

Diehard Conservatives and the Appeasement of Nazi Germany, 1935–1940

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Abstract

Historians have tended to examine right-wing British responses to Adolf Hitler on the basis of a supposed admiration or political affinity for Nazism. This article argues that the dilemma which actually split diehard Conservatives was between challenging Germany before it was too late, and a conviction that Britain lacked the means to do so. Both positions were predicated on a belief that Britain needed to accelerate rearmament, and that Nazi Germany posed a direct threat to British power. Ideology is not irrelevant, but the public statements and actions of diehard MPs reveal that their primary motivation was to resist internal and external threats to Britain's position as a world power. This resulted in an unprecedented division in diehard ranks over Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy, though diehard unity on colonial appeasement recalled an older tradition of working together in defence of the empire.

On the evening of 24 October 1935, a House of Commons debate on unemployment was interrupted twice by protestors seated in the strangers' gallery. As Brigadier-General Sir Henry Page Croft began to speak, a 'young woman ... threw a shower of leaflets into the chamber'. When another Conservative MP, Henry Victor Raikes, concluded his speech, an attack on the Labour Party's support for disarmament, more leaflets were thrown down, accompanied by shouting: 'Never again. Those who speak for peace also prepare for war.'¹ The protesters were incited by the two MPs' complaint

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¹ *Daily Mirror*, 25 Oct. 1935, p. 6. The interruptions are not mentioned in the official record, see House of Commons Debates, 24 October 1935, vol. 305, cols 369–468.

that the previous debate, on the ‘world crisis’, had given way, at the insistence of Arthur Greenwood, a former Labour minister, to one on unemployment. Many Conservatives were favourably disposed to rearmament, but the outspokenness of Croft and Raikes on this occasion was more a characteristic of ‘diehard’ Conservatives. Diehards held that rapid rearmament was essential for the survival of Britain as a world power, and continued to pressure their government to address the issue through to Neville Chamberlain’s resignation as prime minister on 10 May 1940. The diehards’ conviction that Britain had disarmed to a dangerous level shaped their attitude to Nazi Germany. It divided their number on the appeasement of Germany’s territorial ambitions in central and eastern Europe, and united them in condemnation of any transfer of former German colonies under British administration. This has largely been overlooked by historiography on British–German relations, which has preferred to examine right-wing British responses to Adolf Hitler on the basis of supposed admiration or political affinity for Nazism.

Diehard MPs numbered around thirty to forty in the 1920s and 1930s, and were distinguished from the rest of the parliamentary party by regularly being at odds with the front bench over the direction and aims of party policy. According to Stuart Ball, inter-war diehards ‘typified fundamental Conservative attitudes ... It was always clearly understood that the Party could not lightly consider their alienation or defection, without also losing a part of its own essential being.’² Inter-war diehard Conservatism was the product of a number of disparate imperialist and right-wing groups active in the Edwardian period, which held that imperial and domestic decline were linked. Although they were never fully reconciled to one another, the resulting diversity of opinion was obscured by what G. C. Webber calls a common ‘defensive nationalism’.³ Diehards therefore tended to interpret British interests in sufficiently diverse ways that they lacked intellectual and political coherence. Yet the diehards’ shared hostility to the succession of post-1918 imperial constitutional reforms, introduced by Conservative governments, or coalition governments dominated by Conservatives, helped to increase cohesion in their ranks.⁴ The opening months of 1935 witnessed their most spectacular clash with the front bench, when diehards marshalled one of the largest backbench rebellions in the history of the Conservative Party, against the National Government’s bill to extend Indian responsible government.⁵ In the months that followed, diehards were again at odds

² Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–1931* (New Haven, 1988), p. 23.

³ G. C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right, 1918–1939* (London, 1986), pp. 5–6, 19–25.

⁴ N. C. Fleming, ‘Diehard conservatism, mass democracy, and Indian constitutional reform, c. 1918–35’, *Parliamentary History*, 32/2 (2013), pp. 350–2; Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880–1932* (London, 2000), p. 164; H. V. Raikes, ‘Toryism – the one hope: purge us of the traitors in our midst’, *Saturday Review*, 23 Dec. 1933, pp. 653–4; David Woodford, ‘The British empire and the future’, *Indian Empire Review*, 5/10 (1936), pp. 363–6.

⁵ Graham Stewart, *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (London, 1999), pp. 188–9.

with their party leadership over Britain's military preparedness for a potential war in Europe.

In his essay on Viscount Rothermere and appeasement, Paul Addison claims that the press baron faced the 'classic dilemma of the die-hard Right', in that individuals could simultaneously admire 'Fascism as a bulwark against Bolshevism', but also fear 'that Hitler would undermine Britain's [global] position'.⁶ Rothermere might have held 'diehard' opinions on many issues, but he was never formally a Conservative or recognized as such by the party leadership and most MPs. He had a reputation for erratic and unpredictable political affiliations, to David Lloyd George in the early 1920s, Oswald Mosley a decade later, and the Hungarian government in the 1930s, the latter influencing his attitude to Germany. Rather than the dilemma identified by Addison, the public statements of diehard MPs reveal a different predicament. All diehards believed that Britain needed to rearm to more adequate levels, and that Germany posed a direct threat to British power. The problem arose from how to respond to these bare facts. For a sizeable minority, Britain could only preserve its great power status by checking German aggrandizement in Europe. A majority, however, supported Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, on the assumption that conflict with Germany, even if Britain emerged victorious, would weaken British power to the advantage of other rivals. This dilemma was hardly remarkable, for it was the same quandary faced by all Conservatives and foreign policymakers.⁷

The veteran MP, Colonel John Gretton, spoke for a significant minority of diehards in depicting Germany as an existential threat to Britain and its empire. In contrast, his long-time ally, Croft, argued that Britain did not possess adequate armaments to challenge the revision of Germany's eastern borders. Both men still demanded rapid rearmament, with Croft contending that this should be offensive not defensive. And all diehards were united in condemning any deal which 'returned' colonies to Germany. It has been argued that Nazi Germany was 'a "sounding board" that the British right neither could nor wanted to ignore', but in the case of diehard MPs, it is important to note that public commentary on Nazi ideology, or even expressions of admiration, are conspicuous by their relative absence.⁸ The diehards' profound anxiety about British decline meant that they were largely indifferent to the Nazis' internal policy, except when they used its racism or autocracy to condemn deals with Hitler's government. This is not to rule out the possibility that diehard ranks might have contained a few Nazi sympathizers and crypto-fascists, but their overriding ideological concern, which animated diehard

⁶ Paul Addison, 'Patriotism under pressure: Lord Rothermere and British foreign policy', in Chris Cooke and Gillian Peele (eds), *The Politics of Reappraisal, 1918–1939* (London, 1975), pp. 189–208, at p. 94.

⁷ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1988), pp. xix–xx.

⁸ Dan Stone, *Reponses to Nazism in Britain, 1933–1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 114.

Conservatism from the Edwardian period through to the Second World War, was with internal and external threats to Britain's position as a global power.

I

John Charmley's biography of the diehard peer, Lord Lloyd, notes that its subject opposed Indian self-government and Hitler, but that if 'he is remembered at all by historians it tends to be because he was associated with causes which were associated with [Winston] Churchill'.⁹ In a like manner, diehards as a group receive scant or imprecise treatment in historiography, especially inter-war diehard MPs, and particularly on the controversial topic of appeasement. A recent popular account of anti-appeasers, for example, claims that Gretton was a 'fervent supporter of Chamberlain and appeasement', despite the fact that he defied the party whips in parliamentary divisions on Munich and Norway.¹⁰ The scholarly contributions of Maurice Cowling and Richard Griffiths note several individual diehards, but they make no reference to the cohort or the division of opinion therein.¹¹ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott briefly mention the diehards' opposition to colonial appeasement, but do not comment on their attitudes to the broader policy.¹² R. A. C. Parker also acknowledges the diehards' determination 'to surrender no inch of British territory', adding that they were 'zealous supporters of Chamberlainite appeasement, indeed, often more determined Chamberlainites than Chamberlain himself'.¹³ This overstatement is corrected, albeit in equally brief references, in studies by Webber, Carl Bridge and Graham Stewart.¹⁴ The importance of British armaments to diehard positions on appeasement remains ignored, even though it is flagged up in accessible primary source material such as Hansard, the memoirs of Churchill and Croft, and even the cartoons of David Low.¹⁵ That diehards, as a group, have been overlooked, is not altogether surprising, given that the study of backbench Conservatives is a

⁹ John Charmley, *Lord Lloyd and the Decline of the British Empire* (London, 1987), p. 1.

