

## Colonial Appeasement (1935–38)

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Colonial appeasement is a largely forgotten aspect of British appeasement. During the years from 1935 to 1938 the British government gave serious attention to the possibility of granting Germany colonial possessions in Africa as part of a “general settlement” with the Nazi regime. Various schemes for transferring African territories to German jurisdiction were considered, but serious obstacles arose and, with the exception of one formal proposal from the British in early 1938, talks with the Germans on the subject never moved beyond vague generalities.

Prior to the First World War, Germany held four territories in Africa, namely German East Africa, German South-West Africa, Kamerun, and Togoland. All were surrendered to the victorious Allies at the end of the war, who then held them as League of Nations mandate territories. The same applied to the scattered German island possessions in the Pacific. The Germans had always been ambivalent about their overseas possessions. German chancellor Otto von Bismarck had only reluctantly embarked on the European imperial sweepstakes of the late nineteenth century. However, a vigorous colonial lobby gained traction in Berlin, especially during the era of Wilhelm II. Following the war, some Germans continued to hope that their colonies, at least those in Africa, would be returned in the future. A number of pro-colonial lobbying groups were set up in Germany in the early 1920s. Such hopes were given a huge boost with Hitler’s

coming to power in 1933, even though the Nazi leader’s territorial ambitions focused on Eastern Europe, as indicated in his infamous memoir *Mein Kampf*. A few senior Nazis also hoped for a colonial foothold in Africa, but the early years of Hitler’s regime were taken up with other, more urgent matters.

British officials and policy-makers had, throughout the 1920s, strongly rejected any suggestion of returning colonies to Germany. But the deteriorating world economic situation after 1929, combined with the growing threat to the peace from Hitler’s Germany, forced the British to rethink their position. Gradually the idea began to emerge that perhaps colonies could be returned to Germany as part of a much larger general settlement of the situation in Europe.

On March 7, 1936, Hitler sent German troops into the demilitarized zone of Germany. He then issued a series of demands, one of which was a call for equality of colonial rights for Germany. The Nazis had dropped a similar hint the previous year when then British foreign secretary John Simon had visited Germany. The German demands prompted the new foreign secretary Anthony Eden to suggest to prime minister Stanley Baldwin that a colonial redistribution might be worth examining. Baldwin ordered the formation of a committee, headed by Lord Plymouth, parliamentary under-secretary for colonies, to look into the matter. The committee was composed of senior officials drawn from a variety of British government ministries.

A 36-page report followed three months later. The results were largely negative. The Plymouth Committee could find few, if any, reasons to retrocede colonies to Germany. There was some mystification as to

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why Germany wanted colonies anyway, as their economic benefits were dubious and administrative costs would be substantial. The committee cited major legal problems involved in transferring mandated territories to German control. The local inhabitants would not likely want a return of German rule, especially given Nazi racial ideology. Strategic issues were given considerable emphasis by the report. If the British, for example, transferred Tanganyika (the former German East Africa) to German control, the Nazis would then have a potential naval base for Indian Ocean commerce raiders, or air bases to disrupt Britain's Cape-to-Cairo connection. The former German possession of South-West Africa was now firmly under the heel of the South Africans who were not going to allow a German return, so the committee ruled that territory out entirely. The British had been granted small chunks of the former German possessions of Kamerun and Togoland, but most of those territories were under a French mandate. The French, like the South Africans, were unlikely to give up the former German colonies. The Plymouth report led the government to proclaim in the House of Commons on July 27, 1936, that no return of German colonies was forthcoming. The Conservative Party conference the following October voted to support the government's decision. Foreign Secretary Eden was particularly supportive of the committee's report.

The whole issue might have died at that time. However, Germany's Hjalmar Schacht, then minister of economics, and believed by the British to be a moderating influence on Hitler, kept the idea alive. In August of 1936 Schacht traveled to Paris and had a series of conversations with newly elected French prime minister Leon Blum. Schacht was an enthusiastic supporter of colonies for Germany and pleaded his case to Blum. Schacht argued that Germany's economic

problems could be solved by the return of colonies. An agreement over colonies, he suggested, could lead to further agreements on disarmament. Blum listened patiently and apparently encouraged Schacht to take up his cause with the British who, he implied, would be sympathetic. Accordingly, in January and February of 1937 Schacht repeated his arguments in a series of meetings with Frederick Leith-Ross, chief economic adviser to the British government. Leith-Ross was skeptical, and once again pointed to the high costs of administering colonies, but nevertheless relayed Schacht's message to London.

