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### An 'obligation which we are not entitled to get rid of'

Lawry, Ewan

*Published in:*

Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History

*DOI:*

[10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647)

*Publication date:*

2025

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lawry, E. (2025). An 'obligation which we are not entitled to get rid of': Competing Notions of Empire and the British Opposition to the Colonial Appeasement of Germany. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 53(1), 51-81. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647>

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To cite this article: Ewan Lawry (02 Feb 2025): An ‘obligation which we are not entitled to get rid of’: Competing Notions of Empire and the British Opposition to the Colonial Appeasement of Germany, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, DOI: [10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2459647>



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Published online: 02 Feb 2025.



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# An 'obligation which we are not entitled to get rid of': Competing Notions of Empire and the British Opposition to the Colonial Appeasement of Germany

Ewan Lawry 

Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, UK

## ABSTRACT

The Treaty of Versailles saw the defeated Germany's colonies in Africa and the Pacific redistributed as 'mandates' of the League of Nations amongst the victors. Henceforth, the traditional notion of colonialism as an inherently exploitative endeavour would be substituted in these mandates by 'trusteeship'. The British Empire was at its largest extent, but also saw the establishment of formal, institutional oversight of its treatment of those now under its control. The rise of Hitler in 1933 changed this entirely, with British ministers famously going to great lengths to reach a lasting settlement with Nazi Germany. Inevitably, they reached towards these mandates as a cheap way of easing Germany's way into a permanent European peace settlement. Rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the Nazi outlook, this attempt at colonial appeasement was met by vociferous opposition in among British imperialist Conservative MPs. By 1939, with the launch of the Colonial League, their numbers counted members of all parties, for a variety of reasons, as well as opposition groups in the colonies themselves. Largely understudied, a full analysis of this movement in Britain and the African colonies offers a fresh perspective on the changing rhetoric and conception of empire in the inter-war period.



## KEYWORDS

Imperialism; colonialism; appeasement; internationalism

## Introduction

The loss of Germany's African and Pacific colonies to the victorious Allies (the British Empire, France, Belgium and Japan) at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference advanced the formalisation of international oversight of empire.<sup>1</sup> Already conquered by the Allied powers, this colonial confiscation was legitimised in humanitarian terms, tapping into Great War propaganda about real and imagined

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**CONTACT** Ewan Lawry  ewl3@aber.ac.uk  Aberystwyth University, Penglais, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 3FL, UK

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German abuses of the native peoples.<sup>2</sup> As ‘mandates’ of the new League of Nations, these territories were to be held in ‘sacred trust’, with colonial powers having formal responsibilities to their new subjects.<sup>3</sup> The standard for this more ‘benevolent’ imperialism was partly shaped by the largest colonial power of all, the British Empire, in which there existed a long tradition of seeing British imperialism as uniquely more beneficial to colonised peoples. However, like the wider League of Nations system, the optimism behind this shift quickly gave way to the harsh geopolitical reality of the 1930s, when British policymakers saw these colonies as potential bargaining chips in the attempted appeasement of Hitler. In turn, this provoked a backlash, beginning with imperialist Conservative MPs, which morphed into a larger cross-party alliance in Britain and the colonies themselves, all sharing that belief that British rule was intrinsically ‘good’. This article casts new light onto this understudied subsidiary of the wider opposition to the appeasement of Nazi Germany, highlighting how the deeply-held sense of British rule as axiomatically ‘better’ against the inevitable racial persecution under the Nazis, became a key battleground in the debates about British foreign policy in the late 1930s.

The traditional historiography of colonial appeasement, as amply demonstrated by W.R. Louis and A.J. Crozier, focuses on the discussions in and between London and Berlin around the potential for colonial restitution to aid a negotiated peace settlement.<sup>4</sup> There has also been a growing body of literature on the German colonial experience and its enduring impact on German politics, with a particular focus on contextualising the so-called *Kolonialfrage* (Colonial Question) in the Nazi period. Benjamin Madley has demonstrated how the Imperial German genocidal methods employed in South West Africa between 1904 and 1908 inspired Nazi racial policy in Germany itself in the 1930s, whilst S.A. Wempe demonstrates the endurance of a colonialist mindset in inter-war German right-wing circles.<sup>5</sup> And, most recently, Edward Kissi has highlighted how Africans themselves responded to the proposed transfer of their lands and the surge of public professions of loyalty to Britain as the lesser of two evils.<sup>6</sup> All of which leaves an underexplored component of this pan-imperial debate: the opposition to the notion of colonial appeasement in Britain and the roots of this strain of anti-appeasement in Britain’s imperial traditions.