¹⁰ Lynn Olson, *Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels Who Brought Churchill to Power in 1940 and Helped to Save Britain* (London, 2007), p. 350.

¹¹ Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933–1940* (Chicago, 1975); Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933–9* (London, 1980).

¹² Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London, 1963), pp. 88–90.

¹³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1993), pp. 321–2.

¹⁴ Webber, *Ideology*, pp. 46–8; Carl Bridge, *Holding India to the Empire: The British Conservative Party and the 1935 Constitution* (New Delhi, 1986), p. 139; Stewart, *Burying*, p. 333;

¹⁵ David Low, 'Foreign policy vaudeville act', *Evening Standard*, 10 Dec. 1937. Low also got the measure of diehards on colonial appeasement, see, 'Low's topical budget', *Evening Standard*, 25 Sept. 1937; Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, I: The Gathering Storm* (rev. edn, London, 1949), pp. 74, 76; Henry Page Croft, *My Life of Strife* (London, 1948).

relatively recent innovation.¹⁶ A pioneering example of this approach, N. J. Crowson's *Facing Fascism*, declines to treat the diehards as a distinct group worthy of analysis.¹⁷ In contrast, Richard Carr's examination of another well-defined body of Conservative MPs, veterans of the Great War, charts how shared wartime experience disposed them to championing progressive or radical ideas on domestic reform, but failed to maintain the cohort's unity on foreign policy.¹⁸ In a like manner, the Conservative MPs who held senior positions in the League of Nations Union reacted in different and complex ways to that organization's Peace Ballot in 1934–5.¹⁹

If diehards are relatively absent in studies of appeasement, the converse holds for examinations of the inter-war far right.²⁰ Unlike most scholarship on international affairs in the 1930s, the attitudes of right-wing politicians and other prominent figures are often considered through the lens of ideology.²¹ It is generally accepted that the ideas of British fascism and diehard Conservatism have a common origin, in domestic rather than European politics, and in particular, the Edwardian radical right and diehard peers. Historians of the inter-war period have tended to highlight individuals, such as Viscount Lymington, the Conservative MP for Basingstoke, who converted to fascism, as well as diehards who gave speeches which appear to defend the Nazi government, or who had degrees of contact with British fascists. The problems of this approach, in particular the tendency to infer, rather than demonstrate, wider and deeper contacts between the Conservative Party and fascism, are detailed by Philip Williamson.²² Moreover, the assumption that right-wing politics shades from the centre to the extreme right, on a continuum, can all too easily overlook the ways in which fascism diametrically opposed many fundamental principles and values of British Conservatism, particularly

¹⁶ Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain, 1918–1945* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 307–90.

¹⁷ N. J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935–1940* (London, 1997), pp. 74–7, 109–11.

¹⁸ Richard Carr, *Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics in the Aftermath of the Great War: The Memory of All That* (Aldershot, 2013), p. 168.

¹⁹ Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c. 1918–45* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 50, 56–62.

²⁰ W. A. Rudlin, *The Growth of Fascism in Great Britain* (London, 1935), pp. 115–17, 131–2; David Baker, 'The extreme right in the 1920s: fascism in a cold climate, or "conservatism with knobs on"?', in Mike Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition* (London, 1996), p. 18; Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London, 1998); Martin Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts': *Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars* (London, 2005), pp. 3–5, 32–3.

²¹ G. Bruce Strang, 'The spirit of Ulysses? Ideology and British appeasement in the 1930s', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19/3 (2008), pp. 481–526.

²² Philip Williamson, 'The Conservative Party, fascism and anti-fascism 1918–1939', in Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 73–97. See also John Stevenson, 'Conservatism and the failure of fascism in interwar Britain', in Martin Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London, 1990), pp. 264–82.

on the role of the state and individual freedom.²³ None of the seventy-nine Conservative MPs who voted against the 1935 India bill joined the pro-Nazi Right Club. Indeed, its founder, Archibald Ramsay, MP for Peebles and Southern Midlothian, was not part of the diehard rebellion against the India bill. Only two diehard MPs were members of the Anglo-German Fellowship. None appear to have been involved with ‘the Link’.²⁴ A number of diehards, such as the young MP for Mid-Bedfordshire, Alan Lennox-Boyd, were involved with Mosley’s January Club, which arranged dinners to bring British fascists into contact with the political establishment. However, the club included National Labour and centrist Conservative MPs, as well as Zionists, with an interest in or admiration for Italian fascism. It was careful to distance itself from Nazism and did not survive Mosley’s fall from grace. Like many Conservatives, Lennox-Boyd regarded Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, but the most youthful of diehard MPs was no less typical for being ‘repelled by the brutality of the Nazis’.²⁵

Even outside parliament, among right-wing pressmen, opinion was not necessarily dictated by ideological affinity.²⁶ Howell Gwynne, editor of the diehard *Morning Post*, and a well-known anti-Semite, took a strong line against Germany throughout the inter-war period.²⁷ The picture is further complicated by liberal papers, such as the *Manchester Guardian*, joining the diehards in opposing colonial restitution, albeit expressing in stronger terms their ‘abhorrence’ of the Nazi regime.²⁸ This is not to suggest that ideology is irrelevant to understanding diehard attitudes to Nazi Germany, but to caution against too narrow a reading of what this means in practice. Diehards were first and foremost activated by profound concern for British greatness, under siege from without and within. Attitudes to other countries flowed from this position, and in the case of Nazi Germany, resulted in a division of opinion on the basis of whether war would arrest or exacerbate British decline.

The diehards’ belief in maintaining what they regarded as Conservative first principles, and the declinist assumptions on which their outlook was based, marked them out from their backbench colleagues, but it did not isolate them completely. Croft helped lead the Empire Industries Association, to promote tariff reform, following requests

²³ Ball, *Portrait*, p. 80; N. C. Fleming, ‘Political extremes and extremist politics’, *Political Studies Review*, 12/3 (2014), pp. 395–401.

²⁴ Pugh, *Hurrah*, pp. 192, 280–1; Crowson, *Facing*, p. 207; Griffiths, *Fellow*, pp. 307–17.

²⁵ Philip Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd: A Biography* (London, 1999), p. 43.

²⁶ Addison, ‘Patriotism’, pp. 189–208; Alan Foster, ‘The Beaverbrook press and appeasement: the second phase’, *European History Quarterly*, 21/1 (1991), pp. 5–38.

²⁷ Franklin Reid Gannon, *The British Press and Germany 1936–1939* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 49–50; Elspeth Y. O’Riordan, *Britain and the Ruhr Crisis* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 73, 89; John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (London, 1989), p. 157. A dissenting account claims that Gwynne ‘encouraged and supported Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement’, see Janet Dack, ‘“It certainly isn’t cricket!” Media responses to Mosley and the BUF’, in Copesey and Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties*, pp. 141–61.