The ball was now in the British court. The Cabinet seemed puzzled and could find no path forward given the results of the Plymouth Committee. For his part, Eden doubted that Schacht had any real influence on Hitler and thought the problem should be negotiated exclusively between the foreign ministries of the two countries. The Cabinet instructed the British ambassador in Paris, Eric Phipps, to see if France might be interested in transferring some of its territory to Germany. Phipps reported back that the answer, after a very friendly luncheon with Blum, was a firm "no."

The next step took place with the visit of Lord Halifax, who held the senior Cabinet post of Lord President of the Council, to Germany in November 1937. In the meantime Neville Chamberlain had succeeded Baldwin as prime minister on May 28, 1937. Chamberlain was determined to achieve a general settlement with Hitler and believed that the attitude of his own Foreign Office was an obstacle on the road to that goal, although for the time being Eden and Chamberlain were able to paper over their differences. However, Chamberlain preferred personal and informal diplomacy as opposed to going through the allegedly slow-moving channels of formal diplomacy. In the late fall of 1937 Lord Halifax, in his capacity of master of the

Middleton hounds, received an invitation from one Hermann Goering, in his role as *Reichsjägermeister* of the International Hunting Exhibition, to visit Germany. The trip was actually a ruse under which Chamberlain hoped Halifax (an important political ally of Chamberlain's) would be able to discuss the outlines of a European settlement with Hitler.

Halifax's memoir, *Fulness of Days*, published in 1957, is remarkable for its blandness but this visit with Hitler on November 19 at Berchtesgaden is described in some detail. The issue of colonies, Halifax said, "came up in two or three forms in the course of our discussion. If the question could be settled between us, good. If not, he (Hitler) must note and regret. But he hoped that France and Great Britain would examine the question together and arrive at a solution which they could propose" (Halifax 1957: 187-88). Hitler then stated that he did not want a colony at a strategic point that would drag him into trouble. Possessions in the Sahara, the Mediterranean, and the Far East were all ruled out by Hitler. Halifax replied that Britain could not discuss the issue of colonies except in the context of a general settlement of affairs in Europe. "Hitler said that talks and conferences needed very careful preparation, and he did not believe in a conference every three months that achieved nothing. The real danger was that of an unsuccessful conference. Let us be content to go slowly. It was the surest way." Halifax concluded that the chances that Hitler would go to war for the sake of regaining colonies unlikely.

Addressing a debriefing meeting of senior British and French foreign policy officials in London after his return from Germany, Halifax mentioned that Schacht, in a separate meeting with him, had now raised the possibility of Germany regaining Togoland and Kamerun, plus a swath of central African territory taken from Portuguese Angola and

the Belgian Congo. Schacht thought that the latter two territories might be held by Germany under the terms of a League of Nations mandate. This proposal did not go down well at all with the assembled officials who pointed out that the Belgians and Portuguese could not possibly be expected to agree. However, the British Foreign Office was instructed to examine the likelihood of such a settlement of the colonial issue.

The resulting Foreign Office memorandum was even less enthused than the Plymouth Committee report. The authors of the memorandum flatly refused to comment on former German territories held by either Britain or the Dominions, on the grounds that these were outside the purview of the Foreign Office. The memorandum then pointed out that handing over Belgian or Portuguese territory was fraught with strategic and legal issues, and concluded that any colonial redistribution with Germany was rash unless it was part of a larger settlement of European issues.

