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Peter J. Yearwood

'Consistently with Honour': Great Britain, the League of Nations and the Corfu Crisis of 1923

The crisis arising out of the murder on Greek soil of General Tellini, the Italian president of the allied commission delimiting the Graeco-Albanian border, and the consequent Italian occupation of Corfu on 31 August 1923, confronted the League of Nations with what was recognized as being its first major test. It was generally accepted that the Greek government had a clear responsibility to ensure the safety of the representative of a foreign power on its territory, and was thus liable to make substantial apologies and reparation to Italy and probably also to the allied Conference of Ambassadors whose agent Tellini had been.¹ But it was also felt that Mussolini's action in confronting Greece with a patently unacceptable ultimatum with a twenty-four-hour time limit and then proceeding to the bombardment and seizure of an undefended island was an outrage comparable with the behaviour of Austria-Hungary towards Serbia after Sarajevo in 1914.² In the words of the British representative in Athens, expressing sentiments which the Foreign Office considered unexceptionable: 'Great principles appear to me to be involved. Not only is the League of Nations but international relations and indeed the whole Law of Nations at stake.'³

Many people thought, both then and later, that the League failed this test and that this was also a failure for the policy of Great Britain, which had appeared as the strongest champion of the League during the crisis. Harold Nicolson, then a first secretary in the central department of the Foreign Office, provided a bitter summary: 'In response to the successive menaces of M. Mussolini we muzzled the League, we imposed the fine on Greece without evidence of her guilt and without reference to the Hague, and we disbanded the Commission of Enquiry. A settlement was thus achieved.' He felt that British public opinion would ask 'how it came about that we entered into the dispute upon a firm moral basis and that in the end we were forced to

agree to a settlement which is to all appearances unjust . . .⁴ Most subsequent historians have echoed Nicolson's views.⁵

A cautious defence of British policy and of Geneva's action was undertaken by the minister responsible for League matters, Lord Robert Cecil, at the meeting of the imperial conference in October 1923. The League council had

felt that our business under the Covenant was to do everything we could to promote a settlement, and since the two parties had agreed to accept the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors our object henceforward was to do everything we could to facilitate the task of the Ambassadors, and to make their decisions as nearly in accordance with public opinion of the world as expressed at Geneva as we could.

He believed that this 'concentration of public opinion at Geneva was one of the great factors in promoting what was, after all, a very rapid pacific settlement of an exceedingly difficult question'.⁶ Cecil's arguments have in substance been accepted by a significant minority of historians writing on the subject.⁷

Not only is there controversy as to whether Corfu should be regarded as a manifest and ominous setback for the League or as a substantial, if veiled, triumph, there is also disagreement as to when British policy took the decisive step which resulted in an outcome which was on the face of it unsatisfactory. In 1923 Nicolson argued that this had occurred on 13 September⁸ when the British ambassador in Paris, Lord Crewe, failed to prevent the Conference of Ambassadors from accepting the following declaration by the Italian ambassador, Baron Romano Avezana:

Mais si à cette date [27 September 1923 when Italy was due to evacuate Corfu], les coupables ne sont pas découverts et s'il n'est pas établi que le Gouvernement grec n'a pas [sic] commis aucune négligence dans leur poursuite et leur recherche . . . la conférence infligera à la Grèce, à titre de pénalité, le versement de la somme de cinquante millions de lires italiennes à l'Italie . . .⁹

This negative wording, which Crewe had accepted without seeking specific authority from the Foreign Office, made it almost inevitable that Greece would have to pay the full fine.

A decade later, when he came to write his study of Lord Curzon's period as Foreign Secretary, Nicolson placed the decisive moment earlier:

Up to the last moment Curzon maintained his support of Lord Robert Cecil and the League. On September 10 he suddenly withdrew that support. Lord Crewe, in Paris,

was instructed to accept the compromise scheme elaborated by the Ambassadors. The Council of the League were also obliged, in view of our surrender, to renounce their own authority. A settlement was imposed upon Greece which was demonstrably unfair. Corfu was evacuated by the Italians, but the League of Nations had suffered a defeat from which its prestige has never recovered.¹⁰

This account has been rather uncritically accepted by some later historians including Barros,¹¹ but it is not supported by Cecil's own memoirs, which make no mention of a sudden and unaccountable withdrawal of support, but complain only of the Foreign Secretary's failure to consult Geneva over the final decision, taken on 26 September, to make Greece pay the fifty million lire.¹²

The material in the Foreign Office archives released at the end of the 1960s now makes it possible to review in detail the development of British policy during the crisis and to resolve some of these disputed points. In particular, it will be shown that the main disagreements were within the Foreign Office itself rather than between the FO and Cecil, that the policy adopted was essentially that of Cecil, and that the course which was rejected was that proposed by Nicolson himself.

The first reaction of the British government to the occupation of Corfu was simply outrage. The decision to refer the question to Geneva was almost instinctive. Even before the bombardment of Corfu, the councillor in charge of the central department suggested: 'It is surely pre-eminently a case for the League, under Art. 11'.¹³ With the occupation hourly imminent, Nicolson and Sir William Tyrrell, the assistant under secretary, prepared a long minute arguing the case for 'concentrating our efforts to protect Greece through the agency of the League of Nations against an unfair exploitation by Italy'.¹⁴ Curzon, who was about to return from Paris, came independently to the same conclusion. He informed Baldwin, who was on holiday at Aix-les-Bains, that Italy's conduct was 'violent and inexcusable' and that if Great Britain did not back up the Greek appeal to the League, 'that institution may as well shut its doors'.¹⁵ For Curzon, the occupation was always an 'egregious filibuster', and the eventual settlement was 'humiliating and unjust', further evidence of the 'pitch of immorality' to which international affairs had sunk.¹⁶

Baldwin, Curzon and the Foreign Office saw their support for the League essentially as a reaffirmation of basic values which had been brutally challenged by a mountebank dictator. The available documents provide no evidence for calling into question their sincerity in this respect. However, they must also have been aware of certain obvious political considerations. Tyrrell noted that not only would

support for Geneva be 'the most effective action we can take', but it would also secure 'unanimous backing in this country'.¹⁷ According to the Italian ambassador, Curzon confessed that a decision to support Italy would have brought down the ministry.¹⁸ At the very least, failure to back Geneva strongly would certainly have provoked the resignation of Lord Robert Cecil, whose role in the crisis was decisive.

