattered far less than the ultimate outcome of the crisis. The

only pertinent - and determining - question that arose, for him, was whether the Austro-Serb struggle would result in a general war involving France and Germany also. Upon this question alone hung Grey's course of action. - If the crisis led to a Franco-German clash, then Britain would have no choice but to intervene.

Actually, this basic consideration of Britain's eventual course of action did not come up before the Cabinet until July 30th - the day the Cabinet took up, for the first time, the question of Belgian neutrality. On the following day - Friday, the 31st - the discussion turned to what was, for Grey, the nub of the problem: eventual assistance to France. But only on Saturday, August 1st, did the Cabinet really begin to come to grips with this problem ... and did Grey discover, in the course of that morning's deliberations that the vast majority of his colleagues in no way shared his basic fears and convictions.

This discovery, of course, did not come as a surprise, to Grey, In his *mémoires*, eleven years later, he listed, under four heads, "the convictions and considerations that were dominant in my mind throughout that week": the third conviction sums up his stand, and his misgivings regarding the Cabinet. It reads:

3. That, if war came, the interest of Britain required that we should not stand aside, while France fought alone in the West, but must support her. I knew it to be very doubtful whether the Cabinet, Parliament, and the country would take this view on the outbreak of war, and through the whole of this week I had in view the probable contingency that we should not decide at the critical moment to support France. In that event I should have to resign;

but the decision of the country could not be forced, and the contingency might not arise, and meanwhile I must go on.<sup>19a</sup>

Over the years, of course, the Cabinet had agreed to certain actions and policies - such as the continuation of the staff conversations, the repeated naval increases, the 1912 fleet redistribution, and Anglo-French naval co-ordination - that, clearly, had been based on the hypothesis of a British struggle with Germany, and on the thesis that Britain's only serious threat was Germany.

Moreover, in the days immediately following the Austrian declaration of war, the Cabinet had been most amenable and cooperative. They had consented to Churchill's wish not to disperse the fleet just back from a "trial mobilization". They had agreed with Grey that it was both proper and wise to warn Germany against assuming that Britain would remain neutral in the event of a Continental war, and had promptly rejected a German proposition requiring a British promise of neutrality. Finally, they had allowed the Foreign Secretary to send out, to both Germany and France, a request for assurances that these countries would not violate Belgian neutrality. These signs, plus their whole-hearted support of Grey's every suggestion and effort to effect some settlement, or at least a *détente*, between Austria and Serbia, then Austria and Russia, seemed to indicate that the Cabinet not only were aware of the gravity of the crisis, but also appreciated the deeper danger, of a German bid for hegemony over Europe, that lurked behind the crisis.

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<sup>19a</sup>

Grey, II, 158, (3 vol. ed.).

The debate over a promise of assistance to France, however, shattered this last illusion. On Friday, the 31st, as we have seen, the Cabinet, apprised by Grey of Cambon's request, avoided all decision by insisting that the situation was not yet sufficiently alarming to warrant such a consideration. On the following day - Saturday, August 1st - however, the news was so ominous and the situation so alarming, that they could procrastinate no longer. Put thus to the wall, an overwhelming majority of the Ministers reacted violently. The struggle about to be engaged, this majority contended, did not concern or involve Britain in any way. Britain was in no way committed to France; furthermore, France was about to enter into a conflict with Germany, not as a result of any direct dispute with, or any grievance against, Germany, but merely because of the terms of her alliance with Russia. This last point alone banished any moral obligation on the part of the British to come to the aid of the French.

Essentially, this argument was no argument at all: rather, it was an emotional outburst. It did not spring from any clear-eyed appraisal of the situation, or cool-headed appreciation of Britain's position and interests. It sprang from sheer fear and hatred of the very idea of war, and dread of the cost to the nation - both in effort and in lives - of British participation. In short, it was nothing other than an attempt to rationalise an instinctive and blinding wish for non-involvement and isolation.

For, the majority of the Cabinet were ingrained pacifists, whose pacifism could be traced to the Boer-War's Rosebery-Bannerman feud. By



tradition, the greater part were politically insular (and thus in effect isolationist) in outlook, with very little knowledge and still less understanding of international realities, and consequently possessed of the most myopic and superficial view of the significance, implications, and potentialities of developments actual or imminent.

Opposing this majority were a very small group, which included Haldane, Churchill, McKenna, Grewe, Samuels, and - though most tactfully - the Prime Minister himself. Over the years, these men, either through sheer interest, or because of their Office, or both, had followed closely, and had come to grasp thoroughly, the true course and pattern of Continental developments. Their views coincided with Grey's.

On the morning of the 1st, however, this minority were helpless. The majority, finally confronted with imminent war, turned truculent and adamant, and seemed bent on keeping Britain out of the impending Continental collision at all costs - even at the cost of a Cabinet crisis and ultimately of the break-up of the Government.

And thus it was that, after the Cabinet of the 1st, Sir Edward found himself confronted with the unpleasant task of having to convey, to a hopeful Cambon, the Cabinet's decision and stand. This he did, with utter loyalty to the Cabinet, and scrupulous exactitude: before Cambon - and to the Ambassador's amazement, no doubt - he made no effort to disassociate himself from the verdict, gave no inkling of his personal dissent. No doubt his mission, and the Ambassador's reaction, caused him discomfort - to say the least ... But no doubt, either, Grey's greatest concern and anxiety, that afternoon, sprang from the Cabinet's

seemingly unalterable stand of that morning. - Could such a majority, in such a mood, be brought round in time, and without permanent or fatal injury to the Government? ...

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Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary was to be spared the anguish of having to wait with folded arms, while the Prime Minister, with his "festina lente", plied his Cabinet magic.

Unwittingly, the Cabinet had, through their peremptory decision, that morning, provoked a question that would ultimately prove to be the "thin edge of the wedge". - The question was, of course, Britain's 1912 naval commitment, of which Cambon had lost no time in reminding Sir Edward that afternoon.

The Anglo-French naval coordination of 1912 - from which this commitment arose - had been founded on the same premise as the Staff Conversations: namely, on the assumption that Britain's interests would compel her to come to the aid of the French in the event of a Franco-German war. In view of this, therefore, there had been no need for either Cambon or Grey to refer to the naval commitment so long as timely British intervention seemed likely. Now, however, the attitude and temper of the Cabinet majority was such, that this timely assent to British intervention seemed (to say the least) doubtful - since any effort to convert the majority apparently threatened to break up the Government. Under these circumstances, the matter of British naval obligations to

France became a separate, special and most urgent question demanding immediate and definitive settlement.