²⁸ Gannon, *British*, pp. 29–30.

from Neville Chamberlain and Leopold Amery.²⁹ At the height of the controversy over Indian constitutional reform, Raikes was elected secretary of the studiously uncontroversial 1922 Committee, and other diehard MPs participated actively in backbench committees.³⁰ As Brian Girvin observes, ‘Whatever sympathy there may have been between the conservative and radical right in terms of their relationship to capitalism, monarchy and religion, the determining difference between them is the acceptance or rejection of liberal democracy.’³¹ Attitudes to ‘race’ can be added to this list. The diehards’ willingness to employ racial slurs, to justify opposing concessions to colonial nationalists, was a product of ‘cultural provincialism’ rather than a systematic racist doctrine like Nazism.³² Diehard MPs displayed no interest in the eugenics movement, despite its growing international profile in the late 1920s and early 1930s, nor did Britain’s Eugenics Society seek to win diehards over to its cause.³³ Rather, diehard attitudes to race were deeply imbued with paternalism, and by the 1930s, even drew partially on emerging ideas of humanitarianism.³⁴

In choosing to operate within the Conservative Party, as a minority, diehards could only exercise influence if they managed to garner support on the backbenches which exceeded their total number, and then only in a sufficient quantity to embarrass the front bench. This happened if diehards succeeded in creating what Bill Schwarz labels ‘authentic crises of Conservatism’, when ‘national sentiment points one way, and the requirements of state management point another.’³⁵ Most backbenchers were wary of siding with the diehards, even if they sympathized with their outlook on particular issues, and this has led historians to dismiss the idea of diehard influence, or to suggest that it was largely confined to propaganda.³⁶ It is clear that even significant diehard revolts did not veto legislation, but on occasion these could manufacture political crises

²⁹ Robert Self, *Neville Chamberlain: A Biography* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 79; Larry L. Witherell, ‘Sir Henry Page Croft and Conservative backbench campaigns for empire, 1903–1932’, *Parliamentary History*, 25 (2006), p. 368.

³⁰ 1922 Committee, minutes, 10 Dec. 1934, vol. 3, March 1934–July 1938, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1922/3; Stuart Ball, ‘The 1922 Committee: the formative years 1922–45’, *Parliamentary History*, 9/1 (1990), pp. 129–57. The author would like to thank the 1922 Committee for granting access to its minute books.

³¹ Brian Girvin, *The Right in the Twentieth Century: Conservatism and Democracy* (London, 1994), p. 80.

³² Paul B. Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1990), p. 5.

³³ Bradley W. Hart and Richard Carr, ‘Sterilization and the British Conservative Party: rethinking the failure of the Eugenics Society’s political strategy in the nineteen-thirties’, *Historical Research* (published online 24 Sept. 2014).

³⁴ Fleming, ‘Diehard conservatism’, pp. 352–5.

³⁵ Bill Schwarz, ‘Politics and rhetoric in the age of mass culture’, *History Workshop Journal*, 46 (1998), pp. 129–59, at pp. 131, 154; Fleming, ‘Diehard conservatism’, p. 341.

³⁶ Headlam, diary, 21 Oct. 1936, in Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935–1951* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 95; Maurice Cowling, *Impact of Labour 1920–1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 84–7; John Darwin, ‘Fear of falling: British politics and imperial decline since 1800’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 36 (1986), pp. 27–43; Thompson, *Imperial*, pp. 163–64; Philip Williamson, *National*

that might delay reform, cause legislation to be amended, or circumscribe the party leader's room for manoeuvre. Backbench subject committees helped to amplify diehard voices, as did party caucuses and an often sympathetic hearing in the populist right-wing press.³⁷ However, these were merely channels of communication and not sufficient in themselves to provoke a crisis. As Ball argues, 'It was only if events should confirm their constant complaints, or if their outlook on any major issue should come to be widely shared within the Parliamentary Party, that a crisis would emerge.'³⁸

The core cohort of diehard MPs remained remarkably constant throughout the first half of the twentieth century, at around thirty to forty MPs. The need for precision means that diehards are defined using key parliamentary votes. This helps to distinguish them from Conservative MPs who agreed with their outlook, especially on single issues, but who took no action to express their doubts or objections. As the 1935 rebellion on India doubled the size of those labelled 'diehards', to seventy-nine, it is useful to distinguish between 'core diehards' and 'India diehards'. Even here, caution is required when examining the late 1930s; the claim made by Bridge, for example, that 'only 10 per cent of the Indian diehards voted against Neville Chamberlain in May 1940', overlooks the sizeable number not returned to parliament at the 1935 general election.³⁹ This observation aside, it is noteworthy that both cohorts exhibit similar voting patterns in key parliamentary divisions on appeasement. The larger cohort of India diehards shrank by twenty-six MPs by the time of the Norway vote in 1940; the smaller core diehard cohort – based on a parliamentary division on India held on 3 December 1931 – was also reduced by a third after the 1935 general election. Amongst the India diehards, nine abstained on the 1938 Anglo-Italian Agreement; eleven abstained on Munich, fourteen abstained on Norway, and four voted against the government in that landmark division. Of the core diehards, two abstained on the Anglo-Italian Agreement, six abstained on Munich, the same figure abstained on Norway, and two voted against Chamberlain. The remainder in each cohort supported the government. In both cases, a quarter defied the government on Munich, and dissentients increased noticeably between the parliamentary divisions on Munich and Norway.

This article examines how diehard Conservatives responded to the appeasement of Nazi Germany. Section II charts how diehards helped to extend opposition to colonial restitution beyond parliament. Section

Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy, and the Empire, 1926–1932 (Cambridge, 1992), p. 124. For similar argument about Churchill in the 1930s, see R. A. C. Parker, *Churchill and Appeasement* (London, 2000), p. 179.

³⁷ Ball, '1922 Committee', p. 140; Ian St John, 'Writing to the defence of empire: Winston Churchill's press campaign against constitutional reform in India, 1929–1935', in Chandrika Kaul (ed.), *Media and the British Empire* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 108–19.

³⁸ Ball, *Baldwin*, p. 23. For extended treatment see Ball, *Portrait*, pp. 339–49.

³⁹ Bridge, *Holding*, p. 139. Bridge cites J. Ramussen, 'Government and intra-party opposition: dissent within the Conservative Party in the 1930s', *Political Studies*, 19/2 (1971), pp. 172–83, at p. 178, n. 2.

III addresses rearmament, as well as British relations with Ireland, Spain and Italy, in so far as these had a bearing on policy towards Germany. Section IV examines diehard responses to the crises of 1938–40. This research utilizes the voting behaviour of diehard MPs, as well as the speeches of those who identified themselves to, and were called by, the Speaker of the House of Commons. Most diehard MPs did not contribute to parliamentary debates on any topic. Lack of ability, confidence, inclination, or a preference for the more encouraging atmosphere of parliamentary committees, are all likely explanations.⁴⁰ This was not a recent innovation, or peculiar to debates concerning Nazi Germany, as it was entirely in keeping with diehard behaviour since the early 1900s. It meant that the task of representing diehard views in the Commons was left to a small number of spokesmen. Two of the most consistent bearers of this responsibility, since the Edwardian parliaments, were Croft and Gretton, which made their contrasting views on appeasing Germany all the more significant.

II

Diehard opposition to the restitution of former German colonies under British administration was consistent with their customary objection to anything perceived as a diminution of British imperial power. It also reflected strategic concerns about German access to African ports and the potential for submarines to interfere with British shipping. German governments throughout the 1920s and early 1930s demanded equal access to League of Nations mandates. British, dominion and other colonial powers resisted this, but pressure from the German settler lobby ensured that successive German ministries continued to press the issue. Hitler first raised the return of colonies at his meeting with Sir John Simon, in March 1935. The foreign secretary's cool response contrasted with the preparedness of other colonial powers to discuss the matter. Hitler's first public pronouncement on the colonies came in the wake of the remilitarization of the Rhineland, on 7 March 1936, and was reiterated months later in his Nuremberg speech of 9 September. The Nazis moved towards demanding restitution as of right. The British government indicated that it could only consider the matter as part of a general settlement.⁴¹

It is hardly surprising that diehards objected to such a deal. But the suggestion that opposition from ordinary Conservatives was inevitable takes for granted that they held strong feelings about the relatively recent British-administered mandate of Tanganyika and the South African mandate of South-West Africa.⁴² Certainly, over a dozen local divisions

⁴⁰ Richard Toye, 'The rhetorical culture of the House of Commons after 1918', *History*, 99/335 (2014), pp. 270–98.

⁴¹ Wolfe W. Schmokel, *Dream of Empire: German Colonialism, 1919–1945* (New Haven, 1964), pp. 76–136.