Until recently, Cecil has usually been regarded as a sort of selfless martyr to the League cause, a worthy if somewhat impractical idealist — in Salvador de Madariaga's striking phrase, a 'civic monk'.¹⁹ This image is highly misleading. Historians are coming increasingly to recognize Cecil's importance in the complicated politics of the immediate post-war period, his penchant for intrigue, and his desire to create a new centre party. This would have been based on the existing Liberals, but would also have included moderate Labour supporters and progressive Conservatives, and would have been committed to policies such as industrial co-partnership and, above all, support for the League of Nations.²⁰ Cecil was never able either to succeed in his schemes with the political élite or to organize mass support, but it is possible to regard the League of Nations Union, of which he was the chairman, as being at least the embryo of the sort of political party which Cecil hoped to create. Certainly politicians of the 1920s and 1930s were careful never to allow support for the League to become a divisive issue in British politics.

In going through the Cecil and Foreign Office papers, it is difficult to avoid gaining the impression that he was systematically collecting grievances so that he could either force out Curzon, whom he would then replace, or break with the government on the grounds that it was indifferent or even hostile to the interests of the League.²¹ Indeed, he threatened to resign at the beginning of the crisis, but this crossed with Curzon's instruction to 'support the League on the first occasion on which a small power has appealed to it against the high-handed action of a great Power'.²²

This was what had been strongly desired by the central department of the Foreign Office. Here Harold Nicolson played a key role. He was the only member of the FO at this time who can reasonably be described as an enthusiast for the League. He had even spent some time as a member of its secretariat in Geneva. While he had returned to London disillusioned with the degree of influence which the League had in the world and his own lack of constructive employment,²³ he still maintained his faith in its ultimate purposes. He wrote

the first substantive minute on papers relating to the crisis and his position throughout was that:

we should bear firmly in mind . . . above all that the issue is not the murder of General Tellini, is not even the evacuation of Corfu, but simply and solely whether we shall or shall not be forced to retreat from the position of upholding the Covenant and the public law of Europe.²⁴

From Nicolson, the files went first to Alexander Cadogan, the senior first secretary in the department, to Miles Lampson, then to Sir William Tyrrell. As the permanent under secretary, Sir Eyre Crowe, was on holiday,²⁵ they then went to Lord Curzon, who was at his country house of Kedleston recovering from phlebitis.²⁶ While Cadogan, Lampson and Nicolson differed over some of the details of how to handle the crisis, they were agreed as to the fundamental issues involved. The essential need was convincingly to reassert the principles of decent international behaviour and respect for law. The League was the means by which this would be achieved. It was therefore necessary to achieve Geneva's public and visible triumph over the lawlessness of the Italian dictator.²⁷

The actions of the British government in support of the League were subject to three major constraints. The first was set out by Kennard, the counsellor of the embassy at Rome. He pointed out that Mussolini was inexperienced in foreign affairs and 'swayed by a mixture of megalomania and extreme patriotism . . .'. If the League insisted on strong measures, the Italian dictator was 'capable of any ill-considered and reckless action which might even plunge Europe into war'. He had to be regarded 'as a mad dog who may do infinite harm before he is despatched'. Kennard went on:

It might be thought preferable to despatch the mad dog without delay but it should not be forgotten that if Mussolini fell he would not merely be succeeded by some other premier such as Giolitti but that period of anarchy might possibly ensue which would be followed by either military dictatorship or some other worse form of government.²⁸

Such considerations seem to have carried little direct weight in London.²⁹ No one in the FO endorsed Kennard's reasoning, and his unauthorized attempt to arrange a settlement almost provoked an official rebuke.³⁰ Sentiment in the Foreign Office was much more in line with the views of Bentinck, the British representative in Athens, who argued that: 'Question of prestige of Italian President of the Council or his fall even with possible resulting internal disorder is

surely a trifle compared with principle which is the same as that which occasioned great war'.³¹ Nowhere in the FO files or in the private papers of those responsible for the formulation of British policy is there any expression of sympathy for the Italian dictator or suggestion that his retention in power constituted a desirable objective.

Far more important a consideration was the inherent weakness of the coercive machinery of the League. At the beginning of the crisis, the FO had asked Cecil for an assurance 'that our advocacy will not lead to a fiasco owing to imposition of veto by other council members'. The reply strongly urged Great Britain 'to come forward as champion of smaller Powers and upholder of Covenant . . .', but largely evaded the precise questions to which answers were needed. Reading between the lines, it was apparent that action by the council could not be prevented by an Italian veto, but that a French one would be an insuperable obstacle.³² Indeed Cecil himself later came to adopt the even more pessimistic viewpoint that 'a member of the Council, and a permanent member at that, can always block everything which comes up, and if the goodwill of Italy is absent, the League, as at present constituted, becomes completely powerless'.³³

As the crisis developed, it also became clear that Great Britain lacked either the will or the ability to implement League sanctions against Italy. Both Nicolson in London and Cecil in Geneva were willing to contemplate the use, if necessary, of the economic and even the military sanctions of Article 16.³⁴ This suggestion provoked the opposition of the Treasury and of the Admiralty. The former argued the difficulty of implementing the complex system of control of trade and commerce which would be resisted by the business community and would be ineffective unless the United States co-operated wholeheartedly. The Admiralty claimed that an effective blockade of Italy would require a declaration of war and the concentration of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.³⁵ Nicolson was undaunted by these prospects. He felt that 'we shall be defeated if we back the League as far as Article XV and not as far as Article XVI . . .'.³⁶ However, the practical difficulties of applying sanctions against Italy now loomed large in the thinking of Tyrrell in London³⁷ and Crewe in Paris. In the words of the latter: 'Judging from the Treasury Note, the blockade, which I had quite hoped would be an efficient weapon to brandish, seems to be one which might burst at the breach'.³⁸

