

STUDIES IN DIPLOMACY

General Editor: G. R. Berridge, Professor of International Politics and Director of Research, Centre for the Study of Diplomacy, University of Leicester

The series was launched in 1994. Its chief purpose is to encourage original scholarship on the theory and practice of international diplomacy, including its legal regulation. The interests of the series thus embrace such diplomatic functions as signalling, negotiation and consular work, and methods such as summitry and the multilateral conference. Whilst it has a sharp focus on diplomacy at the expense of foreign policy, therefore, the series has no prejudice as to historical period or approach. It also aims to include manuals on protocol and other aspects of diplomatic practice which will be of immediate, day-to-day relevance to professional diplomats. A final ambition is to reprint inaccessible classic works on diplomacy.

Titles include:

Andrew F. Cooper (*editor*)
NICHE DIPLOMACY
Middle Powers after the Cold War

David H. Dunn (*editor*)
DIPLOMACY AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL
The Evolution of International Summitry

Brian Hocking (*editor*)
FOREIGN MINISTRIES
Change and Adaptation

Michael Hughes
DIPLOMACY BEFORE THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
Britain, Russia and the Old Diplomacy, 1894–1917

Donna Lee
MIDDLE POWERS AND COMMERCIAL DIPLOMACY
British Influence at the Kennedy Trade Round

Jan Melissen (*editor*)

INNOVATION IN DIPLOMATIC PRACTICE

Peter Neville

APPEASING HITLER

The Diplomacy of Sir Nevile Henderson, 1937–39

M. J. Peterson

RECOGNITION OF GOVERNMENTS

Legal Doctrine and State Practice, 1815–1995

Gary D. Rawnsley

RADIO DIPLOMACY AND PROPAGANDA

The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956–64

TAIWAN'S INFORMAL DIPLOMACY AND PROPAGANDA

Studies in Diplomacy

Series Standing Order ISBN 978-0-333-71495-9

(outside North America only)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

Appeasing Hitler

**The Diplomacy of Sir Neville Henderson,
1937–39**

Peter Neville

*Senior Lecturer in Twentieth-Century European History
University of Wolverhampton*

palgrave



© Peter Neville 2000

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2000 978-0-333-73987-7

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by PALGRAVE
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of
St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and
Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

Outside North America

ISBN 978-1-349-40952-5

ISBN 978-0-230-37763-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230377639

In North America

ISBN 978-0-333-71495-9

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99-37999 CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

To my wife

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 The Emergent Diplomat	1
2 A Man with a Mission	20
3 The <i>Anschluss</i>	48
4 From the <i>Anschluss</i> to the 'May Scare', 1938	62
5 From the May Crisis to the Nuremberg Rally, May–September 1938	78
6 From Nuremberg to Munich	95
7 Interlude: October 1938–February 1939	119
8 The Polish Crisis	145
<i>Conclusion</i>	168
<i>Notes</i>	177
<i>Bibliography</i>	217
<i>Index</i>	222

Preface

Ten years ago, when I was beginning my research into Neville Henderson's term as British Ambassador in Berlin, an academic colleague warned me off the project. His attitude was not untypical. Henderson had been so consistently damned from all quarters that there seemed to be little to be said in his defence. Henderson was, in Lewis Namier's damning phrase, 'an ill-starred man', the 'Beau Brummel' of diplomacy. Nearly forty years after Namier's post-war castigation, Paul Kennedy could still write in 1986 that as far as Henderson was concerned, the opening of files under the Thirty Year Rule 'required no amendments' to the traditional view of him.

My contention in this book is that the traditional view of Neville Henderson is wrong in important particulars. Henderson was not pro-Nazi, and he did not, contrary to the received wisdom, advocate the *Anschluss* or the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Neither, had his Foreign Office superiors studied his previous record, was there any reason to be shocked by Henderson's behaviour when he arrived in Berlin. He had already demonstrated in earlier postings a tendency to be indiscreet, and to be overtly sympathetic to the regime to which he was posted. Having said this, Henderson was sent to Berlin to get on with the Nazis and build bridges, something his two predecessors had been unable to do. He believed, on the basis of an interview with Neville Chamberlain in April 1937, that he was the personal agent of the Prime Minister's appeasement policy (even though it was Baldwin who had been responsible along with Vansittart for his appointment).