⁴² Crowson, *Facing*, pp. 74, 109.

passed resolutions opposing colonial appeasement, but it was hardly enough to sustain a campaign. The diehards, and some other Conservative MPs, amplified this at the annual party caucuses, which, alongside tabling early day motions in the House of Commons, constituted their strategy in opposing colonial appeasement. Taken together, it hinted at the 1933–5 campaign on India, but it was hardly a repeat of that crusade. Nothing was established resembling the India Empire Society or India Defence League. Even the former's journal, which continued through to December 1939, declined to address the issue; Croft's contribution in November 1936 was instead on the need for coordinated imperial defence.⁴³ Individual speakers might address local constituency associations and branches, but colonial appeasement did not gain the attention of ordinary members in the same way as India. The minutes of the Lancashire and Cheshire Division of the Conservative Party give some idea of the contrast. Whereas India regularly featured in the early to mid-1930s, reflecting its importance to the region's cotton industry, there is no reference to colonial appeasement.⁴⁴ Even so, another explanation for the lack of energetic organizing on this issue is that there was no firm proposal, and that giving Germany territory at the expense of the British empire was simply unconscionable to most Conservatives. In contrast, the 1935 India Act did not surrender the Raj but reformed it; diehards struggled to convince a majority of Conservatives otherwise.

Diehards were not alone in resolutely opposing colonial appeasement, though they naturally became strongly associated with the campaign of opposition. Croft was one of its three leading spokesmen, alongside Duncan Sandys and Leo Amery. Significant weight was lent to the cause by Austen Chamberlain and Churchill. The campaign was launched in the wake of a Commons debate, on 5 February 1936, in which the former Labour leader, George Lansbury, argued for an international conference to arbitrate on opening access to mandates more equally. He hoped that this would lessen international tension by providing a fairer distribution of raw materials and destinations for emigration. In the same debate, Lloyd George questioned the right of Britain to treat its mandates as if they were British territory, and argued that the government should reconsider its attitude for the sake of peace.⁴⁵ On 10 February, Sandys tabled an early day motion, signed by forty-seven other MPs, which opposed the transfer of any mandates.⁴⁶ Two days later, Croft challenged the colonial secretary, National Labour's J. H. Thomas, to give an assurance that the government 'had not considered, and was not considering, the handing over of any of the British Colonies, either under mandate or otherwise to a foreign power, and that they were not prepared to make British Colonies

⁴³ Henry Page Croft, 'Empire unity – defence', *Indian Empire Review*, 5/11 (1936), pp. 398–400.

⁴⁴ Lancashire and Cheshire Division Minutes, 1932–65, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford ARE/3/1/2.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 6 Feb. 1936, pp. 7, 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 Feb. 1936, p. 14.

the subject of barter in any world conference'.⁴⁷ Satisfied with Thomas's response, Sandys subsequently withdrew the motion, though the episode failed to quell anxiety among British settlers in East Africa.⁴⁸ On 9 March, following the German reoccupation of the Rhineland, the British government secretly commissioned the earl of Plymouth to investigate the issue. Plymouth concluded that it would be impractical and worthless to transfer mandates to Germany, but the secrecy surrounding the issue encouraged continued unrest amongst concerned Conservatives.⁴⁹ On 6 April, Sandys and Lennox-Boyd questioned the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, about a recent speech given by a junior minister, which indicated that the government had become favourable to colonial restitution.⁵⁰ Baldwin flatly denied the suggestion, but a month later he was again pressed, this time by a delegation from his party's Imperial Affairs Committee.⁵¹

At the Conservatives' annual Central Council on 24 June, Croft moved, on behalf of his Bournemouth constituency association, a motion seconded by Sandys, which 'called upon the Government to resist any proposals which might tend to weaken the integrity of the Empire and urged that all possible steps should be taken to promote the lasting unity of all its component parts'. Croft went on to refer to 'dictators with expansionist tendencies', and 'war tyrants of the world ... out to grab territories'. But rather than condemn Hitler's peace offer, Croft instead attacked 'Socialist leaders' who proposed handing over the mandates to the League. Two speakers queried Britain's right to hold on to mandates indefinitely, but the mood of the meeting was clear when Croft's motion was passed 'by an overwhelming majority'.⁵² On 3 July Croft signed a letter to the press, along with Amery, Sandys and nine other MPs, demanding that their government follow the example of the dominion governments, by giving an assurance of their 'unwillingness to consider any such cession'.⁵³ On 16 July Baldwin was obliged to dampen concerns in the Commons. These were raised following an interview given by a visiting South African defence minister, in which he suggested that 'influential persons' in Britain were in favour of 'colonial compensation'. Baldwin denied that this referred to British ministers, but declined to 'amplify' his views on the subject despite interventions by Croft and Churchill.⁵⁴ On the same day, Baldwin received another

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13 Feb. 1936, p. 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 Feb. 1936, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Crowson, *Facing*, pp. 75–6.

⁵⁰ House of Commons Debates, 6 April 1936, vol. 310, col. 2415.

⁵¹ Amery, diary, 7 May 1936, in John Barnes and David Nicholson (eds), *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929–1945* (London, 1988), p. 416.

⁵² *The Times*, 25 June 1936, p. 13. See also *Daily Mirror*, 25 June 1936, p. 13; Amery, diary, 24 June 1936, *Empire at Bay*, p. 422.

⁵³ *Scotsman*, 6 July 1936, p. 13.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 17 July 1936, p. 14.

delegation on the mandates; he informed them that the difficulties of returning colonies meant that it was 'almost impossible'.⁵⁵

After a meeting of the party's Foreign Affairs committee, also on 16 July, Sandys indicated to Amery that he had drawn up a new 'memorial demanding a clear assurance on the mandated territories question'.⁵⁶ Tabled as an early day motion a week later, it secured 117 signatures, the first four of which were Sandys, Croft, Austen Chamberlain, and Churchill.⁵⁷ Diehard names were conspicuous; only one of the India diehards, who later abstained on Munich, Major John Courtauld, did not add his name. Anthony Eden presented the government's position when he addressed the Commons on 27 July, acknowledging that access to the mandates' raw materials might be open to discussion, but repeating previous statements about the 'grave difficulties, moral, political and legal, of which His Majesty's Government must frankly say that they have been unable to find any solution'.⁵⁸ Neville Chamberlain, Viscount Halifax and Sir Samuel Hoare, who all favoured territorial concessions, had previously insisted that the foreign secretary's statement should 'convince Hitler that the door was open to future negotiations'.⁵⁹ Privately, Eden was disposed to considering South West Africa for transfer.⁶⁰ Ministers appear to have believed that Hitler was genuinely concerned about Germany's former colonies, and assumed that their contact, Hjalmar Schacht, a veteran campaigner on the question, had 'more influence over the Nazi regime than he had in reality'.⁶¹ The minutes of the 1922 Committee meeting held after Eden's statement reveal the confusion and concern of backbench Conservatives.⁶²

In advance of the party conference of 1–3 October, Sandys and Croft maintained their pressure by giving notice of a motion. This sought assurance from the government that its position had not changed since Simon's March 1935 statement. A compromise amendment was also touted, described by Amery in his diary as 'feeble', and 'put forward at Government instigation'.⁶³ It stated that any decision on mandates rested with the League council and the relevant mandatory powers, that the British government would not initiate this process, and that it would not take any action without full discussion in parliament. At the party conference in Margate, Sandys proposed his motion and was seconded

⁵⁵ Crowson, *Facing*, pp. 75–6.

⁵⁶ Amery, diary, 16 July 1936, *Empire at Bay*, p. 425.

⁵⁷ Notice of Early Day Motion, 22 July 1936, no. 128, pp. 2881–4, House of Commons Library.

⁵⁸ House of Commons Debates, 27 July 1936, vol. 315, col. 1132.

⁵⁹ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 305–6.

⁶⁰ A. L. Kennedy, diary, 30 June 1936, Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Times and Appeasement: The Journals of A. L. Kennedy, 1932–1939* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 235–6.