The third, and probably decisive, constraint on British policy was the reluctance of the French government to allow the League the glory of a public triumph over Mussolini. Instead, Poincaré preferred

the crisis to be dealt with by the allied Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, which had emerged as the one body whose authority both Rome and Athens would accept.³⁹ The French government was therefore anxious to use the conference as a bridge across which Mussolini could retreat. While France could not accept the Italian dictator's open challenge to the post-war international order of which it was the most conspicuous supporter and beneficiary, Paris was anxious to find a way of extricating him from the untenable position in which he had placed himself.⁴⁰

Thus the question rapidly became not so much whether Mussolini would evacuate Corfu as whether he would be seen to do so in obedience to the orders of the League, or because he had achieved the aims for which he claimed the occupation had originally been undertaken: to secure from the Greek government adequate apologies and indemnities for the murder of General Tellini. So long as Mussolini was willing to leave Corfu once Greece had met the demands of the Conference of Ambassadors, it was difficult for Great Britain to enforce a solution through the League of Nations.

During the crisis, Cecil and the FO worked harmoniously together. The British delegate repeatedly acknowledged the support which he received from London,⁴¹ while Baldwin, Curzon and the FO expressed their appreciation of Cecil's skill and moderation.⁴² Both had essentially the same appreciation of the issues at stake and of the constraints on British policy. Nevertheless, each did have apprehensions about the line being pursued by the other. The Foreign Office had swiftly realised that it could not deny the right of the Conference of Ambassadors to deal with the questions arising directly out of the murder of General Tellini, though it sought to limit this by insisting that the functions of the conference were 'definite but circumscribed'. The League and the League alone could deal with the wider dispute.⁴³ Therefore, the central department was worried that Cecil was too willing to allow private sessions of the council at Geneva⁴⁴ and not sufficiently appreciative of the need to display a convincing manifestation of League opinion, which would be 'a unique opportunity of rallying world opinion to our side', before Poincaré could arrive at a complete solution in Paris and thus bring the crisis to an end.⁴⁵ Cecil, however, never accepted the sharp distinction which the FO drew between Janina (the murder of General Tellini) and Corfu, with its implied division of functions between the League and the Conference of Ambassadors. Instead, he envisaged collaboration between the two on all aspects of the crisis.⁴⁶ No doubt he was also worried by

Curzon's decision not to take up his suggestion of a concentration of the British fleet in the Mediterranean.⁴⁷ On 7 September, he asked for Baldwin's full support in view of one or two 'disquieting' telegrams from the FO,⁴⁸ but in fact he never found it necessary to call on the prime minister to intervene actively.

Indeed, the crisis was resolved essentially along the lines set out by Cecil himself. Even more than the Foreign Office, he was anxious for close co-operation between France and Great Britain. As he told Crewe, 'At this moment nothing can work unless those two countries are agreed'.⁴⁹ Throughout the period of the crisis, he was trying to secure the adoption by the League assembly of the draft treaty of mutual assistance which he had worked out in collaboration with Colonel Réquin of the French general staff and which he saw as meeting France's demands for a guarantee of security. He hoped subsequently to get the British government to accept this treaty.⁵⁰ At the same time, he was also engaged in complicated negotiations which he hoped would lead to a solution of the reparations question on terms more favourable to France than the British Treasury was willing to contemplate.⁵¹ Moreover, the success of his domestic political schemes clearly required his being able to have behind him a significant number of Tories alarmed at the deterioration of Anglo-French relations under Curzon.⁵² In September 1923, no major British politician had more to lose in being forced to choose between support for France and support for the League of Nations. On the other hand, the Greeks had clearly been quite within their rights in appealing to Geneva and 'it is almost impossible for the League to refuse to respond to their appeal without pronouncing itself incompetent to deal with any considerable international dispute'. However, 'the League's business is to re-establish peace and there seems a chance that Mussolini would take a decision of the Conference of Ambassadors at Paris though he rejects the League'. Therefore, the League and the Conference would have to 'combine on terms of settlement which both can agree to'.⁵³

The procedure for resolving the crisis was devised by Cecil. The Spanish member of the council put forward a set of proposals, which, because of the Italian veto, were not actually adopted, but the minutes of the meeting were sent to the Conference of Ambassadors, which embodied most of the proposals in a note to Greece which the Italian ambassador acknowledged as 'covering' the Italian demands.⁵⁴ As the Greek government had already agreed to accept the judgement of the ambassadors on the points at issue, and as Geneva was willing

to accept that the conference was acting in accordance with its desires, by the evening of 8 September the thorniest issues seemed to have been resolved. In the next stage of the crisis, Cecil wanted a definite ruling that actions like those of Mussolini were inadmissible and that the League had the right and duty to act in such cases. He also wanted League opinion ultimately to be allowed some expression.⁵⁵ However, he was aware of the need not to let either the reassertion of the League's theoretical competence or a debate in which the smaller powers would pillory Italy interfere with the solution of the substantive questions. As he noted after the debate on the Spanish proposals: '... I do not quite see how the League can deal with that question [the speedy evacuation of Corfu] effectively at this moment'.⁵⁶ Cecil felt that the League would have to take 'some action' over the Italian challenge to its competence, but this would be done later rather than immediately.⁵⁷

The central department was worried about the implications of Cecil's strategy, which it thought ran the risk of turning the League into an annex of the Conference of Ambassadors. However, these worries were shared neither by Tyrrell, who thought 'we may trust Lord R. Cecil to safeguard the interests of the League', nor by Curzon.⁵⁸ The over-riding concern of the foreign secretary was to ensure that 'we can, consistently with honour, see an end to our trouble and escape the horrors of another war'.⁵⁹ His decision was scribbled out in the early morning of 8 September just before the messenger left Kedleston for the Foreign Office:

Will Mussolini accept the clear instructions about the evacuation of Corfu? If yes, I hardly see how the League can pursue the matter. In fact it may be said to have triumphed. If not then 'a grave question' arises and the League would be bound to go on.⁶⁰

The policy outlined in this hasty minute remained essentially unchanged throughout the rest of the crisis. It was set out more fully by Tyrrell later the same day. He reminded Curzon that the British government 'did not set out with the task of either booming the League or testing its vitality', but rather tried to preserve the peace through taking its stand on the sanctity of treaties. This had forced France on to the same side as Great Britain and had induced Poincaré to 'build the bridge for their [the Italians'] retreat . . .'. Tyrrell hoped that the League would for the time being adopt a prudent attitude and abstain from public comment until the dispute had been wound up.⁶¹ In a separate, private letter he noted that: 'Poor Nicolson is a little

disappointed that we have not secured a "victoire éclatante"'. However, he thought that there was no 'use our attempting to be "plus royaliste que le roi [Cecil]"'.⁶²

From the point of view of British policy, 8 September was the watershed. Curzon had chosen the strategy proposed by Cecil and endorsed by Tyrrell rather than that advocated by Nicolson and the central department. There was no longer any question of employing economic or military sanctions. Instead, the emphasis was now decisively upon the use of the weapon of public opinion and particularly on the threat of a debate in the League assembly in which France would have had to have chosen openly between Italy and the Little *Entente*. The Foreign Office hoped that this would provide sufficient motive for Poincaré to continue to put effective pressure on Mussolini to end the occupation of Corfu. The assembly was thus seen as being Great Britain's 'trump card'.⁶³

The adoption of this strategy had three consequences. In the first place, it introduced a very strict time limit. The assembly was due to disperse on or shortly after 28 September. Therefore, the Italians would have to agree to leave Corfu by 27 September at the latest. The need to achieve the evacuation by this date severely handicapped British diplomacy, as Crewe pointed out in the subsequent recriminations.⁶⁴ Secondly, the Foreign Office could not be sure that the French would, if forced, choose to support the League:

Although we can blackmail M. Poincaré by the threat of the Assembly, M. Mussolini can blackmail him even more effectively by the threat of raising the Fiume question in an acute form. I do not think, therefore, that we can rely on any firm support from M. Poncaré [*sic*] in regard to the evacuation of Corfu.⁶⁵

The third, and perhaps most important consequence of using the expression of international opinion in the assembly as a threat to induce the Italians to leave Corfu, was that, to be effective, a threat has to remain a threat. Carrying it out signals a failure of policy. Conversely, when it has achieved its purpose, its actual implementation becomes unnecessary and undesirable. Once the threat of open discussion at Geneva had become the main weapon of British diplomacy in securing the end of the Italian occupation, and once the evacuation of Corfu had been both pledged and carried out, the British government could hardly return to advocating simply on its intrinsic merits public condemnation of Italy by the assembly. The success of the League in private would largely preclude its triumph in public.⁶⁶

Therefore, on 10 September, instructions were sent to Geneva which it was hoped would prevent the League from playing the fool. Cecil was told: 'I trust that the League, while reaffirming, if indeed this be thought necessary, their own competence will be satisfied with substantial triumph they have won. . . .'⁶⁷ These instructions were, as has been shown, in line with Cecil's own inclinations. Moreover, they were sent in the afternoon and therefore cannot account for Cecil's failure to raise the theoretical issue of the League's competence at the council meeting in the morning. He had had no intention of doing so at that stage of the crisis, and his decision not to say anything about the evacuation of Corfu was taken in response to telegrams from Crewe in Paris rather than Curzon in London. Cecil made no protest against this.⁶⁸

Although Cecil had been able to establish a framework for resolving the crisis, achieving the actual evacuation of Corfu proved unexpectedly difficult. Cecil had hoped that with the Greek agreement to deposit the sum of fifty million lire (about £500,000) with a Swiss bank, pending determination of the amount of the indemnity by the Permanent Court, Mussolini would agree to leave Corfu.⁶⁹ However, this did not prove to be the case. The Italian dictator would agree to evacuate only when the murderers of General Tellini had been caught. This meant that the occupation might continue indefinitely.⁷⁰ The negotiations in Paris thus entered their most stormy and difficult phase. After the evening session of the Conference of Ambassadors on 12 September, a breakdown seemed inevitable.⁷¹ Curzon instructed Crewe that if Avezzana did not 'pledge his government to the evacuation of Corfu by some date which shall be not later than the 27th September . . .', then he should try to agree with Poincaré a joint withdrawal of opposition to discussion by the League and joint 'support to the decisions which the majority of the nations assembled at Geneva may adopt'.⁷² Crewe did not play this card. Instead, without seeking further instructions, he agreed to Italian evacuation on 27 September, subject to the terms of Avezzana's declaration, which rendered Greek payment of the indemnity virtually inevitable. In any case, he believed that the Greek government knew who the guilty parties were⁷³ and felt that it could at least have 'gone through the farce, for which precedents exist in their own history, of producing some shepherds, at best accessories after the fact, as the actual perpetrators of the crime'.⁷⁴

London received the news of the ambassadors' decision with considerable relief. Nicolson, it is true, had serious misgivings, but

even he did not fully grasp the implications of the negative phrasing of Avezzana's declaration. Tyrrell was much more enthusiastic about the result, which, he thought, 'does not deprive us of any cards which we still hold'.⁷⁵ Curzon told Baldwin: 'Think on the whole we have come well out of the Corfu business, and that our cautious but definite and *righteous* line has justified itself'.⁷⁶

This optimism proved to be ill-founded. A commission of enquiry under a Japanese president was sent to Epiros, but its proceedings were almost farcical. According to the British member, Major Harenc, Colonel Shibouya was an ineffective and incompetent president, while the Italian member, Colonel Beaud, who was inclined for reasons *d'ordre moral* to believe in the complicity of the local Greek authorities, did all he could to hinder an effective investigation. In the end, to produce a unanimous report, the commission agreed that there had been several examples of negligence in the Greek search for the culprits.⁷⁷ When this preliminary finding reached Paris, it became clear that the French would back the Italians in insisting on the immediate payment of the fifty million lire.⁷⁸ Curzon instructed his ambassador not to agree to this.⁷⁹