That afternoon, sometime after his interview with Cambon, Grey received a reminder from his Permanent Under-Secretary:

Sir Edward Grey,

M. Cambon pointed out to me this afternoon that it was at our request that France had moved her fleets to the Mediterranean, on the understanding that we undertook the protection of her Northern and Western coasts. As I understand you told him that you would submit to the Cabinet the question of a possible German naval attack on the French Northern and western Ports it would be well to remind the Cabinet of the fact.

A.N. 20

To this note, Sir Edward was able immediately to append the following minute: "I have spoken to the P.M., and attach great importance to the point being settled to-morrow."<sup>21</sup>

How earnest Grey was, would be made evident to Cambon that very evening.

## V

By sundown, that Saturday, Grey's quandary had begun to dissolve.

At six o'clock that evening, St. Petersburg time, the German Ambassador to Russia appeared before the Russian Foreign Minister and handed him a declaration of war. The news reached London sometime before six (Greenwich time) that same evening: Churchill was dining alone at the Admiralty, when a Foreign Office messenger delivered the notice.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> G. & T., XI, 252, No. 424.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., "Minute".

<sup>22</sup> There is no trace, in Gooch & Temperley, of the notice quoted by Churchill, which he says he received (Churchill, I, 217): the first official notice arrived from St. Petersburg at 11:15 that night (see: G. & T., XI, 259, No. 445).

Immediately, the First Lord hurried over to Asquith's residence, where he found the Prime Minister surrounded by Grey, Haldane, Crewe and perhaps others. Without losing a moment, he bluntly announced that he "intended instantly to mobilize the Fleet notwithstanding the Cabinet decision" (to the contrary, that morning).<sup>23</sup>

Taking quick leave of the gathering, Churchill was joined by Sir Edward Grey, who told him, as they stepped out of the Prime Minister's drawing room: "You should know that I have done a very important thing. I have told Cambon that we shall not allow the German fleet to come into the Channel."<sup>24</sup>

Actually, Grey's communication to the French Ambassador, following the news of the German declaration of war, was not so definite a commitment as Grey's words to Churchill would lead us to believe: that evening, Cambon wired to Paris -

...les escadres anglaises sont mobilisées et Sir E. Grey proposera à ses collègues de déclarer qu'elles (the naval squadrons) s'opposeront au passage du détroit par les escadres allemandes ou, si elles ont passé, à toute démonstration sur les côtes françaises.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, his assurance to Cambon did go farther than his earlier promise. In his conversation following the morning's Cabinet meeting, Grey had undertaken merely to submit the question to the Cabinet: now he went so far as to define what he would propose, and to commit him-

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Churchill, I, 217.

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Ibid.

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D.D.F., 3eS., xi, 424, 532.

self, before Cambon, to seeing that it was accepted in Cabinet. How serious Grey judged his promise to be, we may judge from his announcement to Churchill.

At any rate, in the next day's early Cabinet (Sunday, August 2nd) Sir Edward made good his promise; and his success was unqualified.

On the previous morning, the Cabinet had been irascible and adamant, and the minority hesitant to press their views for fear that a Cabinet crisis might ensue. On Sunday morning, however, Grey and his partisans had the upperhand. Germany was now at war with Russia; and France, because of her alliance with the latter, was also a party to the conflict. Yet, while France had so far refrained from all aggressive acts across her eastern frontier, and still carefully observed the ten kilometer zone all along her border, Germany, on the other hand, though not having yet declared war on France, had already begun her western aggression: early that morning, German troops had begun to march into the Duchy of Luxembourg, their ultimate objective being evidently Belgium, then France.

Confronted with these facts, with the certainty of German violation of Belgian territory, and with the imminence of a Franco-German clash, the Cabinet majority were badly shaken. While they would still maintain that Britain should not participate in the impending conflict, all but two - Burns and Morley - would finally surrender, that morning, on issues which, though important, were not decisive in Britain's going to war.

The discussion, that morning, ranged over Fleet mobilisation, British protection of French coasts, Britain's attitude regarding violation

of Belgium, and even - so it would seem - the eventuality and possibility of despatching the Expeditionary Force to the Continent. As for the outcome - Churchill secured his colleagues' post factum approval of his mobilisation orders already despatched; but the real victory went to Grey, who obtained the assent of the majority, to his assurances to France, that Britain would safeguard the French denuded coasts and coastal shipping against German naval attacks.

Grey's position, in this question, was unassailable. The Cabinet itself had authorised the Anglo-French naval talks of 1912 and given its consent to the redistribution that followed. It had been fully apprised of - and had fully agreed to - the French conditions attached to this naval cooperation, to wit, that in the event of a Franco-German war, Britain should either protect the denuded French coasts herself, or give the French sufficient notice of her refusal to undertake this defence, so that the French might take the necessary naval dispositions to see to the defence themselves.

Now, of course, war was an hourly possibility; and while the German fleet was within hours of the denuded French coasts, the French fleet, concentrated in the Mediterranean, was within days' sailing distance. - But above all, Britain's own interests forbade a French evacuation from the Mediterranean: on the one hand, her communications with her Mediterranean and Asian possessions, and the threat thereto, not only from the Austrian and the German navy, but perhaps also by the Turkish and Italian, made it absolutely essential that Britain have a strong friendly force in those waters; yet on the other hand, Britain, faced with a possible war with Germany, could not afford to weaken her

Home Fleet to fill the vacuum which a French naval withdrawal would cause.<sup>26</sup> In view of these facts, then, Britain had no choice but to guarantee the safety of the denuded French coasts and coastal shipping.

Thus, Grey's stand was incontrovertible. - Yet, the implications and dangers of the guarantee were frightening. Should Britain assume this defence, and should Germany choose to ignore the British warning and attempt to pass her fleet through the Channel and attack French ports or coastal ships, would not the British Fleet have to intervene by force? - And would this not automatically involve her in a war with Germany? The danger was real; and it moved at least two Ministers, John Burns and Lord Morley, to give notice of their intention to resign, should this guarantee be given France. The remainder of the "opposition", however, finally, if reluctantly, submitted: Britain did have a commitment which she must honour and there was no practicable alternative to the assurance. The only proviso attached to this guarantee, was the stipulation that it must meet with the assent of Parliament: this, Grey would attempt to secure, in his address to the House scheduled for the following day.

Cambon was waiting at the Foreign Office, when Grey returned from the Cabinet. The Foreign Secretary handed the Ambassador the aide mémoire drawn up in Cabinet:

"I am authorised to give an assurance that if the German fleet comes into the Channel or through the North Sea

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Judging from all that was said by Grey and Cambon, and particularly from Grey's speech to the House, of the 3rd, the latter argument alone - i.e., the one based on British interests - determined the Cabinet's decision.

to undertake hostile operations against French coasts or shipping the British fleet will give all the protection in its power.