⁶¹ Scott Newton, *Profits of Peace: The Political Economy of Anglo-German Appeasement* (Oxford, 1996), p. 77.

⁶² 1922 Committee, minutes, 27 July 1936, vol. 3, March 1934–July 1938, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1922/3.

⁶³ *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 12; Amery diary, 1 Oct. 1936, *Empire at Bay*, p. 427.

by Croft. Hoare replied on behalf of the government, claiming that their position had not changed, but also indicating that they could not elaborate further due to the 'present delicate international situation'. The First Lord of the Admiralty's conclusion, that the 'passing of the resolution ... could not make them any more cautious than they were already', was ignored by delegates, who on a show of hands defeated the amendment and carried Sandys and Croft's resolution 'by a large majority, amid cheers'.⁶⁴ As the one-time secretary of state for India who had steered through the 1935 Act, Hoare was familiar with such displays of imperialistic defiance at party conferences, and the possibility that these might escalate into major party crises.

Government assurances aside, in February 1937, the British held secret conversations with the French on the possibility of Schacht's ideas on economic access to colonies forming part of a peace deal.⁶⁵ Diehards and others remained suspicious about their government's intention, especially as Nazi speeches continued to mention colonial restitution.⁶⁶ In an early day motion dated 15 February, ninety-seven signatories – including Croft, Gretton and other diehards – pointedly noted 'with satisfaction the assurance given by His Majesty's Government that they are not considering the cession of any colonial or mandated territory'.⁶⁷ A week later, Croft addressed an empire unity meeting at Swindon, declaring that Germany could only re-enter Africa if it abandoned submarines, ended conscription and reduced its air power by 75 per cent, 'to prove once and for all that she stands with the British Empire for a new world order of non-aggression'.⁶⁸ A meeting the following month, between Eden and Joachim von Ribbentrop, produced an increasingly shrill reaction in Germany to the British foreign secretary's refusal to countenance the transfer of mandates.⁶⁹ Nazi demands for restitution, as of right, effectively ended Franco-British hopes of colonial appeasement as part of a peace deal. Even Hitler let the issue rest, realizing that it might mean compromising on Austria and Czechoslovakia, although it continued to feature in his public speeches.⁷⁰ As prime minister from May 1937, Chamberlain nevertheless remained open to the possibility of a deal if the Germans were forthcoming, though he looked to other governments to make sacrifices.⁷¹ As British representatives informed the Imperial Conference at London, on 2 June, transferring British mandates would create a crisis that might bring down the government, therefore

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 2 Oct. 1936, p. 8. See also, *Daily Mirror*, 2 Oct. 1936, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Schmokel, *Dream*, p. 100.

⁶⁶ Jones to Lady Grigg, 12 Feb. 1937, in Thomas Jones, *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* (London, 1954), p. 313.

⁶⁷ Notice of Early Day Motion, 15 Feb. 1937, no. 55, p. 1259, House of Commons Library.

⁶⁸ *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1937, p. 8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1937, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Schmokel, *Dream*, pp. 102–4.

⁷¹ Charmley, *Chamberlain*, p. 20.

the dominion governments should not rule out returning the mandates assigned to them.⁷²

Chamberlain was not alone in remaining disposed to a peace deal that included the return of colonies.⁷³ Sections of Liberal and Labour opinion, prominent peers and clergymen, and the Anglo-German Fellowship, all promoted the scheme to varying degrees.⁷⁴ In the last three months of 1937, *The Times* carried letters on the subject in which ‘opponents were outnumbered and could only muster Leo Amery and Croft as significant names in their cause.’⁷⁵ In his contribution, Croft made it clear that on colonies, ‘some of us differ as to the means by which better relations, leading to permanent peace, can be obtained.’⁷⁶ He blamed sections of the press for encouraging the Germans to demand colonial restitution. Croft repeated Jan Smuts’s claim that returning Germany’s former African colonies would give it submarine bases that would affect the security of all nations, and effectively revived what Germans labelled the ‘colonial guilt lie’, which the British government had abandoned in 1925.⁷⁷ Focusing on South-West Africa, Croft cited a report on the ‘merciless destruction of the Hereros’, whose population had decreased by over two thirds: ‘It may be that the Nazi regime would be far more enlightened in its treatment of blacks – let us all hope so; but the most vital test of all is the safety of the British Empire in Africa and the ultimate peace of the world.’⁷⁸ These arguments reiterated those of interest groups representing British settlers. They also reflected strategic concerns about maritime lines of communication, and Conservative assumptions about the supposedly inherent paternalism and superiority of British imperialism.⁷⁹

In his February address to Swindon Conservatives, Croft had claimed to speak for ‘non-official Conservative opinion’.⁸⁰ By the time of his October letter to *The Times*, he confidently asserted that he spoke ‘for the great mass of the British people as well as the unanimous National Union of Conservative Associations’.⁸¹ This change of self-appointed status probably reflected the support he had received several weeks beforehand, at the party conference, alongside his frustration with the lack of opponents making their views clear in the press. At that conference, on behalf of the Wessex Provincial Area, Croft moved, and Lennox-Boyd seconded, a motion which, in strong language,

⁷² Ritchie Ovendale, *‘Appeasement’ and the English Speaking World: Britain, the United States, the Dominions and the Policy of ‘Appeasement’, 1937–1939* (Cardiff, 1975), p. 38.

⁷³ Charnley, *Chamberlain*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ N. C. Fleming, *The Marquess of Londonderry: Aristocracy, Power and Politics in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2005), p. 187; Pugh, *Hurrah*, p. 272; Andrew Chandler, ‘Munich and morality: the bishops of the Church of England and appeasement’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 5/1 (1994), pp. 77–99.

⁷⁵ Andrew J. Crozier, *Appeasement and Germany’s Last Bid for Colonies* (London, 1988), pp. 226–7.

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 18 Oct. 1937, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Schmokel, *Dream*, p. 83.

⁷⁸ *The Times*, 18 Oct. 1937, p. 10.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 Feb. 1937, p. 8.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18 Oct. 1937, p. 10.

returned to the idea of associating the surrender of colonies with Labour and Liberal ‘sentimentalist’ intellectuals, and bitterly condemned the idea as economically disastrous and a ‘treacherous betrayal’ of colonial inhabitants.⁸² The party conference carried the motion ‘without opposition’.⁸³ *The Times*’ Berlin correspondent subsequently reported that it ‘naturally caused disappointment here and provoked some abusive comment in the Press’, adding that it would lead to further demands for the return of German colonies.⁸⁴ Croft continued to be exercised by British supporters of restitution, even chiding Labour MPs in December 1937 for sending out the wrong signal to Germany by raising the subject in parliament.⁸⁵

The British government continued to be prepared to discuss colonies in its diplomacy with Germany; Halifax raised the issue during his unofficial visit to Germany in November 1937.⁸⁶ In January 1938, Chamberlain indicated his support for a new scheme, at a cabinet subcommittee on foreign affairs, that placed the burden of transfer on other colonial powers, especially Belgium and Portugal, with minimal territorial effect on British possessions: ‘a new regime of colonial administration ... roughly corresponding to the conventional zone of the Congo Basin Treaties, acceptable and applicable to all the Powers concerned on exactly equal terms’.⁸⁷ This was communicated to Hitler by the British ambassador to Berlin on 3 March 1938.⁸⁸ As with Halifax’s efforts months earlier, Hitler had no interest in this latest scheme, insisting instead on the return of German colonies. In the weeks and months that followed, diplomatic attention moved decisively away from colonies to the Anschluss with Austria and the Sudeten crisis. The colonial question largely disappeared, but rather than reassuring Croft and others, the silence encouraged their anxiety. Having supported the Munich Agreement, Croft subsequently delivered a speech in his Bournemouth constituency that distinguished the annexation of the Sudetenland from colonial restitution:

Because Germany has succeeded by strong measures in embracing Germanic peoples under the rule of the Reich, this is no reason why we should contemplate paying her Danegeld or handing over territories which in her hands would prove a strategic menace to the British Empire and the peace of the world. On the contrary, the very principle which concedes that people of German race ... should be included, if they wish, in the Reich, must deny any such right to coerce native or European peoples in the colonies into the Germanic system against their wish.⁸⁹

⁸² *Ibid.*, 8 Oct. 1937, pp. 8–9.

