

## NADIR OF APPEASEMENT: BRITISH POLICY AND THE DEMISE OF ALBANIA, APRIL 7, 1939

Despite Italian influence which was predominant in Albania between World War I and World War II, Albania survived as a sovereign, independent kingdom under King Ahmed Zog. Furthermore, British cultural and economic influence after World War I was significant.<sup>1</sup> British prestige, which was largely due to the unofficial military mission in Albania between 1923 and 1938, but also in part to the position of Great Britain as the most powerful European democratic government (and as such representing to small nations a protector and defender of their rights and independence), was high.<sup>2</sup> Yet when independent Albania ceased to exist on April 7, 1939, as a result of a military annexation by Fascist Italy, the official voice of protest was scarcely audible.<sup>3</sup> As Sir Anthony Eden, British Foreign Secretary from December 1935 to February 1938, put it, the official British reaction to the Italian invasion constituted "the nadir of the policy of appeasement."<sup>4</sup> The British reaction, whether or

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1. See for examples, League of Nations, *Treaty Series*, XLIII (1926), pp. 81-84; *British Foreign and State Papers*, CXXIII (1926), Part I, pp. 454-455; Sir Andrew Ryan, *The Last of the Dragomans* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1951), p. 318; René MacColl, "Albania and the British Mission," *The Quarterly Review*, CCLXXI (October 1938), pp. 301-315. MacColl points out that English was widely spoken in Albanian schools, and that British exports (in 1933) to Albania totaled 1.4 million gold francs or more than one-third the value of Italian exports to Albania.

2. Great Britain, Foreign Office, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, ed. by Rohan Butler and E.L. Woodward, Ser. III, Vol V. (1939), (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1952), pp. 139-140. Hereinafter cited as *D. Brit. F.P.*; Reynolds Packard and Eleanor Packard, *Balcony Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 85; MacColl, pp. 314-315. British ex-army officers advised the Albanian Minister of Interior and reorganized the Albanian police force.

3. Stavro Skendi, *Albania* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1956), p. 17.

4. Earl of Avon, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden: The Reckoning* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 61. Sir Anthony Eden reaffirmed the validity of my interpretation of his position and feelings regarding Britain's policy toward the Italian annexation of Albania, in a personal letter to me from Manor House, Alvediston, Salisbury, Wiltshire, United Kingdom, dated April 10, 1969.

not considered the low point of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy, was surely a continuation of that policy. Britain attempted to appease Italian Premier Benito Mussolini by neglecting to denounce the aggression and by allowing the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938 to remain in force. Furthermore, on October 31, 1939, Britain gave *de facto* recognition to the Italian annexation of Albania.<sup>5</sup>

The annexation violated the sovereignty of Albania which was guaranteed by the League of Nations Covenant, as well as by the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938, in which Italy promised to maintain "the status quo as regards the national sovereignty of territories in the Mediterranean area."<sup>6</sup> As a result of Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, British policy was supposed to have undergone a total revolution. Great Britain's resultant guarantee of independence to Poland had constituted in Chamberlain's words, "a new epoch" in British foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> In the view of Sir Neville Henderson, British Ambassador at Berlin, Britain's guarantee to Poland meant a "momentous departure from normal British policy."<sup>8</sup> British policy had apparently awakened to reality with regard to German aggression since the guarantee to Poland stood as the first proof of drawing the line to prevent further aggression. However, with regard to Italy's take-over of Albania, British policy remained essentially that of appeasement concerning Italy through November 1939. Consequently there existed an ambiguous policy which stood ready to resist German aggression, but which failed to take a stand in resisting Italian aggression in Albania. In other words, the British guarantee to Poland on March 31, 1939, which ostensibly terminated the British policy of temporizing vis-à-vis the dictators, did not signify a total departure from past courses of action. Thus Britain, which avowedly had on March 31 recognized the futility of negotiating with a fascist dictator, was a week later dealing with Mussolini seemingly oblivious of the reality of his unrepentant belligerency. If British policy had in fact undergone a major revision with the guarantee to Poland, then what

5. *New York Times*, November 1, 1939, p. 4, col. 1.

6. Great Britain, Foreign Office: *Declaration by the British and Italian Governments Regarding the Mediterranean on January 2, 1937*, Cmd. 5348 (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1937) and Great Britain, Foreign Office: *The Anglo-Italian Agreement, Treaty Series No. 31 (1938)*, Cmd. 5726 (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1938). The Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938 reaffirmed the Mediterranean Declaration of 1937.

7. Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), Ser. V., Vol CCCXLV (1939), col. 2415; Hugh Gibson, ed., *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1946), pp. 61-64. Hereinafter cited as *Ciano: Diaries (1939-1943)*.

8. *D. Brtt. F.P.*, Vol. V., p. 619.

was the justification for subsequent action regarding the annexation of Albania? Britain's actions seem all the more incredulous when it is realized that the British Government had evidence of Italian plans to annex Albania for at least two weeks prior to the coup of April 7, 1939.<sup>9</sup>

Despite appeals for aid by the Albanian Minister in London, the first official British reaction on April 7 was that of "grave concern."<sup>10</sup> In general, the responses of members of Parliament and the public were more condemnatory toward the Italian annexation than were those of Chamberlain and the Foreign Office.<sup>11</sup> To the extent that Britain officially protested the coup, it was largely for the purpose of assuaging public opinion. Perhaps Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Foreign Minister, best described both the impact of the invasion on public opinion and Britain's reaction when he said, "the British protests are more for domestic consumption than anything else."<sup>12</sup>

Prime Minister Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax, and the Ambassador at Rome, the Earl of Perth, were the most notable formulators and executors of British policy toward the demise of Albania as a nation. Although Chamberlain recognized that the Italian occupation violated the Anglo-Italian Agreement, he refrained from denouncing it in the hope that Italy would honor its remaining provisions.<sup>13</sup> Halifax assured Guido Crolla, Italian Chargé d'Affaires at London, that no action regarding the Anglo-Italian Agreement would be taken by the British Government, and that "although the window panes are shattered, the bridge is still intact."<sup>14</sup> Halifax informed

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-123; Vol. IV, pp. 351-358, 402; *The Times*, April 4, 1939, p. 16.

10. *The Times*, April 8, 1939, p. 12; *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V, pp. 139-140. The government of King Zog also appealed to the League of Nations, and to the Great Powers through the Albanian Ministers in France, Great Britain and the United States.

11. See for examples of the public outcry U.S.A., Department of State: *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1939, Vol. I (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956), pp. 408-410; *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), Ser. V., Vol. CCCX-LVI, cols. 8-9; *The Times*, April 8, 1939, p. 13, April 13, 1939, p. 6. For the strong reactions of the Mineworkers Federation of Great Britain (affiliated with the Labor Party) and the Liberal Party spokesmen, see *The Times*, April 10, 1939, p. 10, and *The Times*, April 13, 1939, p. 6.

12. Ciano: *Diaries* (1939-1943), p. 64.

13. Keith Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1946), pp. 403-404; George Glasgow, "Italy, Albania and the Mediterranean," *Contemporary Review*, CLV (May 1939), 551; L.B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1948), p. 119.

14. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, Ser. D (1937-1945), Vol. VI (1939), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1956), p. 220. Hereinafter cited as *D. Ger. F.P.*

Perth on April 12 that Parliament's session of the next day would include Chamberlain's statement of "some critical references to Italian policy but these will be couched in a form as little provocative as possible."<sup>15</sup> On the day of the annexation, Perth left a memorandum with Ciano, which Ciano said "might have been composed in our own offices."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Sir Anthony Ryan, British Minister in Albania, probably more than Chamberlain, Halifax or Perth, recognized the meaninglessness of Italian assurances after the annexation that promised to respect Albanias' independence. After all, Ryan was closer to the actual events than any other member of the British Government. Ryan communicated on April 14 his first-hand account of the occupation in Albania. He also expressed disapproval of Parliamentary proceedings which denounced neither the Italian invasion nor the Anglo-Italian Agreement:

the not very satisfactory wireless reports of yesterday's proceedings in Parliament inspire me with some doubt as to whether I have sufficiently informed your Lordship of my views on the merits of the rival contentions of the Italian Government and the late Albanian Government in connexion with the negotiations which collapsed finally on the evening of the 6th April.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the Italian attack on Albania, Britain extended guarantees of independence to Greece and Rumania.<sup>18</sup> The guarantees constituted Chamberlain's answer to the Italian action and to the maintenance of peace in Europe.<sup>19</sup> But the British guarantees, which were officially welcomed by Greece and Rumania, had diminished value because of Britain's neglect of Albania.<sup>20</sup> Neither Hitler nor Mussolini valued the British guarantees.<sup>21</sup> Conservative M.P. Harold Macmillan later wrote that the sudden turn from appeasement to the distribution of several guarantees did not convey conviction.<sup>22</sup> Grigore

15. *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V, pp. 156, 181-182; *Ciano: Diaries (1939-1943)*, p. 88.

16. *Ciano: Diaries (1939-1943)*, p. 61. For Ciano's assurances to Perth on April 7 and 9, see *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V., pp. 128, 149.