The problem next went to the Cabinet's Foreign Policy Committee at a meeting of January 24, 1938. Neville Chamberlain now made a direct intervention, and the results were fairly dramatic. Chamberlain proclaimed he was taking an entirely new approach to the issue of German colonies. The prime minister seems to have taken up aspects of Schacht's idea about a bloc of territory in central Africa. He suggested that "two lines should be drawn across Africa, the northern line running roughly to the south of the Sahara, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland, and the southern line running roughly to the south of Portuguese West Africa, the Belgian Congo, Tanganyika and Portuguese East Africa" (Crozier 1988: 1186). The territory in between would be governed by a number of European powers, including Germany. Each power would be given specific territories to administer provided they followed certain

principles including freedom of trade and communications, respect for native rights and privileges, and a ban on military bases. This would now be the first step to a general settlement with Germany (as opposed to Eden's approach, which had advocated a general settlement before any colonial concessions). Chamberlain denied there had been any change in policy and argued that since colonies were the only issue of substance between Germany and Britain, solving the problem would drive the prospect of a general settlement forward.

Chamberlain's proposal met with a frosty reception from his colleagues, many of whom feared it would have a severe negative impact on opinion in the rest of Africa, Asia, and the West Indies. A close examination of the scheme revealed that Belgium and Portugal would be giving up most of the territory in question, and the British the least. France would also lose territory, although some Cabinet members thought that Paris could be compensated with territory from British holdings. Vigorous opposition from Belgium and Portugal could certainly be expected, as was pointed out by some ministers. Chamberlain brushed aside these objections and the Foreign Policy Committee decided to proceed regardless. The British ambassador to Germany, Neville Henderson, was summoned home for a briefing. He was subsequently instructed to raise the issue of colonies again in his next meeting with Hitler.

A succession of crucial events took place before Henderson could meet with Hitler. First, Eden resigned as foreign secretary on February 20, 1938, after a series of disagreements with Chamberlain. Eden was succeeded by Lord Halifax. By this point German threats against Austria were reaching a peak. The Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, had already had a disastrous meeting with Hitler on February 12 and was now considering the rapidly narrowing

options for his country. Henderson thus met with Hitler on March 3 in an atmosphere of international crisis and the prospect of an imminent German invasion of Austria.

Henderson began the meeting by expressing concern for the fate of Austria. When it came to colonies, he outlined the British proposal in the following terms: "A solution which seemed to them (British government) to have many attractions might be found in a scheme based upon the idea of a new regime of colonial administration in a given area of Africa, roughly corresponding to the conventional zone of the Congo Basin Treaties, acceptable and applicable to all the Powers concerned on exactly the equal terms. Each Power, while solely concerned for the administration of its own territories, would be invited to subscribe to certain principles designed to promote the well-being of all" (Schmokel 1964: 118). He then enumerated the governing principles that Chamberlain had earlier outlined. It was the clearest offer of colonial appeasement that the British ever made to Hitler.

Alas, Henderson quickly discovered that Hitler had little interest in discussing a general settlement, much less colonial proposals. Instead Hitler ranted about the British press, the oppression of Germans in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the failures of disarmament, and the alleged threats from the French and the Soviets. "As for colonies he did not seem the least interested in them, and the sum of his reply was that the colonial problem could wait for 4, 6, 8, or even 10 years. He promised, however, to give me a written reply on the subject, and I left Berlin a year and a half later without having ever received it" (Henderson 1940: 117). A few days later on March 13, 1938, German troops marched unopposed into Austria and Hitler achieved his long-sought *Anschluss*, or union, with his homeland. Afterwards the colonial issue dropped far down the agenda as the British

and French turned their attention to the next crisis point in Europe, the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia.

Early historians of the subject were harshly critical of colonial appeasement, which they saw as a particularly craven aspect of British policy towards Hitler's Germany. However, a deeper examination of the issue shows that the British were for the most part using colonial appeasement as a stepping stone to resolving issues in Europe as a whole. If the strategy failed, it was largely due to the fact that Hitler personally was not overly interested in colonies in Africa (even if some of his supporters were serious) and was using the issue to mislead his enemies.

SEE ALSO: Abyssinian Crisis (1935); African Diplomacy; Alliance Diplomacy; *Anschluss* (1938); Appeasement; Bismarck-Schönhausen, Otto von (1815–98); Chamberlain, Neville (1869–1940); Eden, Anthony (1897–1977); Halifax, Lord (1881–1959); Hitler, Adolf (1889–1945); League of Nations; Rhineland Crisis (1936); Treaty of Versailles (1919)

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