"This assurance is of course subject to the policy of His Majesty's Government receiving the support of Parliament and must not be taken as binding His Majesty's Government to take any action until the above contingency of action by the German fleet takes place."<sup>27</sup>

Sir Edward then went on to explain that the Government had

very large questions and most difficult issues to consider, and that the Government felt that they could not bind themselves to declare war upon Germany necessarily, if war broke out between France and Germany to-morrow, but it was essential to the French Government, whose fleet had long been concentrated in the Mediterranean, to know how to make their dispositions with their north coast entirely undefended. We therefore thought it necessary to give them this assurance. It did not bind us to go to war with Germany unless the German fleet took the action indicated, but it did give a security to France that would enable her to settle the disposition of her own Mediterranean fleet.<sup>28</sup>

M. Cambon asked about the violation of Luxembourg, and was referred to "the doctrine on that point laid down by Lord Derby and Lord Clarendon in 1867". He then asked what Britain would say about the violation of Belgian territory; to this Grey answered: "that was a much more important matter; we were considering what statement we should make in Parliament to-morrow, in effect whether we should declare violation of Belgium neutrality to be a casus belli. I told him (i.e., Cambon) what had been said to the German Ambassador on this point."

At this point, and without any preliminaries, Sir Edward - according to this same account written to Sir Francis Bertie - went

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Quoted in full to Bertie, in Grey's despatch of that day: G. & T., XI, 274-5, No. 487.

28

Ibid.



off on a most surprising and revealing tangent. It will be recalled that he had said, at the very outset, that "the Government felt that they could not bind themselves to declare war upon Germany necessarily, if war broke out between France and Germany to-morrow": now, however, he suddenly engaged upon a discussion regarding the eventual disposition of the British Expeditionary Force:

I also explained how at the beginning of a great catastrophe such as this European war, of which no one could foresee the consequences where we had such enormous responsibilities in our Empire, as in India, or as regards countries in our occupation such as Egypt, when even the conditions of naval warfare and the responsibility of protecting our coasts under these conditions were untried, it was impossible safely to send our military force out of the country.

M. Cambon asked whether this meant that we should never do it.

I replied that it dealt only with the present moment. He dwelt upon the moral effect of our sending only two divisions. But I said that to send so small a force as two or even four divisions abroad at the beginning of a war would entail the maximum of risk to them and produce the minimum of effect.

We may legitimately ask ourselves whether Grey intended, by this digression, to soften his warning that Britain might not see fit to join France in the war. Cambon's account to Paris<sup>29</sup>, however, seems to dispell this theory; in his despatch to Paris, he makes it clear that at this stage British intervention in the coming conflict is very far from certain; and he treats the question of the Expeditionary Force as chose à part - that is, as simply a warning that even if Britain finally does decide to join France in the struggle,

military aid on the Continent will very likely not be forthcoming at first.

No doubt this is the way Grey meant it to be understood. - And on closer scrutiny, we may read, in his words, a simple but all-important wish to warn the French once again, as he had on the previous day, not to assume that Britain's entry into the war would automatically mean the despatch of her Expeditionary Force to the Continent in accordance with the long-established and carefully elaborated Anglo-French joint plans...

For, while the Cabinet were busy debating the principles of British intervention, a small group of Ministers - among them: Asquith, Grey and Churchill - were already giving close attention to military and naval plans and preparations, on the hypothesis (if not the assumption) of an early intervention. - One indication of this subliminal activity (and a most pertinent one, in view of the above), is a note, which the Prime Minister jotted down, that day: "The dispatch of the Expeditionary Force to help France at this moment is out of the question and would serve no object."<sup>30</sup> - And Churchill's activities, that very afternoon, provide (as we shall now see) still further evidence of this discreet "anticipation".

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Indeed, the first person to act upon the Cabinet decision of that morning was the First Lord, Winston Churchill. On returning to the Admiralty, that afternoon, he despatched a cable to his Commanders-

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Spender & Asquith, II, 104.

in-Chief:

"To-day, August 2, at 2:20 the following note was handed to the French and German Ambassadors. (Begins) The British Government would not allow the passage of German ships through the English Channel or the North Sea in order to attack the coasts or shipping of France (ends).  
"Be prepared to meet surprise attacks."<sup>31</sup>

We may note in passing, that this message was inaccurate on one point. Sir Edward had not advised the German Ambassador of the assurance to France - and had no intention of advising him before he informed Parliament. Grey set this error to right in a special note to Cambon later on in the day<sup>32</sup>.

But to continue: Churchill followed up his wire by summoning the French Naval Attaché to the Admiralty<sup>33</sup>. An official Compte rendu<sup>34</sup> drawn up at the end of the meeting, reveals the purpose and nature of the conversation:

The First Lord, in the presence of the First Sea Lord and Chief of the War Staff, informed the French Naval Attaché of the Cabinet's decision and the note on naval matters handed to M. Cambon (and the German Ambassador<sup>35</sup>) at 2:30 p.m., August 2nd.

In order to prepare for the possibility of an alliance being concluded between the Governments, but without prejudicing this question, the following preliminary steps are to be taken:

The package containing the secret signal books to be distributed and opened, but not used.

Mutual regulations for the entry of allied ships into each other's ports to be issued now.

The officers in command of the Mediterranean and China Stations will be given permission to enter into communication with the French Senior Officers in command of their stations.

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<sup>31</sup> Churchill, I, 218.

<sup>32</sup> See: G. & T., XI, 275, No. 488.

<sup>33</sup> Churchill, I, 218.

<sup>34</sup> The Compte rendu is given in full in: Churchill I, 219; and D.D.F., 3eS., xi, 476-7, No. 625.

<sup>35</sup> This was included in the original draft, but erased at Grey's request that same day: D.D.F., 3eS., xi, 476, No. 625, Footnote.

The general direction of the naval war to rest with the Admiralty...

The Attaché was asked to communicate the above at once to his Government by telegraph and obtain full knowledge and authority for a fuller discussion on details to-night.