17. *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V. pp. 195-196. Ryan's communications were cut off by the Italians during the week following the invasion, and consequently Britain's initial policy was formulated without benefit of first-hand accounts of the annexation and occupation. See *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V. pp. 174-176, 190-191.

18. *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. CCCXLVI (1939), cols. 8-14.

19. Feiling, p. 404.

20. *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V, p. 236.

21. *D. Ger. F.P.*, p. 239; Namier, p. 118.

22. Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change 1914-1939*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 539.

Gafencu, Rumanian Foreign Minister, had good reason to fear that "Hitler would attempt yet another grab, because of his failure to understand Britain's seriousness of purpose."<sup>23</sup> The British guarantees may have given Greece and Rumania an added feeling of security, but Britain's minimization of the Albanian incident was of more importance toward a strengthening of the Axis.<sup>24</sup> Even if Italy's occupation of Albania did not alter long-range British policy or if it can be considered only of secondary importance, it remains apparent that to Mussolini and Ciano, Britain's guarantees were of much less importance than Britain's appeasement of Italy's coup.<sup>25</sup>

Subsequent diplomatic actions made clear Britain's intentions regarding recognition, if not approval, of the *fait accompli*. The arrival in Rome of a new Ambassador, Sir Percy Loraine, on May 3, evidenced Britain's decision not to protest by refusing to send a new Ambassador.<sup>26</sup> After Italy's abolition of the Albanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs on June 3, Ryan was demoted from Minister to Consul-General without diplomatic privileges.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, France and the United States had withdrawn their diplomatic representatives from Albania in protest against the Italian occupation. And furthermore, the United States continued to recognize the Albanian Minister from the government of King Zog.

A natural extension of Britain's policy of continued hope for friendly Anglo-Italian relations occurred on October 31 with Britain's *de facto* recognition of the Italian annexation. In Parliament on October 31, Chamberlain proposed that L.B. Grafftey-Smith be appointed as Consul-General in Albania in succession to Sir Andrew Ryan. In order that the new Consul-General could exercise his functions, Chamberlain said, "it will be necessary to apply in the usual way to the Italian Government for an *exequatur*."<sup>28</sup> When the British Government asked the Italian Government for an *exequatur* for a new Consul-General in Albania, Italian sovereignty was therefore recognized *de facto*.<sup>29</sup>

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23. Earl of Avon, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden: The Reckoning*, p. 61.

24. *D. Brit. F.P.*, Vol. V, pp. 239-248.

25. *D. Ger. F.P.*, pp. 238-239; *The Times*, April 15, 1939, p. 12.

26. It should be noted that Loraine's credentials (which were dated March 28) expressly stated that the King of Italy was not recognized as King of Albania.

27. *Ciano: Diaries (1939-1943)*, p. 92; Packard and Packard, pp. 95-96; *The Times*, June 13, 1939, p. 9; *The Times*, June 5, 1939, p. 13; *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. CCCXLVIII, cols. 875-876.

28. *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. CCCLII, col. 1755.

29. *The Italian Colonial Empire* (Information Department Papers, No. 27, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1940), p. 59; Arnold Toynbee and Veronica M.

How could a government whose foreign policy had radically changed from appeasement to a determined stand against aggression, give recognition to an annexation which destroyed the independence of a small European nation?

It has been argued that the extension of British guarantees to Greece and Rumania was more important for Anglo-Italian relations than was Britain's decision to forgive the violation of the agreement.<sup>30</sup> But if Britain could not support Albanian independence as promised in the Anglo-Italian Agreement and the League of Nations Covenant, what value could the guarantees to Greece and Rumania of April 13 have? The guarantee to Greece was aimed at Mussolini, but he felt that Britain would not honor it. Consequently, Mussolini made preparations for an invasion of Greece without worrying over the worth of a guarantee.<sup>31</sup> Britain can not be considered blameless for her official reaction, even if one views the end of Albania's independence as only a minor episode in pre-World War II Europe. For British appeasement in the Albanian crisis encouraged Italian aggression, and consequently postponed the final reckoning.

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Toynbee, eds., *The Eve of War, 1939*, of the *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 254; *New York Times*, November 1, 1939, p. 4, col. 1.

30. See for example Malcolm Muggeridge's viewpoint in Galeazzo Ciano, *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*, ed. by Malcolm Muggeridge, trans. by Stuart Hood (London: Odhams Press, Ltd., 1948), p. 282.

31. *D. Ger. F.P.*, pp. 238-239; *The Times*, April 15, 1939, p. 12.