Henderson also believed that he had been selected by Providence to preserve the peace (fatalism was a characteristic of his). This may have strengthened his unorthodox streak, and also opened him to accusations of disloyalty from the Foreign Office. Perhaps he was disloyal in the strict sense, but he also had to cope with bitter institutional feuding inside the Foreign Office. Worse still, he had to deal with Adolf Hitler and Ribbentrop, who disliked him and refused to listen to his warnings about the consequences of German aggression.

Henderson, who died in 1942, has been a convenient scapegoat for the failure of appeasement, particularly as he wrote his memoir *Failure of a Mission*, in which he failed to repent, well before his post-war critics went into print. His influence has been subsequently

exaggerated, partly because it seems to have been accepted at Henderson's own evaluation. Henderson was no more 'our Nazi Ambassador in Berlin' than Ribbentrop was a sincere believer in good Anglo-German relations. Henderson has been unfairly maligned – for, warts and all, he was a man of honour desperately trying to preserve the peace in a context in which, as his predecessor Rumbold acknowledged, no one could have succeeded.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt to a number of people for their assistance in the preparation of this book. My greatest debt is to my supervisor, Tony Lentin, of the Open University for his invaluable guidance and encouragement. In addition, I must express my thanks to Andrew Crozier of Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. I am also indebted to the staff at the Public Record Office, Kew, the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Aberdeen, the Archives of Churchill College, Cambridge, the Archives of Trinity College, Cambridge, the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh, the Durham County Record Office, the Earl of Derby, and the Imperial War Museum.

I also need to express my debt to the late Lord Sherfield and the late Sir Frank Roberts, who worked in the Foreign Office in the 1930s, Mr Gordon Etherington-Smith, a surviving member of the Berlin Embassy staff, and Herr Reinhard Spitzky.

For permission to reproduce material, I thank: Birmingham University; the Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College; the Marquess of Londonderry and the Durham County Record Office; the National Archives of Scotland; the Keeper of the Public Records (Documents in the Public Records Office); and the Liverpool Record Office.

Every effort has been made to contact copyright-holders. If any have inadvertently been overlooked the publisher will be glad to make the necessary acknowledgement at the first opportunity.

Finally I should like to acknowledge my debt to Mrs Carol Willis for her great secretarial expertise, and to my wife for putting up with the demands that Neville Henderson has made on my time.

All historians sit at the feet of others, and I salute the memory of the late K.R. Stadler, and the late F.S. Northedge who first aroused my interest in this period.

Introduction

As British Ambassador in Berlin between 1937 and 1939 Neville Henderson has understandably attracted the attention of historians analysing the causes of the Second World War. For most of the post-war period, however, his period of service in Berlin has been viewed by historians with a surprising degree of uniformity, and this uniformity has been largely negative and critical.

The trend was set in the late 1940s and early 1950s by Sir Lewis Namier, who castigated Henderson as ‘un homme néfaste’, a posturing incompetent, who attempted in unconvincing fashion to defend his role in Germany as Ambassador by means of the ‘pseudo-artistic claptrap’ in his memoir *Failure of a Mission*, published in 1940.¹