That evening, Churchill began to implement the decisions agreed upon that afternoon. Shortly after seven p.m., he sent off a cable granting permission to his Commanders-in-Chief to "enter into communication with the French Senior Officer on your station for combined action in case Great Britain should decide to become the ally of France against Germany."<sup>36</sup> - And by 7:30 the next morning (Monday, the 3rd) the French Attaché was wiring to the French Minister of the Marine:

"A la suite de communication importante faite par Ministre des Affaires étrangères à l'Ambassadeur France" (-i.e., the naval assurances given Cambon on the previous day -) "le Premier Lord Amiralité me charge de vous informer que les mesures de sûreté préliminaires suivantes sont ordonnées: les plis décachetés contenant code B.G. et instructions pour entrer dans les ports réciproques seront immédiatement ouverts mais pas encore utilisées: les commandants supérieurs Méditerranée et Mer de Chine autorisés concerter avec commandant supérieur français.

"Prière me télégraphier si vous envoyez ordres parallèles."<sup>37</sup>

By that afternoon, even before Sir Edward Grey had risen before the House, the French Admiralty sent out parallel orders.<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the question of British intervention still hung in the balance, the whole machinery of Anglo-French naval coordination, so carefully elaborated over

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<sup>36</sup> Telegram to be found in: Churchill, I, 223.

<sup>37</sup> D.D.F., 3eS., xi, 504, No. 668.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., No. 669.

the last two years of peace, was brought to instant readiness.

In these naval "precautionary measures", we catch a glimpse, once again, of the shadow of a discreet, informal, but highly active "war committee" ... For, while we know for a fact that Grey was kept abreast of Churchill's preparations (Churchill's telegram and Compte rendu, given above, were immediately submitted to him for scrutiny), and while we may assume that Asquith was consulted and gave his nihil obstat, we can, with considerable justice, doubt whether the Cabinet as a whole was apprised of these activities - or at any rate, of their full nature and import.

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For, while Churchill was putting the final touches to his machinery for naval coordination, the Ministers were wholly engrossed in the final deliberations over British policy.

The Cabinet met for the second time that Sunday, at 6:30 p.m. It was found that they had weathered the morning's storm, with only two casualties - Burns and Morley, who resigned, on learning that the Foreign Secretary had given Cambon the naval assurances.<sup>39</sup> The Cabinet took up the Belgian question once more, and for the last time. The discussion was heated, but it nevertheless did give rise to a definite decision. After "heavy wrestling", it was agreed, as Lord Crewe reported to the King, "that it should be made evident that a

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At Asquith's request, Lord Morley agreed to "sleep on it", that night. His resignation became effective only the following morning, when he did not turn up at the Cabinet meeting.

substantial violation of the neutrality of that country would place us in the situation contemplated as possible by Mr. Gladstone in 1870 when interference with Belgian independence was held to compel us to take action."<sup>40</sup> This decision, it must be noted, was arrived at while it was still far from certain that Belgium would stand up to a German violation of her territory: evidently the Cabinet agreed with Grey that the British guarantee of Belgian neutrality was independent of, and unaffected by, the Belgian attitude or stand.

The only point to remain obscure and debatable, after this meeting, was the definition of a "substantial" violation. This question seems to have served the good purpose of providing the still recalcitrant members who were loath to stand by their principles in the manner of Burns and Morley, with a face-saving and relatively safe and harmless device for "sitting on the fence". In any event, on Monday morning - when the news arrived of Germany's "ultimatum" to Belgium, and of the latter's most honourable reply - the Belgian question was treated as settled in its essence and was put aside, and the Cabinet gave itself over to a consideration of the principal points and general tone of the statement that Sir Edward Grey was to make in the House of Commons that afternoon. The outline won a "predominant assent"; yet, as the Cabinet dispersed for the day, that morning, no one could be certain how many resignations would be turned in before Parliament rose, that night.

As it happened, however, Grey was destined to save the day - and

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<sup>40</sup>

Spender & Asquith, II, 91.

cast the die of British policy - with his speech to Parliament that afternoon.

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The Foreign Secretary rose before the House sometime after four o'clock. The task before him was bestrewn with difficulties. He had not only to set forth the nature of Britain's commitment regarding Belgian neutrality, but also to divulge, for the very first time to Parliament, the entire story of Britain's relations with France. The history of the secret Anglo-French Staff Conversations both military and naval, the 1912 naval arrangement with France and the commitment that arose therefrom, as well as his correspondence of November 1912 with Cambon - all this had to be exposed. That he succeeded in avoiding political disaster for the Government as well as for himself, was due as much to his reputation, as to his manner of exposition.

For, the House was most amiably predisposed towards him. Over the years he had gained their utter confidence as a man of absolute integrity, conscientiousness and soundness of judgment. No other Minister commanded such deep and unanimous respect, nor such unqualified trust. Fortunately, his tone, on this day, was in keeping with his reputation. His exposition was frank and candid, and it mingled with fetching artlessness, a most objective statement of the facts, with a most personal and subjective expression of sentiment.

The speech itself may be said to have had four topics, which were,

in their order of presentation: (1) Britain's relations with the Continental Powers, and in particular, her intimate relations with France; (2) the nature of the present crisis; (3) Britain's naval commitment to France in this crisis; (4) the question of Britain's obligations regarding Belgian neutrality.

His exposé of the Belgian question, we need not go into, here: suffice it, to say that it was quasi-juridical in form, and made clear the Government's conviction that a German violation of Belgium should be considered a casus belli. But Grey's account of Britain's relations with France requires a brief pause: for, while his summary of the origins and nature of the staff conversations was brief but adequate and accurate, his reading of his letter to Cambon dated November 22nd, 1912, contained a serious omission.

On that afternoon of the 3rd, Grey read out this letter to Cambon, as a definition and proof of the truly noncommittal nature of the conversations. In the Parliamentary Debates's account of this day's proceedings, he is quoted as having read the last paragraph of the letter, thus:

"I agree that, if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other, whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so what measures they would be prepared to take in common."

Omitted, then, is the very last sentence of the letter: "If these measures involved action, the plans of the General Staffs would at once be taken into consideration, and the Governments would then decide what effect should be given to them."



This omission, of course, affected in no substantial way the basic meaning of the Note; but when discovered, years later, it did give rise to considerable speculation and criticism. Grey, for his part, was astounded, when, nine years later, it was brought to his attention: he could neither explain nor even recall it.<sup>40a</sup>

As for Grey's exposition of the nature of the present crisis, and his defence and explanation of Britain's naval promise to France - these deserve still closer examination, as they provide an excellent example of Grey's tone and train of argument, that afternoon.

"The situation in the present crisis", Grey announced to the House, "is not the same as it was in the Morocco question. In the Morocco question it was primarily a dispute ... as it seemed to us, affecting France, out of an agreement subsisting between us and France, and published to the whole world, in which we engaged to give France diplomatic support. No doubt we were pledged to give nothing but diplomatic support; we were, at any rate, pledged by a definite public agreement to stand with France diplomatically in that question.