Crewe had no success in resisting the arguments of the French and Italians. After the meeting of the afternoon of 25 September, he told the FO that he required definite instructions by 11 o'clock the next morning, that there was no option but to agree to the imposition of the full fine if Corfu was to be evacuated on 27 September, and that 'any attempted reference to the League of Nations at the stage we have reached would mean a complete break with Italy'. After rereading the text of Avezzana's declaration, Curzon was forced reluctantly to agree.⁸⁰

Curzon and the Foreign Office were disgusted with this outcome. Throughout the crisis they had been apprehensive that Crewe might not be sufficiently forceful in standing up to Jules Cambon and Avezzana.⁸¹ Now recriminations began. Nicolson drew up a savage indictment of the final stage of British policy and blamed Crewe for its failure. His acceptance of Avezzana's declaration had marked the point at which 'we abandoned our principles in deference to the menaces of M. Mussolini'. Curzon agreed that the ambassador had made 'a serious error of judgement',⁸² and in a letter to Cecil wrote of the conference having been 'bamboozled'.⁸³ For a time, the FO seriously considered making him a public scapegoat, and acrimonious letters passed between London and Paris.⁸⁴

Two charges could be made against the unfortunate ambassador.

The first, strongly pressed by Nicolson, was that by accepting Avezzana's declaration on 13 September he had certainly exceeded and perhaps even defied his instructions. Against this, Crewe could argue that he had in fact secured their essential point, which was the binding pledge of evacuation by 27 September at the latest, and that, as Avezzana had not tried to 'avoid all explicit undertakings', he had not been obliged to demand an adjournment to consult London.⁸⁵ The second charge, which was largely overlooked, was that Crewe had not made clear to the Foreign Office the implication of the negative wording of the declaration, even though he was apparently aware of it himself.⁸⁶ The implication was not appreciated in London until Curzon re-read the declaration on the evening of 25 September. Thus, for the better part of two weeks, the FO was under the illusion that it had in its hand cards which it had in fact lost.

Whether the outcome of the crisis would have been significantly different if Curzon had been consulted over the acceptance of Avezzana's declaration may well be doubted. Neither the Foreign Office nor Curzon himself questioned Crewe's subsequent judgement on the substantive question:

The only effective weapon in my hands was the threat of referring the matter back to the League. The League had already failed to settle the question; it was unlikely that if my threat had been put into execution Signor Mussolini would have evacuated Corfu within a measurable period of time.⁸⁷

The crucial choice had, in any case, been made, not on 13 September but on 8 September, when Curzon had rejected the strong line of the central department and accepted instead to settle the crisis according to the procedures devised by Cecil in Geneva. This decision could not easily have been reversed. Within Whitehall, the Treasury and the Admiralty had both made clear their belief that physical sanctions would be clumsy, ineffective, unpopular, and perhaps dangerous. Clearly, any policy more vigorous than that actually pursued would have given rise to serious divisions within the Cabinet and could only have been adopted if there had been an overwhelming popular demand for it.

There was no such pressure from public opinion. Individual hotheads such as Oswald Mosley, who broke with Cecil on this issue, advocated the use of force,⁸⁸ but the letters which poured into the Foreign Office from branches of the League of Nations Union and other interested bodies⁸⁹ were mainly concerned to 'welcome the vigorous support the British Government has given to the League in

this crisis, and assure His Majesty's Government of the enthusiastic support of the great majority of thinking people in this district, irrespective of creed or party, in anything they may do to strengthen the League and the Ideals for which it stands'.⁹⁰ Such messages regularly called on the British government to 'stand by' the covenant, or to 'enforce' it, or even to use the 'full powers' of the League, but only rarely did they explicitly express the hope that the League 'if need be, shall not shrink from applying the sanctions provided for in the Covenant'.⁹¹

So long as Cecil and Curzon were in substantial agreement in following a course which put the preservation of peace above the assertion of the prestige of the League, Baldwin did not feel it necessary to intervene. He was consulted on, and endorsed, the major decisions, but played no active role in the making of British policy. Like Curzon, he considered the occupation of Corfu to be an outrage, and felt that the League would have to deal with it.⁹² Like Curzon, he was relieved by the ambassadors' decision of 13 September, and he congratulated the foreign secretary on having got the country round 'an awkward corner'.⁹³ There is nothing to suggest that he would have backed a more dangerous or controversial policy. Curzon's own inclinations were similar. His minutes and letters often spoke the language of the central department, but his final decisions were usually to give way, especially if the blame could be attributed elsewhere.

It is therefore unlikely that British policy would have been much different if Crewe had consulted London on 13 September. This was acknowledged at the time by Cadogan: 'Perhaps we should ultimately have had no alternative but to accept . . . in any case: but Ld. Crewe's own case would have been stronger if he had asked for instns'.⁹⁴ In the event, Crewe's failure to consult allowed the Foreign Office to ride off on a comparatively minor point instead of forcing it to consider more carefully the potential role of the League in international affairs. Corfu stimulated much indignation, but little hard thinking. No memorandum attempted either to draw general lessons from the crisis or to consider its implications for the future development of the League. In mid-October Yencken, a junior FO official attached to the British delegate in Geneva, minuted:

The Italo-Greek affair has undoubtedly destroyed a great many confused and dangerous illusions, but it has cleared the air. It will make it easier for people to look upon the League not as an ideal or a religion but as a piece of machinery always capable of improvement. The ultimate effort must be much more healthy than harmful.⁹⁵

Within the Foreign Office such comments were rare, if not actually unique.