⁸³ *Scotsman*, 8 Oct. 1937, p. 12.

⁸⁴ *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1937, p. 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1937, p. 7.

⁸⁶ Schmokel, *Dream*, p. 108.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 118; Charmley, *Chamberlain*, p. 45.

⁸⁸ Andrew Roberts, *The Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (London, 1991), p. 77.

⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 14 Oct. 1938, p. 2. Churchill’s speech on Munich, a week earlier, raised the analogy of Danegeld, see House of Commons Debates, 5 Oct. 1938, vol. 339, col. 367.

The following month, on 14 November, the diehard MP Brenden Bracken reopened the controversy by calling on the prime minister to end the ‘discouragement to development and employment caused by uncertainty regarding the future Government of Tanganyika and other African mandates formerly under German rule’. Chamberlain’s response to this, and other questions, was to refer to Baldwin’s statements in 1936. This encouraged further questions: whether the prime minister was aware of ‘Nazi propaganda’ in Tanganyika, or a planned visit by a South African minister to Berlin, and whether he had received representations from the colonies concerned.⁹⁰ Afterwards, at the 1922 Committee, the press reported that those who had supported Chamberlain’s foreign policy, including Croft, were puzzled and disconcerted by the prime minister’s statements on the mandates.⁹¹ The minutes of the meeting indicate that the India diehard, Annesley Somerville, vice-chairman of the committee, who had supported Chamberlain on Munich, was the first of eight to speak against the return of any colonies.⁹² The result was another early day motion, containing twenty-nine signatures, mostly ordinary Conservative MPs, which stated that ‘no British colony or mandated territory should be transferred to Germany without the consent of the people of Great Britain.’⁹³ The issue thereafter disappeared from political debate in Britain.⁹⁴ It was also during this period that widespread political enthusiasm for appeasement, already under severe strain since Kristallnacht, withered away as most Conservative MPs looked instead to accelerated rearmament.

III

Just as diehards were united in opposing colonial appeasement, so they were at one on the need to accelerate rearmament. Churchill, who had been their most prominent spokesman on the 1935 India bill, continued to rally diehard MPs to his side by calling for greater investment in the Royal Air Force. In principle, the issue enjoyed widespread support in the party, and it allowed diehard MPs to lay the blame for disarmament at the door of Labour.⁹⁵ In practice, diehards were suspicious of their own government, not least for its equivocation during the World Disarmament Conference at Geneva.⁹⁶ The Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 led Churchill, Croft, and others on the right, to ally their calls for

⁹⁰ House of Commons Debates, 14 November 1938, vol. 341, cols 491–493.

⁹¹ *The Times*, 15 Nov. 1938, p. 14.

⁹² 1922 Committee, minutes, 14 Nov. 1938, vol. 4, Nov. 1938–May 1943, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1922/4.

⁹³ Notice of Early Day Motion, 14 Nov. 1938, no. 5, p. 118, House of Commons Library.

⁹⁴ Schmokel, *Dream*, pp. 121–4.

⁹⁵ Raikes to editor, ‘To bomb or not’, *Saturday Review*, 26 Aug. 1933, p. 232.

⁹⁶ N. C. Fleming, ‘Cabinet government, British imperial security, and the World Disarmament Conference, 1932–1934’, *War in History*, 18/1 (2011), pp. 62–84.

rearmament with support for the League of Nations.⁹⁷ However, Croft's espousal of the League was tepid, and intended to signal his support for the government. He inevitably broke with Churchill in the months and years that followed, especially as Churchill's advocacy of the League intensified in the late 1930s, when the Soviet Union enhanced its role on the League's council.⁹⁸ Other diehards had little regard for the League, and their calls for rearmament were unalloyed to institutions or agreements that promoted multinational security. Two years before Chamberlain's policy of seeking bilateral agreements with Germany, Gretton launched a scathing attack in the Commons on the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

It ties our hands, but it does not necessarily tie the hands of Germany ... Germany is governed by an autocracy and has all the elements of secrecy in the carrying out of her naval policy. What is to bind Germany to this Agreement? ... What Treaty or engagement has Germany kept since the War? Germany has become almost a professional treaty-breaker. Yet you have nothing but the word of the German Government to guarantee the fulfilment of this Agreement ... if you say, 'We believe the German Government has not kept its engagements, and we must have an increased programme,' you will immediately cause diplomatic repercussions.⁹⁹

The Admiralty, Gretton argued, 'had been quite reckless' in allowing Germany a submarine fleet, 'which would give her a power in submarines far greater than anything possessed by other naval powers'.¹⁰⁰ Despite frequently speaking on the subject of armaments, Croft was conspicuously quiet in this debate. Labour MPs also criticized the agreement, from a different perspective to that of Gretton, though such concurrences of opposition encouraged the MP for Burton-upon-Trent to believe, or claim to believe, that some in the Labour movement supported strong rearmament, and express this in private to Chamberlain in January 1937.¹⁰¹

Gretton's objection to the naval agreement was not the first occasion on which he expressed apprehension about the existential threat posed by Germany. A fortnight before, he claimed that a recent declaration by Ireland's Taoiseach, Eamon De Valera, that no foreign power could use Irish aerodromes, was made in response to statements emanating from Germany.¹⁰² Gretton's comments were part of a lengthy speech

⁹⁷ Neville Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1971), p. 84; Andrew David Stedman, '“A most dishonest argument”?: Chamberlain's government, anti-appeasers and the persistence of League of Nations' language before the Second World War', *Contemporary British History*, 25/1 (2011), pp. 83–99.

⁹⁸ Parker, *Chamberlain*, pp. 319–21; Parker, *Churchill*, p. 117. Thompson notes diehard distaste for the League of Nations and Croft's attacks on Labour for hypocritically using it as an instrument for war when it was intended for peace, see Thompson, *Anti-Appeasers*, p. 69.

⁹⁹ House of Commons Debates, 22 July 1935, vol. 304, cols 1523–4.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 23 July 1935, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ John Ruggiero, *Neville Chamberlain and British Rearmament: Pride, Prejudice, and Politics* (Westport, CT, 1999), p. 77.

¹⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 11 July 1935, p. 3.

condemning a succession of concessions to Irish nationalism, which he blamed for the economic war between Ireland and Britain. Diehard MPs had been especially activated by the Irish question since the Great War, and their speeches on this occasion hinted that something decisive needed to be done to check Fianna Fáil.¹⁰³ Not unexpectedly, Croft delivered a similar history lesson, but he declined to echo Gretton's concern about aerodromes.¹⁰⁴ Churchill's contribution focused on recent history, conveniently overlooking his own role in establishing the Irish Free State. In striking diehard language, he described relations with Ireland as part of the 'perpetual progress of British degeneration', also manifested in the 'diminution in arms and defensive security' and the 1935 India Act.¹⁰⁵

The 1938 Anglo-Irish Treaty, in particular its implications for relations with Germany, produced another cleavage in diehard opinion. Intended to end the economic war, it relinquished three Royal Navy bases that guarded the Atlantic approaches to the British Isles. These had been a provision of the 1921 treaty between the British government and Dáil Éireann. As the author of that provision, Churchill led the attack when the Commons debated the 1938 treaty. In his contribution, Gretton claimed it was

an indefensible bargain and arrangement. Commercially there is nothing to be said for it, and financially the arrangement is ludicrous and indefensible. As regards Defence, we are admittedly giving up everything, and there is nothing to be set on paper or even an assurance given to this House that we are getting anything in exchange.¹⁰⁶

Croft's intervention was markedly different: 'I am so largely in favour of the wide scope of the peace promotion of the Government in Europe at the present time.' And in an implicit rebuke of Churchill, Croft urged critics to direct their anger to the 1921 treaty.¹⁰⁷

The contrasting positions adopted by diehards on relations with Spain and Italy were also connected to concern about Germany, inasmuch as neither side wanted to encourage alliances between Berlin, Madrid and Rome. Unlike British–Irish relations, however, these were differences of emphasis rather than outright disagreement. Whereas Croft was General Franco's 'noisiest supporter', Gretton chose not to endorse him.¹⁰⁸ In a Commons division on 25 June 1937, called by Labour to challenge the government's controversial approach to non-intervention, Croft backed the government. Gretton, in contrast, abstained, distinguishing himself from Labour by criticizing the League and demanding a policy of active neutrality on the part of the British government:

¹⁰³ Kevin Matthews, *Fatal Influence: The Impact of Ireland on British Politics, 1920–1925* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 157–80; *The Times*, 11 July 1935, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ House of Commons Debates, 10 July 1935, vol. 304, cols 422–6.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 July 1935, vol. 304, col. 447.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5 May 1938, vol. 335 cols 1112–16.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 May 1938, vol. 335, cols 1145–7.