"The present crisis has originated differently. It has not originated with regard to Morocco. It has not originated as regards anything with which we had a special agreement with France; it has not originated with anything which primarily concerned France. It has originated in a dispute between Austria and Serbia. I can say this with the most absolute confidence - no Government and no country has less desire to be involved in war over a dispute with Austria and Serbia than the Government and the country of France. They are involved in it because of their obligation of honour after a definite alliance with Russia. Well, it is only fair to say to the House that

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For Grey's letter as read on August 3rd, see: Parl. Deb., 5th Ser., (House of Commons), LXV, col. 1813 ... Grey's own comment on this omission reads as follows: "It was not until 1923, nine years later, that a charge of having omitted the last sentence of that letter was brought to my notice. My first impulse was to deny the thing as impossible; but it was so: the last sentence of the letter does not appear in the report of the speech. A question, according to the report, was interjected about the date of the letter, and it may be that the interruption in the letter, so near to the end, caused an accidental omission, or perhaps I thought the last sentence unimportant, as it did not affect the sense or main support of what had been read out." - Grey, II, 218-9 (3 vol'd ed.).

that obligation of honour cannot apply in the same way with us. We are not parties to the Franco-Russian Alliance. We do not even know the terms of that Alliance."<sup>41</sup>

Up to this point, Grey had established, that nothing in the present war, or in Britain's foreign relations, committed her to intervene in the struggle. Now, he turned his attention to the one "limited obligation" incurred by Britain - the naval obligation and promise to France.

"The French fleet is now in the Mediterranean, and the Northern and Western coasts of France are absolutely undefended. The French fleet being concentrated in the Mediterranean is very different from what it used to be, because the friendship which has grown up between the two countries has given them a sense of security that there was nothing to be feared from us. The French coasts are absolutely undefended. The French fleet is in the Mediterranean and has for some years been concentrated there because of the feeling of confidence and friendship which has existed between the two countries. My own feeling is that if a foreign fleet engaged in a war which France had not sought, and in which she had not been the aggressor, came down the English Channel and bombarded and battered the undefended coasts of France, we could not stand aside and see this going on practically within the sight of our eyes, with our arms folded, looking on dispassionately, doing nothing! I believe that would be the feeling of this country. There are times when one feels that if these circumstances actually did arise, it would be a feeling which would spread with irresistible force throughout the land.

"But I also want to look at the matter without sentiment, and from the point of view of British interests, and it is on that that I am going to base and justify what I am presently going to say. If we say nothing at this moment, what is France to do with her fleet in the Mediterranean? If she leaves it there, with no statement from us as to what we will do, she leaves her Northern and Western coasts absolutely undefended, at the mercy of a German fleet coming down the Channel, to do as it pleases in a war which is a war of life and death between them. If

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<sup>41</sup>

Parl. Deb., 5th Ser., (House of Commons), LXV, cols. 1814-5.

we say nothing, it may be that the French fleet is withdrawn from the Mediterranean. We are in the presence of a European conflagration; can anybody set limits to the consequences that may arise out of it? Let us assume that to-day we stand aside in an attitude of neutrality, saying, "No, we cannot undertake and engage to help either party in this conflict." Let us suppose that the French fleet is withdrawn from the Mediterranean; and let us assume that the consequences which are already tremendous in what has happened in Europe even to countries which are at peace - in fact, equally whether countries are at peace or at war - let us assume that out of that come consequences unforeseen, which make it necessary at a sudden moment that, in defence of vital British interests, we should go to war; and let us assume - which is quite possible - that Italy, who is now neutral (Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!") - because, as I understand, she considers that this war is an aggressive war, and the Triple Alliance being a defensive alliance her obligation did not arise - let us assume that consequences which we had not yet foreseen - and which perfectly legitimately concern her interests - make Italy depart from her attitude of neutrality at a time when we are forced in defence of vital British interests ourselves to fight, what then will be our position in the Mediterranean? It might be that at some critical moment those consequences would be forced upon us because our trade routes in the Mediterranean might be vital to this country?"<sup>42</sup>

Underlying all this, of course, was the fact of the British fleet concentration in Home waters, a move decided on two years before, as a result of Germany's naval policy. Could Britain, now in danger of war with Germany, afford to fill a vacuum in the Mediterranean resulting from a French naval evacuation, at the expense of her Home fleet?

Sir Edward now turned from this problem, to the specific matter of Britain's naval assurance given to France on Sunday. He read out the assurance as contained in the aide mémoire handed to Cambon, then observed:

"I read that to the House, not as a declaration of war on our part, not as entailing immediate aggressive action on our part, but as binding us to take aggressive action should that contingency arise."<sup>43</sup>

It will be recalled that Grey had had no intention of informing the Germans of this guarantee to France, until he had informed the House. Sometime Sunday evening or early Monday morning, however, the Prime Minister himself had revealed it to the German Ambassador<sup>44</sup>; and on that very morning the German Government formally advised the Foreign Office that Germany would respect the French coasts and mercantile ships, and would make no attempt to pass through the Channel - so long as the British remained neutral.<sup>45</sup> Sir Edward now informed the House that Germany had been advised, and communicated Germany's ready - albeit conditional - acquiescence.<sup>46</sup>

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The speech was an unqualified success. The House received it with unreserved approval. The Government's stand regarding Belgian neutrality was, of course, the most vital point at the moment; Parliament accepted this obligation as a matter of course.

But Grey's description of Britain's relations with France, and in particular, of the Government's decision (of the previous day) to assume

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., cols. 1818.

<sup>44</sup> See: G. & T., XI, 293, No. 536, "Minutes".

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 291, No. 531.

<sup>46</sup> Parl. Deb., 5th Ser., (House of Commons): LXV, col. 1818.

the safeguard of French shores and shipping, was equally well received. Only one or two voices rose in opposition - and not on this specific commitment. No pertinent questions were asked.

Most important, however, was the fact that Grey's statement of policy passed without even a motion of vote. The Government was now free to issue an ultimatum to Germany, should the latter violate Belgian neutrality. Also, Grey's naval guarantee to France now became definitive: Cambon wired to Paris, the next morning (the 4th):

A la suite du discours de Sir Ed. Grey, aucun parti n'ayant demandé le scrutin, les déclarations du Gouvernement britannique sont considérées comme approuvées à l'unanimité par la Chambre des députés.