At a higher level, the role of the League in the Corfu crisis was discussed at the imperial conference in October. Baldwin, in a statement drafted by the FO, praised the council 'for having placed the permanent interests of peace above what might have seemed the immediate interests of the League itself'.⁹⁶ Cecil made a long defence of its action during the crisis.⁹⁷ Consistently with what had long been his position,⁹⁸ he stressed that the League was 'not a super-State', but was rather 'an international organization to consider and discuss and agree upon international action and the settlement of international difficulties and disputes'. He noted that sanctions were contemplated only to prevent nations from resorting to war 'until an opportunity has been given for discussion, and consideration, and agreement', and emphasized the role of the League in promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes. Here, international public opinion had the major role in ensuring a settlement. It was in this context that Cecil had told the House of Commons in 1919: 'The great weapon we rely upon is public opinion, and if we are wrong about it then the whole thing is wrong'.⁹⁹ Now he argued that Corfu had shown that he was right about public opinion. Its effect 'was exactly what we who believed in it thought it would be; it was overwhelming, that no country, not even in the state of vehement and nationalistic excitement that undoubtedly Italy was in, could stand against it . . .'. In trying to bring about a peaceful settlement 'the Council did exactly what it ought to have done'.

Cecil's arguments found favour with the prime ministers of the dominions. There was general agreement that the Conference should express strong support for Geneva. It was recognized that Corfu was, at least on the surface, a setback for the League, but there was much appreciation of Geneva's role in promoting 'peace by arbitration, peace by conciliation, or peace by bringing to bear public opinion'.¹⁰⁰ It was clearly felt that the real force behind the League was moral rather than military. Massey, the New Zealand prime minister, looked forward to the abolition of Article 16. The other premiers, unlike Cecil, simply did not mention the possibility that sanctions might have to be used in certain circumstances. There was no suggestion that the British government might have acted unwisely in seeing the Italian occupation of Corfu as a challenge to the basic principles of the new international order or in using the League machinery to reassert those principles.

Yet the crisis had produced so many paradoxes that a more careful analysis of it would have seemed essential if the League was to play an important part in future British foreign policy. Italy had been induced to withdraw from Corfu, but the public law of Europe had not been convincingly vindicated. Peace had been preserved, but almost, it seemed, despite the League rather than because of it.¹⁰¹ The sanctions articles of the covenant had been shown to be ineffective, at least when agreement between France and Great Britain was lacking. On the other hand, public opinion as manifested in the assembly had been shown to be a powerful weapon, but only so long as it was not actually used.

This outcome raised many important questions. Had the crisis shown that sanctions were unenforceable or that they were unnecessary? Had it shown that a great power could defy the League with impunity or that it would back down so long as it could do so without humiliation? Had it revealed the council to be essentially a quasi-judicial body which could not act effectively in a political context or a political body which could not act effectively in a quasi-judicial capacity? Had it shown the folly of adopting, or the folly of retreating from, a high moral position? Such questions seem hardly to have been raised within the British government in the autumn of 1923. Instead, there was much lamentation at the perfidy of the French, the ineptitude of the ambassadors, the low standards of international morality, and Mussolini's refusal to play the game.¹⁰² The sentiments may have been admirable, but they were no substitute for hard thought.

Notes

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1. Foreign Office draft telegram to Crewe (Paris). 2 September 1923, Foreign Office archives, Public Record Office, FO 371/8533, C15017/742/90; J.A. van Hamel (director, League of Nations secretariat, judicial section), 'Note juridique sur la responsabilité des états des crimes et attentats politiques commis sur leur territoire', 8 September 1923, League of Nations archives, Geneva, Political 1923: 11/30650/30508,

summarized in James Barros, *The Corfu Incident of 1923* (Princeton 1965), 170–71; Robert, Viscount Cecil of Chelwood (Lord Robert Cecil), *A Great Experiment* (London 1941), 150; F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (1 vol., London, 1960 edn.), 245; J.L. Brierly, *The Law of Nations*, Sir H. Waldock (ed.), (New York 1963), 289–90. There was some doubt as to whether the Conference of Ambassadors had a personality under international law and could therefore obtain reparation for damages; Barros, op. cit., 186, n.74. Since this article was written, the relevant Foreign Office documentation has been published in *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, series 1, vol. XXIV.

2. Stamfordham (private secretary to King George V) to Tyrrell (assistant under secretary, FO), 2 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C15134/15065/62; Curzon minute, 1 September 1923, FO 371/8533, C14825/742/90.

3. Bentinck to Curzon, 4 September 1923, and minute by Cadogan (first secretary, central department), 18 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C16066/15065/62.

4. Nicolson memorandum, 27 September 1923, FO 371/8621, C16980/15065/62.

5. George Scott, *The Rise and Fall of the League of Nations* (London 1973), 85–86; Denis Mack Smith, *Italy, A Modern History* (Ann Arbor 1969), 445; Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism* (London 1967), 673; C.L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars, 1918–1940* (London 1955), 160; Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace; International Relations in Europe 1918–1933* (London 1976), 60; Barros, op. cit., 296.

6. Imperial conference, minutes of 6th meeting, 11 October 1923, Cabinet papers, PRO, CAB32/9.

7. Walters, *League of Nations*, 254; Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Europe of the Dictators, 1919–1945* (London 1966), 49.

8. FO 371/8621, C16980/15065/62.

9. Barros, op. cit., appendix B, 316.

10. Harold Nicolson, *Curzon, The Last Phase 1919–1925* (London 1934), 371.

11. Gordon Craig, 'The British Foreign Office from Grey to Austen Chamberlain', in Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats 1919–1939* (2 vols., New York 1963), I, 37; H. Stuart Hughes, 'The Early Diplomacy of Italian Fascism', in *ibid.*, I, 220; Barros, op. cit., 214–17.

12. Cecil, op. cit., 150–51.

13. Lampson minute, 30 August 1923, FO 371/8533, C14825/742/90. Article 11 gave the members of the League the right to bring to the attention of the assembly or council any circumstances which threatened to disturb international peace and empowered the League to take action to safeguard that peace.