¹⁰⁸ Parker, *Churchill*, p. 147.

We have not tried the orthodox, regular, clear policy of recognising both sides as belligerents and acting as a neutral Power ... We should then be able to play our part even in restraining supplies of munitions of war. Our policy would be clearly understood by every nation and every Government in the world.¹⁰⁹

Like most British observers, of course, Gretton understood that neutrality undermined Franco's opponents, but as with his attitude to Europe more generally, Gretton rationalized his stance in the language of British self-interest.

The division between Croft and Gretton on Italy was more subtle again. Only two of the 'core diehards', Churchill and Courtauld, opposed the 1938 Anglo-Italian Agreement, though they were joined by seven additional 'India diehards', including the duchess of Atholl.¹¹⁰ One of Gretton's criticisms of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was that it undermined the Stresa Front, also signed in 1935, though in keeping with his focus on British self-interest, he failed to comment on Italian and French concerns.¹¹¹ Speaking in a Commons debate in the middle of the Abyssinian crisis, Gretton criticized both the opposition and the government for basing their policies on the League, and claimed that the burden would fall on the British and French navies.¹¹² Croft supported the government during the crisis, and took this further than others by actively refuting widespread claims that the British public had bombarded their MPs with letters of protest.¹¹³ Churchill's otherwise brief interventions in this debate are notable for his challenge to Croft's claim that the Italian conquest of Abyssinia was an established fact. The latter brushed this aside, saying that he could not sympathize with a country which allowed the killing of British subjects in Kenya and that practised the slave trade.¹¹⁴

IV

From the remilitarization of the Rhineland through to the Munich agreement, diehard MPs were preoccupied with opposing colonial restitution. With the exception of the debates outlined above, in section III, they did not publicly address developments in Germany. Throughout this period, few would have doubted the diehards' patriotism, but as war with Germany appeared increasingly likely towards the end of 1938, and the pressure to appease Germany in directions other than the colonies mounted, Croft and his supporters had to tread carefully in justifying agreements with Hitler.¹¹⁵ Like the government, Croft felt obliged to denounce the brutality of the *Anschluss*, although he accompanied

¹⁰⁹ House of Commons Debates, 25 June 1937, vol. 325, cols 1574–7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 November 1938, vol. 340, cols 332–6.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22 July 1935, vol. 304, col. 1523.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 19 December 1935, vol. 307, cols 2087–90.

¹¹³ David Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935–6* (London, 1975), p. 53.

¹¹⁴ House of Commons Debates, 2 November 1938, vol. 340, cols 238–9.

¹¹⁵ Stone, *Reponses*, p. 114.

this, characteristically, with a condemnation of Labour's support for disarmament.¹¹⁶ The Commons had no extensive opportunity to discuss British–German relations until the start of October 1938, when, in a dramatic reversal, it debated the Munich Agreement over four days. Churchill, Croft and Raikes were the only diehards from the core cohort to speak. Churchill's contribution, on the third day of the debate, is well known. Croft's first contribution came on the first day, when his interruption of Duff Cooper's resignation speech expressed the irritation of many at the consequent delay to Chamberlain's statement.¹¹⁷ Croft's more substantial contribution came on the third day, and immediately followed Churchill. He began by regretting that the two men should disagree, having worked together 'on so many causes'. Croft rejected the charge that Britain had 'suffered total and unmitigated defeat'. He broke also with Chamberlain by expressing regret at the pledge given to Czechoslovakia: 'I have always felt that we have burdens enough in our present commitments, and ought not to go meddling in the distant parts of Central Europe.' But his speech was essentially supportive of the prime minister's policy. Croft argued that there were now two schools of thought. The first says that: 'We cannot have any conversations or intercourse, and certainly no agreement, with dictators; we differ from them, their form of government and their methods.' The second realizes 'that the dictatorial form of Government has now existed in a great many countries for many years'. He went on to justify dealing with dictators:

there is no evidence of any great uprising of the people in those countries where they are subject to dictatorships, and, since you cannot wait for all this great range of countries to eliminate their firmly-established dictators, if the machinery of civilisation is still to work you have got to understand their mentality, you have got to work with them, and, if possible, you have got to reach agreement ... or we have to fight them ultimately.

Croft believed that Germany was ready to invade the Sudetenland, and that Britain's inability to prevent this militarily meant that it had no alternative but to reach an agreement. Conscriptio would take half a year to implement properly, and a naval blockade would require a 'long time' to bring about the necessary conditions of 'starvation'. An air war, he reasoned, based on Churchill's figures, would not result in immediate victory. In response to an interruption, which suggested assistance from the Soviet Union, Croft made the uncharacteristic admission that 'I am the last person to want in any way to criticise a country which might have come to our common aid at that time', before doubting it could mobilize fast enough, and highlighting problems within the Soviet forces.¹¹⁸

Raikes's speech, two days before Churchill and Croft, was the first from the Conservative backbenches. He pre-empted Croft's argument

¹¹⁶ House of Commons Debates, 14 March 1938, vol. 333, cols 72–3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 October 1938, vol. 339, cols 29–40; John Charmley, *Duff Cooper: The Authorised Biography* (London, 1997), p. 127.

¹¹⁸ House of Commons Debates, 5 October 1938, vol. 339, cols 374–83.

by remarking that: 'War might have been waged in revenge for Czechoslovakia's dismemberment, but Czechoslovakia knew well that the brunt of that war would tear their State to pieces before a single step could be taken to stop it.' He then brusquely dismissed concerns about the shortness of the time limit for Jews and Social Democrats to leave the Sudetenland, contending that they had 'known for weeks ... that they were in danger from a German occupation and that they would have been wiped out when that occupation took place'. Raikes blamed the Czechoslovakian government for annexing the Sudetenland before it was ratified by the Paris Peace Conferences, and for taking twenty years to grant rights to the Sudeten Germans. He compared criticisms of Chamberlain to those which greeted Benjamin Disraeli following the 1874 Treaty of Berlin, and concluded that 'our leader will go down to history as the greatest European statesman of this or any other time.'¹¹⁹ Little wonder Amery noted in his diary that Raikes had 'blessed' the government position.¹²⁰ It is therefore remarkable that Raikes abstained from the division called on 6 October to support the Munich Agreement. As no explanation was offered, it is not clear if his hitherto consistent support for Chamberlain faltered on this occasion.¹²¹ He was certainly present for the division which immediately preceded, to vote against a Labour amendment. Whatever the explanation, Raikes joined Gretton and nine other 'India diehards' in abstaining on the crucial division to support the government.¹²²

In the months that followed, Raikes returned to defending the government, against the criticism made by Churchill and others that it should enter into an alliance with the Soviet Union.¹²³ When the Commons debated the Czechoslovakian crisis of March 1939, Viscount Wolmer was the only diehard called to address the Commons. The MP for Aldershot acknowledged that he was a critic of the government, and censured Chamberlain for his claim that 'he was not going to relax his efforts to preserve the peace of Europe ... Is it proper, legitimate, right and sensible to describe the state of Europe to-day as one of peace[?]'. Wolmer supported Eden's calls for all parties to set aside their differences, but went further than the timid dissidence of the former foreign secretary by recommending the formation of 'a real National Government' committed to national service. Wolmer believed that this was the only message capable of being understood by a 'dictator state'.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 3 October 1938, vol. 339, cols 94–7.