Cette interprétation, conforme aux usages parlementaires anglais, vient de m'être donnée par le Foreign Office.<sup>47</sup>

## VI

The Cabinet assembled on Tuesday morning, August 4th, almost wholly unscathed from the internal stresses of the past three days and the Parliamentary trial of the night before. Grey's speech, and Parliament's almost unanimous approval, had settled, once and for all, the question of Foreign Policy: the Cabinet ceased all discussion over this matter, and calmly settled down to the business at hand - the business of converting this peace-steeped country, overnight, into an arsenal and training-camp. Of their collective activity, that day, we get a clear

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<sup>47</sup>

D.D.F., 3eS., XI, 537, No. 724.

summary in Asquith's Aide Mémoire<sup>48</sup>:

"Aug. 4 ... we had an interesting Cabinet, as we got news that the Germans had entered Belgium and had announced that if necessary they would push their way through by force of arms. This simplifies matters. So we sent the Germans an ultimatum to expire at midnight requesting them to give a like assurance with the French that they would respect Belgian neutrality ... The House took the fresh news to-day very calmly and with a good deal of dignity."

Grey delivered the ultimatum to Germany early in the afternoon.

At eleven o'clock that night, the time-lapse expired, without a reply from Germany. As Big Ben struck the hour, Britain entered into war with Germany: the Anglo-French alliance was at long last realised.

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The Anglo-French naval machinery, assiduously set up during the long years of peace, and brought to immediate readiness on the 2nd and the 3rd, now swung into action. The Anglo-French military plans, however, underwent no such immediate and automatic realisation.

In fact, on the morrow of Britain's entry into war, the fate of

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Quoted in Asquith's Memoirs and Reflections, II, 21.

the British Expeditionary Force was absolutely undecided. These six Divisions had, it was true, been conceived, organised, trained and equipped, for intervention on the Continent alongside French and perhaps Belgian troops. But as the war, which they anticipated, unfurled itself in the first days of August, problems and misgivings arose, that threatened to constrain the British to put aside, at least for a time, the Anglo-French expeditionary plans.

On the 1st and the 2nd, it will be recalled, Sir Edward Grey had carefully advised Cambon that at the moment the Cabinet felt it "impossible safely to send our military force out of the country." No one was certain what effect the coming war would have upon the Empire - "in India, or as regards countries in our occupation such as Egypt." Moreover, no one could foresee with certainty the eventual "conditions of naval warfare" or estimate "the possibility of protecting our coasts under these conditions": as Spender has pointed out<sup>49</sup>, orthodox strategy ordained "that the enemy's fleet must either be disposed of in battle or safely sealed up in its own ports before the army could be transported overseas".

At first, the possibility of the Expeditionary Force not being despatched to the Continent in accordance with the Anglo-French joint staff plans, did not seem to trouble the French unduly. On August 2, the French still believed they would be numerically as strong as the Germans, and still projected a French offensive into Alsace-Lorraine,

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<sup>49</sup>

Spender & Asquith, II, 104.

which they hoped to make the principal battle-ground.<sup>50</sup> In view of this, then, British military aid was not considered indispensable in the opening phase of the war. Cambon's plea of August 2, to Grey, reflected this attitude, when he requested the despatch of even "only two divisions" on the ground of the moral effect which their presence would have upon the French.

By the 5th, however, France had altered her view considerably.<sup>51</sup> In the first place, it was the Germans - and with overwhelming forces - that had taken the offensive; and their invasion of Belgium made it clear that the main battle front (in the early phase of the war, at least,) would be in the vicinity of the Franco-Belgian border. Unfortunately, the French forces, already disposed in accordance with France's plans for a Southern campaign, were critically outnumbered in the northern area: France, therefore, had need of every British trooper available, to stem the German advance along the Meuse. - In short, the British Expeditionary Force was now indispensable.

Britain's preoccupation, however, remained unaltered. Egypt and other points in the Empire still posed a problem; and it was still an open question whether the British Navy could assure the safe traverse of the British Army. These questions appeared so formidable in certain quarters, that on the 5th, (Churchill recounts<sup>52</sup>,) "men of great power and influence, who throughout the struggle laboured tirelessly and rendered undoubted service, were found at this time resolutely opposed

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For an idea of France's urgency at this point, see: Huguet, pp. 32 ff.

<sup>52</sup> Churchill, I, 231.



to the landing of a single soldier on the Continent." In view of the urgency of the French request for the expedition of the British Force, and the equally strong objections of a significant (if small) group at home, Asquith promptly convened an extraordinary Council of War.

The Council met on the afternoon of the 5th, at 10 Downing Street. Those present included: Haldane, Grey, Churchill, Kitchener, Roberts, French, Douglas, Grierson, Haig, Murray, Wilson and Ian Hamilton.<sup>53</sup> Churchill provides the only extensive account of this celebrated meeting:<sup>54</sup>

..... I do not remember any gathering like it. ... Decision was required upon the question, How should we wage the war that had just begun? Those who spoke for the War Office knew their own minds and were united. The whole British Army should be sent at once to France, according to what may justly be called the Haldane Plan. Everything in that Minister's eight years' tenure of the War Office had led up to this and had been sacrificed for this. To place an army of four to six divisions of infantry thoroughly equipped with their necessary cavalry on the left of the French line within twelve or fourteen days of the order to mobilize, and to guard the home island meanwhile by the fourteen Territorial Divisions he had organized, was the scheme upon which, aided by Field-Marshal Nicholson and French, he had concentrated all his efforts and his stunted resources. It was a simple plan, but it was a practical plan. It had been persistently pursued and laboriously and minutely studied. It represented approximately the maximum war effort that the voluntary system would yield applied in the most effective and daring manner to the decisive spot; and mobilization schemes, railway graphics, time-tables, the organization of bases, dépôts, supply arrangements, etc., filling many volumes, regulated and ensured a thorough and concerted execution. A commander whose whole life led up to this point had been chosen. All that remained to be done was to take the decision and give the signal.

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<sup>53</sup> This list (the only extensive one) is found in Gen. Grierson's diary, in his entry for that day: See: Macdiarmid, 258.

<sup>54</sup> Churchill, I, 231-3.

By a most timely and forceful (and courageous) intervention, the First Lord himself secured the Council's adhesion to the principle of military intervention on the Continent:

At this point (Churchill continued,) I reported on behalf of the Admiralty that our mobilization being in every respect complete and all our ships in their stations, we would waive the claim we had hitherto made in all the discussions of the Committee of Imperial Defence, that two Regular Divisions should be retained in Great Britain as a safeguard against invasion, and that so far as the Admiralty was concerned, not four but the whole six divisions could go at once; that we would provide for their transportation and for the security of the island in their absence too. This considerable undertaking was made good by the Royal Navy.