14. Nicolson and Tyrrell, minutes, 31 August 1923, *ibid.*, C149/742/90.

15. Curzon minutes, 1 September 1923, *ibid.*, and Curzon to Baldwin, telegram, 1 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15178/15065/62. Curzon sent these instructions from Paris, not from London, after having been met by Nicolson and Ronald Lindsay on 2 September as stated by Nicolson (op. cit., 369–70, and Nicolson to Crewe, 6 November 1944, Marquess of Crewe papers, Cambridge University Library, box C/38) and by Barros, op. cit., 107–08.

16. Curzon to Cecil, 6 and 27 September 1923, Cecil of Chelwood papers, British Library, Additional manuscripts 51077.

17. FO 371/8533, C14919/742/90.

18. Barros, op. cit., 111, citing Della Torretta (London) to Mussolini, 4 September 1923, in *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, series 7 (2 vols., Rome 1955), 177–78. This is

not confirmed by Curzon's own account of the interview, Curzon to Kennard (Rome), 3 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15179/15065/62.

19. Salvador de Madariaga, 'The civic monks', in Gilbert Murray, *An Unfinished Autobiography* (London 1960), 37.

20. See e.g., Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge 1971), esp. 60–69; Michael Bentley, 'Liberal Politics and the Grey Conspiracy of 1921', *Historical Journal*, XX, 2(1977), 461–78; and Peter J. Yearwood, 'The Foreign Office and the Guarantee of Peace through the League of Nations, 1916–1925' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex 1980), 262–80.

21. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Yearwood, *op. cit.*, 243–47, 274–75.

22. Cecil to Baldwin, 1 September 1923, Earl Baldwin of Bewdley papers, Cambridge University Library, vol. 111; Curzon to Baldwin, telegram, 1 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15178/15065/62.

23. Hardinge (permanent under secretary, FO) minute, n.d. (May 1920), FO 371/4613, Miscellaneous General 199091.

24. Nicolson minute, 17 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C15065/62, file 18.

25. Barros, *op. cit.*, 156.

26. Nicolson, *op. cit.*, 369.

27. Central department, draft telegram to Cecil, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15065/62, file 9.

28. Kennard to Curzon, telegram, 6 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15429/15065/62.

29. However, they did carry weight in Paris, and therefore influenced British policy indirectly; Crewe, telegram by telephone, received 4 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15212/15065/62.

30. Kennard to Curzon, telegram, 4 September, minutes by Lampson and Tyrrell, 5 September, and Curzon, 6 September, and draft telegram to Kennard, 7 September 1923. After a discussion between Curzon and Graham (the British ambassador to Rome who was then in London), it was decided not to send the telegram; FO 371/8614, C15293/15065/62 and file 7.

31. Bentinck to Curzon, telegram, 6 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15457/15065/62.

32. FO to Cecil, telegram, 1 September 1923; Cecil to FO, telegram, 2 September 1923, FO 371/8534, C15042, 15036/742/90.

33. Tufton (Geneva) to Nicolson, 11 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C16206/15065/62. Charles Tufton was the counsellor in the FO responsible for League matters and was attending the assembly with Cecil.

34. Nicolson memorandum, 31 August 1923, FO 371/8533, C742/90, file 2; Cecil to Curzon, telegram, 6 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15422/15065/62. Article 16 of the covenant provided that, if a member of the League resorted to war in defiance of its obligation first to seek a peaceful method of resolving the question at issue, all other members of the League would sever all financial, commercial, and personal relations with it. In addition, the council would 'recommend to the several Governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the Members of the League shall severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League'.

35. Treasury to FO, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15365/15065/62; Admiralty to FO, 6 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15410/15065/62.

36. Nicolson minute, 17 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C15065/62, file 18. Article 15 provided for the peaceful settlement of disputes by the League council.
37. Tyrrell minute, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15356/15065/62.
38. Crewe to Cecil, 8 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51096.
39. Barros, *op. cit.*, 117–18.
40. *Ibid.*, 87–90, 130–31.
41. Cecil to Curzon, telegram, 15 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15269/15065/62; Tufton to Nicolson, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8618, C15801/15065/62; Cecil to Curzon, 4 and 15 September 1923, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston papers, India Office Library, MSS EUR F/112/229.
42. Tufton to Nicolson, C15801/15065/62; Curzon to Cecil, 11 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 151077; Baldwin to Curzon, 14 September 1923, Curzon papers, MSS EUR F/112/229; Curzon to Baldwin, 15 September 1923, Baldwin papers, vol. 114; Nicolson minute, 20 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C16263/15065/62.
43. Curzon to Crewe, telegrams, 3 and 4 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C15177, 15275/15065/62.
44. Central department, draft telegram to Cecil, 2 September 1923, FO 371/8533, C742/90, file 4.
45. Nicolson and Lampson, minutes and draft telegram to Cecil, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15065/62, file 9.
46. Cecil to Curzon, telegrams, 6 September 1923, *ibid.*, C15381, 15382, 15427/62.
47. Curzon to Cecil, telegram, 5 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15356/15065/62.
48. Cecil to Baldwin, 7 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51080.
49. Cecil to Crewe, 13 September 1923, Crewe papers, box C/5.
50. There are detailed treatments of this topic in P.S. Raffo, 'Lord Robert Cecil and the League of Nations' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool 1968), and Yearwood, *op. cit.*, 327–58.
51. Cecil memoranda, 4 and 5 August 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51102, 51096; Cecil to Baldwin, 29 June and 4 August 1923, *ibid.*, 51080; Bradbury (Treasury) to Cecil, 29 November 1923, *ibid.*; Cecil to Baldwin, 24 August 1923, Baldwin papers, vol. 114; Cecil to Crewe, 13 September 1923, Crewe papers, box C/5.
52. For diehard attitudes to Curzon and their political significance, see Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, 301–04.
53. Tufton to Nicolson, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8618, C15801/15065/62.
54. *Ibid.*; Cecil to Curzon, telegrams, 6 and 7 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15381, 15427, 15473/15065/62; Crewe to Curzon, telegrams by telephone received 6 and 7 September 1923, *ibid.*, C15421, 15513, 15543/15065/62; Cecil to Curzon, 8 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15558/15065/62; Barros, *op. cit.*, 157–69, 188–201.
55. Cecil to Curzon, 10 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15704/15065/62.
56. Cecil to Curzon, draft telegram, 10 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51104. This portion of the telegram was not actually sent.
57. Cecil to Curzon, telegram, 8 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15558/15065/62.
58. Nicolson, Lampson and Tyrrell, minutes, 7 September, Curzon minute, 8 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15065/62, file 9.
59. Curzon to Crewe, 9 September 1923, Crewe papers, box C/12.
60. C15065/62, file 9.
61. Tyrrell memorandum, 8 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15695/15065/62.
62. Tyrrell to Curzon, 8 September 1923, Curzon papers, MSS EUR F/112/231.
63. Nicolson and Tyrrell minutes, 11 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15065/62,