There has been little disposition to challenge Namier’s conclusions among historians thereafter. In 1953 the seminal study of inter-war diplomats by Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert accused Henderson of ignoring his own injunction that an ambassador should ‘act as “faithful interpreter” of his government’s instructions’.² It also saw Henderson as not only an unsuccessful diplomat, but also a representative of ‘a declining ruling class’ which could not reconcile itself to ‘the social transformation of the 1920s and 1930s’.³ The hostile theme continued in 1963 with the savage critique of appeasement presented by Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott in *The Appeasers*, which depicted Henderson in much the same way as Namier had as ‘our Nazi ambassador in Berlin’, a diplomat who failed disastrously either to convey British views accurately to Hitler or to avoid showing overt sympathy for the Nazi regime.⁴ *The Appeasers* coincided with the publication in the previous year of the former Foreign Secretary Lord Avon’s first volume of memoirs, *Facing the Dictators*, in which the former Anthony Eden described Henderson’s appointment in 1937 as ‘an international misfortune’ and regretted the fact that he had sent him to Berlin. (Henderson’s selection for this key post was a surprise both to himself and others in the diplomatic service.)⁵ A decade earlier, Craig and Gilbert had speculated on why it was that Henderson had insisted on behaving like ‘a “great ambassador” in the style of the eighteenth or nineteenth century’,⁶ and highlighted Henderson’s own belief that ‘God had granted him a special mission’ to save the peace and create a long-lasting Anglo-German entente.⁷

The implementation of the Thirty Year Rule in 1968, which opened many Foreign Office files hitherto unavailable (including Henderson's own personal file) did not in the opinion of Professor Paul Kennedy require any revision of the way in which Henderson's diplomacy had been portrayed by earlier historians. This conclusion was supported in 1986 by Edward Ingram, who compared Henderson's lack of competence and professionalism with that of Shirley Temple Black.⁸ As recently as 1996 Professor D. Cameron Watt in an essay entitled 'Chamberlain's Ambassadors' reiterated the charge that Henderson had failed in his duty to warn the Germans effectively about the likely consequences of aggression on their part.⁹

Henderson also aroused unfavourable comparison with his subordinates in the Berlin Embassy. Both Professor Watt and Bruce Strang, writing in 1989 and 1994 respectively, argued that Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, the then Counsellor at the Embassy, was both more realistic and more robust than Henderson in his attitude to the Nazis (particularly in 1938–39 when he stood in for him during the latter's absence on sick leave).¹⁰

Another accusation, put forward in Patricia Meehan's 1992 monograph *The Unnecessary War*, is that Henderson failed miserably to take seriously the German opposition to Hitler, or to encourage his government to do so. Meehan supported the charge that Henderson had been guilty of fawning acquiescence to the Nazi regime's aspirations.¹¹

Attempts to rehabilitate Henderson have been few and far between. One attempt in 1958, very much in the teeth of the received wisdom about Henderson at the time, was made by the Irish historian T. Desmond Williams. Williams suggested that the prestigious British Foreign Policy Documents series had been edited in such a way as to deliberately show Henderson in a poor light.¹² There was no equivalent attempt to rehabilitate Henderson in the 1960s, but a cogent analysis of his diplomacy is in the US historian Vaughan B. Baker's unpublished PhD thesis in 1975, and a subsequent article in 1977. Baker's view is that Henderson laboured heroically to represent Britain in Berlin despite the confusion created by the existence of a large faction in the Foreign Office, led by Sir Robert Vansittart and Orme Sargent, which was critical of the Government's appeasement line towards Germany.

Henderson, according to Baker, was a Wilsonian idealist who had always believed that the aspirations of ethnic Germans had been cruelly crushed by the Versailles Treaty and its associated treaties, and subsequently ignored. But Henderson's idealism, in Baker's view,

was also blended with a strong streak of realism. Henderson consistently warned against pointless military posturing against Germany in 1938–39, when in his judgement, Britain lacked the military muscle to carry out its threats.¹³

A subsequent article in *The Journal of British International Studies* (1980) by Aaron Goldman, while acknowledging Henderson's flaws as an ambassador, questioned why it was that he had been sent to Berlin in the first place in 1937, and why, when a very sick man in 1939, he had been sent back to his post, after four months' sick leave, by Halifax and the Foreign Office. Goldman was critical of Vansittart's attitude to Germany compared to Henderson's (noting that Vansittart was not always as anti-German as his reputation suggests), but did not adopt the more revisionist position of Baker about the practicality of Henderson's position, and his sympathy for German grievances.¹⁴