The Council conceded the principle; and it now focussed its attention upon the strategical arrangements previously drawn up in concert with the French military authorities.

Discussion then turned upon the place to which they should be dispatched. Lord Roberts enquired whether it was not possible to base the British Army on Antwerp so as to strike in conjunction with the Belgian armies, at the flank and rear of the invading German hosts. We were not able from the Admiralty point of view to guarantee the sea communications of so large a force on the enemy side of the Straits of Dover, but only inside the Anglo-French flotilla cordon which had already taken up its station. Moreover, no plans had been worked out by the War Office for such a contingency. They had concentrated all their thought upon integral co-operation with the French left wherever it might be. It was that or nothing.

Another discussion took place upon how far forward the British Expeditionary Force should be concentrated. Some high authorities, dwelling on the fact that the mobilization of the British army had begun three days later than the French, were for concentrating it around Amiens for intervention after the first shock of battle had been taken. But in the end Sir John French and the forward school had their way, and it was felt that we must help France in the way the French Staff thought it would be most effective.

Thus, in the final count, it was the thoroughness of Anglo-French planning, a result of the peace-time Staff Conversations, that won the day. "If everything had not been prepared," Churchill concludes<sup>55</sup>, "if the plan had not been perfected, if it had not been the only plan, and if all military opinion had not been industriously marshalled round it - who shall say what fatal hesitancy might not have intervened?"

In these last days, and at this decisive Council, there were no claims on the part of anyone that Britain was committed to send her Force to the Continent because of the joint plans. The French made no such claim, in pleading for the despatch of the Forces; and the Army, at this meeting of the 5th, apparently also carefully eschewed any such argument to strengthen their case.

The military conversations bore fruit, when the time finally came, for the same reason as did the naval conversations - solely because of the wisdom and thoroughness of the resultant preparations, and the validity of these preparations in the light of Britain's supreme interests when finally the war did come.

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Immediately after the War Council meeting, that afternoon, Haldane hurried over to the War Office to issue the final orders. On

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<sup>55</sup>

Ibid., I, 231.

the climactic evening of Sunday, August 2, the Prime Minister, who for some time had been holding the Seals of the War Office, had instructed Haldane to direct and oversee the necessary military preparations. On the Monday, Haldane had summoned the Army Council and had directed them to proceed with the immediate mobilisation of the Expeditionary and Territorial Forces, and also of the Special Reserve and the Officers' Training Corps, and to issue the Telegrams, all prepared and in store, to this effect. The Formal Order of Mobilisation, however, was not issued till the following day - Tuesday, the 4th:- by then, however, the Army was "ready, with the aid of the Transport Department and of the Admiralty, to send the entire force at once if necessary"<sup>56</sup> to the Continent, according to the long-settled Anglo-French plan. Thus, on the afternoon of Wednesday, the 5th, when the War Council finally gave its assent, the War Office needed only Haldane's nod, to throw the whole apparatus into gear.

Four days later, the Expeditionary Force began to cross the Channel; and by the 20th of the month, all first four Divisions were on the Continent - right on schedule and without record of a single mishap or blunder throughout the operation. Less than one month later, the two remaining Divisions, kept back by decision of the War Council to assure the safety of the home coasts, joined their comrades on the French front.<sup>57</sup> With this, Lord Haldane had the unique satisfaction of seeing his handiwork - and the handiwork of the Anglo-French Mili-

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<sup>56</sup>

Haldane, Autobiography, 275-6. - The entire account, in this paragraph, comes from this source.

<sup>57</sup>

Churchill, I, 236.

tary Conversations - come to full realisation.

EPILOGUE

Our detailed diplomatic and political account of the Anglo-French military and naval conversations has now come to an end. But before drawing our story to a close, we must, in all fairness to our subject, cast a final glance over the whole of the conversations, and ask one parting question:

What was the historical rôle of the conversations? - What, in the last analysis, can they be said to have contributed?

Fundamentally, the Conversations were a response to the challenge of an era. They were the result of the German menace, on the one hand, and a mutual interest and common concern, between Britain and France, on the other. In a very essential way, the conversations can be said to have been the gage or barometer of that German pressure and of the Entente's response. And in an equally essential - and equally practical - way, they were the most dramatic and tangible sign of the Anglo-French bond.

Yet, the effect of the conversations - of their very existence, of their peculiar nature - on the politics, whether internal or diplomatic, of the pre-war years, is relatively negligible. Upon the few fully informed statesmen both French and British (- for it must be remembered that the conversations remained secret right up to August 3, 1914-) this joint armed planning did, no doubt, leave a mark, by underscoring the intimacy of the Entente and the high degree of mutual trust and confidence between the two countries. But to the "initiates", the influence of the conversations must, in fact, have been negligible, compared to the greater diplomatic problems and preoccupations of the

times.

Nevertheless, the conversations did help to tighten the bonds between France and Britain. And nowhere is this fact better illustrated than in the 1912 Anglo-French naval arrangements, and in the British commitment to which these gave rise. Yet, in the end, not even this naval commitment was to figure in any clear or outstanding way, in the final political and diplomatic drama that was destined to seal the Entente into an Alliance. - Indeed, the story of July 29 to August 5 shows - if it shows anything - that in Britain there were two groups and attitudes in Cabinet: the "pro-war" group, who contended that Britain's interests dictated her joining France, and to whom the question of naval assurances to Britain was little more than an obligation that was of some benefit to Britain and that had, in any event, to be honoured, but that was at best a "stop-gap" till Britain joined France in arms; and on the other hand, the "peace party", to whom France's peril was not sufficient reason for Britain to assume the onerous burden of war; to whom the question of naval assurances to France was but a sad but unavoidable cost of a modicum of security; and for whom the decisive issue was Belgium, and Britain's obligations and responsibilities regarding Belgian neutrality.

No - ironically enough, the conversations were to make their greatest contribution to a period wholly outside the scope of this thesis: in short, to the allied war-effort in the war's opening stage. For, the conversations, as we have seen, had been established but for one purpose: to enable the British to intervene on the Continent with the greatest number of troops available, and at the earliest



possible hour; and to assure a modicum of Anglo-French naval coordination from the very outset of war. This, the conversations accomplished, and with glorious success ... And to this day, we cannot be certain that the presence of the British Expeditionary Force in the path of the German spearhead, less than a month after hostilities had begun, did not prevent the Germans from celebrating Christmas 1914, in Paris ....

A P P E N D I X

(An account of the military Conversations up to 1912, by the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, November, 1912. - From: G. & T., VII, 626-9, No. 639.)

Memorandum by Brigadier-General Sir G.N. Nicholson.