file 12; Curzon to Crewe, telegrams, 11 and 13 September 1923, *ibid.*, C15803, 15820/15065/62; Nicolson minute, 18 September 1923, FO 371/8619, C15065/62, file 19.

64. Crewe to Curzon, 27 September 1923, FO 371/8621, C16855/15065/62.

65. Nicolson minute, C15065/62, file 12.

66. This had been one of the main considerations behind the proposed policy of the central department. Draft telegram to Cecil, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8616, C15065/62, file 9.

67. Curzon to Cecil, telegram, 2.00 p.m. 10 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15707/15065/62.

68. Cecil to Curzon, telegram, 6.10 p.m. 10 September 1923, *ibid.*, C15704/15065/62.

69. Cecil to Curzon, telegram, 7 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15474/15065/62.

70. Cecil to Curzon, 10 September 1923, C15704/15065/62. Some historians have suggested that this was indeed Mussolini's object: Giampiero Carocci, *Italian Fascism*, Isabel Quigley trans. (Harmondsworth 1975), 31; Hughes, 'Early diplomacy', 220; C.J. Lowe and F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870–1940* (London 1975), 197–98. However, no documentary evidence for this has yet been produced.

71. Curzon to Cecil, Bentinck and Kennard, telegram, 13 September 1923, FO 371/8618, C15820/15065/62.

72. Curzon to Crewe, telegram, 13 September 1923, *ibid.*

73. Crewe to Curzon, telegram, 13 September 1923, *ibid.*, C15903/15065/62.

74. Crewe to Curzon, 27 September 1923, FO 371/8621, C16855/15065/62.

75. Nicolson, Tyrrell and Curzon, minutes, 14 September 1923, FO 371/8618, C15065/62, file 16.

76. Curzon to Baldwin, 15 September 1923, Baldwin papers, vol. 114, emphasis in original.

77. Barros, *op. cit.*, 258–64.

78. Crewe to Curzon, telegram, 23 September 1923, FO 371/8620, C16459/15065/62.

79. Curzon to Crewe, 25 September 1923, FO 371/8620, C15065/62, file 26.

80. Crewe to Curzon, telegram by telephone received 7.15 p.m. 25 September, Curzon to Crewe, telegram by telephone, 8.30 a.m. 26 September 1923, *ibid.*, C16689/15065/62.

81. Curzon to Cecil, 6 September and 11 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51077.

82. Nicolson memorandum, 27 September and Curzon minute, 30 September 1923, FO 371/8621, C16980/15065/62.

83. Curzon to Cecil, 27 September 1923, Cecil papers, Add. MSS 51077.

84. Curzon to Crewe, 26 and 27 September 1923, Crewe papers, box C/12; Crewe to Curzon, 27 September and 5 October 1923, FO 371/8621, 8622, C16855, 17428/15065/62; Crewe to Curzon, 26, 27, and 30 September 1923, Curzon papers, MSS EUR F112/201.

85. Crewe to Curzon, telegram by telephone received 13 September 1923, FO 371/8618, C15903/15065/62.

86. He had simply told the FO that it was 'not entirely satisfactory from our point of view' (*ibid.*), but he had argued against it at the meeting of the Conference (Barros, *op. cit.*, 246) and subsequently acknowledged that it had rendered payment of the fine virtually inevitable, Crewe to Curzon, 27 September 1923, C16855/15065/62.

87. Crewe to Curzon, 27 September 1923, C16855/15065/62.

88. Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London 1975), 94–95.
89. These were collected in a special file, FO 371/8615, C15334/15065/62. There were 138 of them.
90. Almondsbury LNU, 10 September 1923, *ibid.*
91. Brighton and Hove LNU, 7 September 1923, *ibid.*
92. Baldwin to Curzon, telegram, 5 September 1923, FO 800/155.
93. Baldwin to Curzon, 14 September 1923, Curzon papers, MSS EUR F/112/230.
94. Cadogan minute, 1 October 1923, FO 371/8621, C15065/62, file 32.
95. Yencken minute, FO 371/9456, W8212/8023/98.
96. Draft statement on Corfu for inclusion in PM's speech to imperial conference, n.d., FO 371/8621, C17110/15065/62; minutes of 1st meeting, imperial conference, 1 October 1923, CAB32/9.
97. Minutes of 6th meeting, *ibid.*
98. Cecil speech, 21 July 1919, *House of Commons Debates*, 5 series, vol. 118, col. 990; Lord Robert Cecil, 'The League of Nations and the Problem of Sovereignty', *History*, April 1920, 11–14; Cecil to Murray, 30 March 1921, Murray papers, box 16.
99. *House of Commons Debates*, 5 series, vol. 118, col. 992. Cecil's statement has often been taken to refer to sanctions against aggression, most notably in E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939* (London 1946), 35–36. However, from the context it is quite clear that Cecil was referring to the role of public opinion in the peaceful settlement of disputes.
100. Speech by Massey, 6th meeting, CAB32/9.
101. T.P. Conwell-Evans, *The League Council in Action* (Oxford 1929), 80.
102. Tyrrell minute, 11 September 1923, FO 371/8617, C15065/62, file 12.

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