¹²⁰ Leopold Amery, diary, 3 Oct. 1938, *Empire at Bay*, p. 525.

¹²¹ Amery, diary, 17 March 1936, *Empire at Bay*, p. 411; Henry Channon, diary, 2 Aug. 1939, Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, 1993), p. 207.

¹²² House of Commons Debates, 6 Oct. 1938, vol. 339, cols 558–61. The other nine were the Duchess of Atholl, Brendan Bracken, Winston Churchill, John Courtauld, William Davison, Roger Keyes, John Lees-Jones, Thomas Somerset, and Viscount Wolmer.

¹²³ House of Commons Debates, 19 May 1939, vol. 347, cols 1850–5; Raikes criticized Churchill's association with Labour on foreign policy, see Thompson, *Anti-Appeasers*, p. 171, citing House of Commons Debates, 25 May 1938, vol. 336, col. 1294.

¹²⁴ House of Commons Debates, 15 March 1939, vol. 345, 465–7.

Croft responded to the crisis by writing to *The Times*, associating himself with calls by former service chiefs that the country should concentrate its 'main purpose on producing the maximum punching power against an aggressor'. He took the opportunity to blame the crisis on 'the whole psychology of political leadership of all parties during the last few years', and singled out Baldwin's famous claim that there was no defence against air attack, accusing him of playing the game of the enemy by encouraging flight to shelter rather than the need to fight.¹²⁵ On 31 March, *The Times* published another letter from Croft, condemning critics of Chamberlain, in particular Eden, who called for national unity but tabled a motion critical of the government. Chamberlain, Croft boasted, had brought about a 'miraculous change' in the 'defence and spirit of the people', when three years previously 'we were suffering from a poisonous attitude of pacifism and a yielding to a complete psychology of defeat.'¹²⁶ Croft nevertheless echoed Wolmer's demand for national service, claiming that he was a 'recent convert'.¹²⁷

When parliament was recalled after the summer recess in 1939, to hear the prime minister's announcement that war had been declared on Germany, Croft was the only diehard to address the House of Commons. He declared that he spoke on behalf of the 'old Tories', and signalled his peace with Churchill, who had just been brought into the government as First Lord of the Admiralty. Briefly reflecting on a political career promoting imperial unity, Croft sidestepped recent divisions by expressing his pride that in the 'great Dominions overseas to-day hearts are pulsating for liberty and freedom in precisely the same way as in the old land.'¹²⁸

Despite calls for unity between the parties, rifts in the Conservative Party and diehard ranks widened and fractured again, exacerbated by the uncertainty and pessimism about war aims and strategy generated by the 'bore war'. At the party Central Council on 4 April 1940, Adam Maitland, an 'India diehard' and supporter of appeasement, proposed a measure calling for national unity, which others regarded as curbing criticism of the government. Prominent critics of appeasement, Vyvyan Adams and Richard Law, ensured a less restrictive motion was passed instead.¹²⁹ The divisions amongst diehards were more obvious at the famous Norway debate on 7 and 8 May 1940. Early on, Sir Roger Keyes, one of the India diehards, condemned his government, comparing the Norway debacle with the disastrous assault on Gallipoli during the Great War. As the admiral was one of the very few India diehards to follow Churchill in the late 1930s, it is significant that he criticized naval policy

¹²⁵ *The Times*, 18 March 1939, p. 8.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1939, p. 10.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28 April 1939, p. 8. Thompson cites Croft's memoirs in which he retrospectively argued that the seizure of Prague was 'the turning point in our times', Croft, *Life of Strife*, p. 294, cited in Thompson, *Anti-Appeasers*, p. 201.

¹²⁸ House of Commons Debates, 3 Sept. 1939, vol. 351, cols 300–1.

¹²⁹ *The Times*, 5 April 1940, p. 5.

in this manner.¹³⁰ As a member of the government, Churchill was not among the diehards who defied the party whips on the crucial vote of confidence on 8 May. Another diehard, Courtauld, also ended his record of abstentions by supporting Chamberlain, without indicating why his position had changed since Munich. Of the core diehard cohort, six abstained and two went further by voting against their government.¹³¹ In the larger cohort of India diehards, fourteen abstained and four voted against the government.¹³²

The core diehard MP, Sir William Davison, who abstained on Munich and did so again on Norway, made a number of interruptions during the two-day debate, all directed at Labour speakers. But the only substantial diehard contribution came from Croft.¹³³ He defended the government at great length; indeed, Amery suggests that calling Croft to speak was intended to kill the debate.¹³⁴ The Bournemouth MP caused considerable controversy by blaming the present crisis on articles in the press, which encouraged ‘despondency among our people because of some temporary setbacks’, and criticized MPs for devoting too much of their energies to ‘social problems’ rather than fostering the ‘offensive spirit’ which was necessary to win the war.¹³⁵ These remarks prompted some Labour MPs to leave the chamber.¹³⁶ Croft’s speech went on, at some length, to deal with the problems faced by the British army. It is likely that his determined and consistent posture on the need to address these issues went some way to securing him ministerial office, as under-secretary of state for war, following Churchill’s replacement of Chamberlain. Wolmer also received a junior ministerial appointment, and from the India cohort of diehards, Churchill’s close friend, Bracken, was placed in charge of the Ministry of Information.¹³⁷

V

Historians have tended to examine right-wing British responses to Hitler on the basis of a supposed admiration or political affinity for Nazism. This assumes more about diehard Conservatism than it understands. Rather than a dilemma between sympathy for Nazism and concerns

¹³⁰ House of Commons Debates, 7 May 1940, vol. 360, cols 1125–30.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 8 May 1940, vol. 360, cols 1364–5. In addition to Gretton and Davison, four others, who had not before abstained, were prepared to do so on this occasion: Charles Emmott, Lindsay Everard, Howard Gritten, and Reginald Purbrick, none of whom addressed the two day debate.

¹³² House of Commons Debates, 8 May 1940, vol. 360, cols 1364–5. Wolmer as well as Admiral Keyes voted against the government, and were joined by Alfred Roy Wise, a diehard supporter of Munich.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1940, vol. 360, col. 1088; 8 May 1940, vol. 360, cols 1291–2.

¹³⁴ Amery, diary, 7 May 1940, *Empire at Bay*, p. 592.

¹³⁵ House of Commons Debates, 7 May 1940, vol. 360, cols 1106–7. See also *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1940, p. 2.

¹³⁶ Harold Nicolson, diary, 7 May 1940, in Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters, 1939–1945* (London, 1967), p. 76.

¹³⁷ Wolmer’s opposition to Chamberlain was criticized by local constituency members, see, Parker, *Churchill*, p. 192.

about German threats to Britain's global position, the dilemma that actually split diehards was between challenging Germany before it was too late, and a conviction that Britain lacked the means to do so. Both positions were predicated on a belief that Britain needed to accelerate rearmament, and that Nazi Germany posed a direct threat to British power. Ideology is not irrelevant, but the public statements and actions of diehard MPs reveal that their primary motivation, as it had been since the early 1900s, was to resist internal and external threats to Britain's position as a world power. This resulted in an unprecedented division in diehard ranks, over Chamberlain's foreign policy, though diehard unity on colonial appeasement recalled an older tradition of working together in defence of the empire. If Chamberlain had a successful track record in outmanoeuvring or ignoring critics of appeasement, then diehard MPs, alongside other Conservative critics of colonial appeasement, succeeded in doing something beyond the ability of others by limiting what the prime minister could offer Germany.¹³⁸ This is a reminder that political history and diplomatic history should not just be the study of those taking decisions, but ought also to consider their reliance on parliamentarians for endorsement in the legislature, and supporters across the country for moral authority.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.