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W.O. Liaison I/6.  
Secret.

War Office, November 6, 1911

Action taken by the General Staff since 1906 in preparing a plan for rendering military assistance to France in the event of an unprovoked attack on that Power by Germany.

In January 1906, when French and German relations were strained in connection with Morocco, the General Staff with the approval of the Ministers of State concerned began to consider what steps could be taken to render military assistance to France in the event of an unprovoked attack on that Power by Germany, should His Majesty's Government in such an event decide to render such assistance.

The problem was treated as being of a secret and hypothetical nature, and all that was done at first was to estimate the force which could be made available and the period within which it could be mobilized at the stations where the several units composing the force were quartered. After due consideration, and having taken into account the requirements of home defence, the General Staff were of opinion that our military resources would admit of the formation of an expeditionary force for the purpose in view, consisting of four Divisions and a Cavalry Division. But if the scheme were to be of any value should

the occasion arise for carrying it into effect, it would be necessary to go further and collect and formulate information regarding the ports of embarkation and railway transport thereto, transport by sea across the Channel, the ports of disembarkation, and railway transport therefrom to the assumed area of operations.

The consideration of some of these questions obviously involved secret and unofficial communication with one or more members of the French General Staff, and reference was made to the Foreign Office on the subject. In reply Lord Sanderson informed General Grierson, then Director of Military Operations, on the 15th January, 1906, that Sir Edward Grey in concurrence with the Secretary of State for War agreed to communications being entered into with Colonel Huguet, the French Military Attaché, for the purpose of obtaining such information as might be required, it being understood that the communications must be solely provisional and non-committal.

Colonel Huguet was accordingly consulted, and a preliminary scheme was drawn up with the assistance of the Admiralty in regard to the ports of embarkation and disembarkation and the arrangements for sea transport across the Channel. As secrecy was essential, no official letters passed on the subject between the War Office and the Admiralty.

Meanwhile the tension between France and Germany began to relax, and hopes were entertained, which were afterwards realized, that the dispute about Morocco might be capable of amicable settlement, at any rate for the time being.

In October, 1906, General Ewart succeeded General Grierson as

Director of Military Operations, and found that the original scheme needed revision on account of certain changes in the organization of the Home Army. Intimation had also been received of certain changes in the French plans of mobilization and concentration, which affected the ports of disembarkation and the railway transport therefrom. A revised scheme was therefore prepared, but before communicating it to Colonel Huguet Sir Neville Lyttleton, then Chief of the General Staff, approached the Foreign Office and on July 26th, 1907, submitted a covering memorandum indicating the action which it was proposed to take. In this memorandum it was clearly laid down that the scheme was not binding on the British Government, but merely showed how the plans made in view of the situation in 1906 would be modified by the changes made in the organization of the Home Army in 1907. The memorandum with a few verbal amendments was approved by Sir Edward Grey, and Colonel Huguet was informed accordingly.

At the same time the Admiralty were unofficially acquainted with the changes in the scheme so far as the Department was concerned, and Lord Fisher, then First Sea Lord, authorized General Ewart to settle details with Sir Charles Ottley, then Director of Naval Intelligence, and the Director of Naval Transport.

The scheme was then further elaborated, on December 3rd, 1908, it was laid before a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence appointed by the Prime Minister to consider the Military Needs of the Empire. This Sub-Committee was presided over by the Prime Minister and included among its members the Marquess of Crew, Viscount Haldane,

Mr. McKenna, Lord (Sir C.) Hardinge, and Lord (Sir J.) Fisher. The question of rendering naval assistance to France in the event of an unprovoked attack on that Power by Germany was considered at the second meeting of the Sub-Committee on December 17th, 1908; and at a third meeting on March 23rd, 1909, the question of rendering military assistance was further discussed, the following conclusion being un-animously arrived at -

"(a) In the event of an attack on France by Germany, the expediency of sending a military force abroad, or of relying on naval means only, is a matter of policy which can only be determined, when the occasion arises, by the Government of the day.

"(b) In view, however, of the possibility of a decision by the Cabinet to use military force, the Committee have examined the plans of the General Staff, and are in the opinion that in the initial stages of a war between France and Germany, in which the British Government decided to assist France, the plan to which preference is given by the General Staff is a valuable one, and the General Staff should accordingly work out all the necessary details."

The Sub-Committee reported this conclusion to the Committee of Imperial Defence on July 24th, 1909. In their report the Sub-Committee remarked that it would be possible in the course of a few months to strengthen the British Expeditionary Force of four Divisions and one Cavalry Division by the two remaining Divisions, thus bringing the force up to 160,000 men.

In accordance with the conclusion arrived at the General Staff continued to elaborate the scheme, certain alterations being made from time to time in the ports of embarkation and disembarkation in conformity with variations in the naval situation and in the French plans of military concentration.

In April last, when the recurrence of tension between France and Germany seemed not improbable, the possibility of at once despatching six instead of four Divisions besides the Cavalry Division came under consideration, and revised tables for the larger force with accelerated dates of mobilization were worked out. The tables for movements by rail, embarkation, sea transport, and disembarkation were similarly revised. This enlarged scheme was drawn up not in supersession of, but as an alternative to, the original scheme, from which it only differed in contemplating the immediate despatch of the two additional Divisions instead of in the course of a few months. As the greater includes the less, it is obvious that arrangements made for the despatch of the larger force would a fortiori provide for the despatch of a smaller force. It was recognized by the General Staff that the alternative scheme would have to be referred to the Committee of Imperial Defence for consideration, and it was submitted and explained in detail to the Committee on the 23rd August last, the Prime Minister presiding and Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Haldane, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Winston Churchill, and the First Sea Lord being present with other members. At the meeting doubt was expressed by some of those present as to the prudence of adopting the alternative scheme, more particularly in connection with requirements of home defence, but no conclusion was arrived at.

It may be added that the greatest care has been taken throughout by the General Staff to treat the plans for rendering military assistance to France, should His Majesty's Government determine to render such

assistance on occasion arising, as being secret, hypothetical, and non-committal. Personally, I have never spoken on the subject to any French officer, not even to Colonel Huguet. It had been unavoidable for the Director of Military Operations to consult Colonel Huguet and a few experts of the French General Staff whom he has interviewed on technical matters at Colonel Huguet's request; but that the non-committal proviso has been rigidly adhered to is evident from a note which was made in French of a conversation which took place on July 20th, 1911. This note is prefaced by a statement which may be translated as follows -- "First and foremost, it is placed on record that these communications are devoid of any official significance, and are in no way binding on the British and French Governments."

W.G.N.

War Office,

6-11-11.