Among the very few monographs which adopted a more sympathetic attitude to Henderson's diplomacy were Maurice Cowling's *The Impact of Hitler*, published in 1975, and John Charmley's *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace*, which appeared in 1989. Unusually, Cowling believed that 'Before the Anschluss Henderson was not optimistic. Nor did he want it to be the Nazis who brought it about.' Neither did he actually advocate, Cowling argued, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Cowling recognised that Henderson 'held no brief for the Nazi system', whereas other historians had accused Henderson of just that offence. Crucially Cowling recognised that Henderson was 'ill, in close touch, and overworked', factors curiously ignored by his many critics. Conversely, Cowling was critical of Henderson's former friend, and admirer, Vansittart, whom he believed to be inconsistent and contradictory.¹⁵

Charmley, who devoted the first chapter of his book to the key relationship between Henderson and Neville Chamberlain, saw Henderson as someone in the tradition of British diplomats who had not regarded Eastern Europe as a vital British national interest in the context of German demands for territorial revision after the 1919 settlement. Charmley also pointed out that Neville Chamberlain's own half-brother Austen said, when Foreign Secretary in 1925, that the Polish Corridor (with its large population of ethnic Germans) was not worth 'the bones of a British grenadier'. Thus Henderson, Charmley argued, was in the same tradition as Sanderson before the First World War, who did not regard Germany as a menace, as Vansittart was in that of Sir Eyre Crowe, who

suspected German intentions and insisted on a forward policy to safeguard British interests.¹⁶

On the German side, some significant evidence has been produced that Henderson did in fact, contrary to the assertions of Professor Watt and others, pass on serious warnings that German aggression against Czechoslovakia or Poland would mean war. The Von Hassell Diaries, first published in German in 1946, show this to have been the case in 1938, and *How We Squandered the Reich*, the memoirs of Reinhard Spitzzy, an aide to Ribbentrop, published in an English translation in 1997, show that Henderson did carry out this function in the summer of 1939.¹⁷ Spitzzy went so far as to dedicate his book to Henderson as a man 'who risked both himself and his reputation' in the process of trying to prevent war in 1939.¹⁸

The reactions to Henderson's period as Ambassador in Berlin seem to have left little room for neutrality. The historiography portrays him as either an incompetent, prejudiced bungler or as a high-minded, patriotic idealist.

One of the central contentions of this book is that there has been, among historians, a tendency to ignore Henderson's earlier career and especially his period in Belgrade between 1929 and 1935. This has distorted the view of his time in Berlin and his capacity for unorthodox diplomacy, both in terms of his relationship with the Foreign Office and his relationships with foreign leaders like King Alexander of Yugoslavia and Hermann Göring in Germany. He was, after all, sent to Berlin in 1937 because of his ability to 'hit it off' with authoritarian rulers.¹⁹

There were also more nuances to Henderson's diplomacy than traditional analyses have allowed (as I will attempt to show). A more detailed scrutiny of even the published Documents on British Foreign Policy, shows that Henderson tried to preserve both Austrian and Czechoslovak integrity in 1938, but that he was badly shaken by the events of the so-called 'May Scare', over the weekend of 20–21 May. Thereafter Henderson, in one sense laudably, was desperate to preserve the peace at almost any cost.

Henderson was never an apologist for the Nazi system, although he undoubtedly sympathised with German grievances because he had always believed (from the period when he worked in the Paris Embassy in 1919) that the Versailles Treaty was unjust. Hence his insistence on the importance of morality in Britain's dealings with Germany. Making sure that Britain, and not Hitler, took the moral high ground was an essential part of Henderson's approach to Anglo-

German relations. Yet at the same time he could be brutally realistic about Britain's military weakness in 1938–39, while failing to perceive the ultimate objectives of Nazi foreign policy.