Whilst some ‘anti-appeasers’, most famously Winston Churchill, challenged the National Government over its apparently lethargic response to German rearmament or Hitler’s moves to annex Austria and Czechoslovakia, the proposed horse-trading of colonies attracted a distinct response centring on the Tory imperialists, Leo Amery and Duncan Sandys. In 2015, N.C. Fleming analysed the responses of these Tory diehards between 1936 and 1938 in response to undeveloped, early suggestions that the former German colonies were a viable negotiating tool. However, this work did not tackle this group’s transfiguration after 1938, when Neville Chamberlain’s accession to the premiership

prompted a far more determined effort to secure an agreement with Berlin through colonial restitution.<sup>7</sup> In late 1938, these early critics of colonial appeasement became part of a louder chorus of cross-party opinion, resulting in the launch of the Colonial League. Where the likes of Amery had long held that Britain held the colonies by right of conquest and could not be returned, he and his new allies, including leading members of the Labour and Liberal parties, embraced the notion of empire as a benevolent endeavour that prioritised the welfare of colonised peoples. Though having deep roots in the British psyche, the formalising of this notion of the coloniser having defined obligations to the colonised was particularly significant in the inter-war period as the new League of Nations sought to internationalise and codify an agreed idea of 'good' colonial governance. Set against the explicitly racialised attitude of the Nazis, the Colonial League found support in the affected colonies by centring its arguments on this point and became a significant component of the wider opposition to the attempted appeasement of Hitler.

Ultimately, this was a British-German matter, but the issue had implications spanning across continents. Of course, offering to return Germany's African colonies would have changed the map of Africa and, Britain's appeasing ministers hoped, be a substitute to any further territorial changes in Europe. In turn, this would have strategic, economic, and diplomatic consequences for Britain and those powers with interests in Africa. Further, a colonial redistribution with Germany outside the League of Nations would damage the international organisation's authority, but it had little power to intervene and, though looming large in the arguments of British opponents of colonial appeasement, played little role in the actual discussions. Likewise, France, as the other leading mandatory power, played a remarkably small role in this debate. As Callahan has argued, French policymakers viewed their mandates as essentially indistinct from France's other possessions, with anxiety about Germany in Europe leading to a refusal to consider colonial concessions and concerted efforts to undermine Nazi propaganda in Africa.<sup>8</sup> That was until 1937, when, with few viable alternatives, the French were forced to follow Britain's appeasing strategy. The other major power whose attitude could have some bearing on this matter, the United States, played a similarly peripheral role. With Washington's early view of the mandates system swinging between Wilsonian idealism and economic opportunism, reflecting her difficult relationship with the wider League of Nations, the United States engaged with this debate fitfully in line with its gradual move away from isolationism.<sup>9</sup> President Roosevelt's growing interest in a more active policy in Europe after 1936, with an eye to increasing trade, manifested in a tacit desire to assist those 'moderates' in the Nazi regime, like economics minister Hjalmar Schacht, by improving Germany's economic position through giving her access to raw materials in the colonies.<sup>10</sup> But, even this amounted to little in practical terms, as MacDonald points out, due to the unwillingness of a still isolationist-inclined American political class to offer more than

moral leadership at a time when hard political bargaining was required.<sup>11</sup> In these ways, the discussion about colonial appeasement remained firmly a matter that, if it were to be resolved, would do so between London and Berlin.

Considering the growing volume of literature on this subject, this is the final piece to the jigsaw of responses to colonial appeasement. On an issue that can be easily reduced to redrawing lines on a map, which was technically simple and politically cheap, taking a pan-imperial view demonstrates the complexity of a diplomatic strategy that infringed on the rights of British subjects, risked dividing colonial society, and, ultimately, threatened to jeopardise the integrity of the British Empire. At its heart were two distinct visions of empire, the British model which consciously sort to legitimise itself by benefitting indigenous peoples and a modernist, overtly racialised Nazi model. In turn, this informed the foreign policy debate in Britain, with the activism of British imperialists in London and in the colonies anchored in this live debate about the nature of imperial governance and the efforts to negotiate with Hitler in the years before the Second World War.

### **Re-Legitimising Empire**

The confiscation of Germany's colonies was framed in humanitarian terms, though merely confirming a fact already established by the Allied occupation of these territories in wartime. Under the Versailles settlement, the governance of these League of Nations 'mandates' were now subject to the oversight of the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC), with the expectation that their new imperial powers would administer them to a higher standard than had been the case previously. Behind this attempt to cement the obligations between the imperial powers and colonised peoples lay a desire to secure moral and legal legitimacy for the perpetuation and expansion of empire at a time when Eastern and Central Europe were being remodelled on the principle of self-determination.<sup>12</sup> It is true, as Mazower argues, that a new formula for extending empire was demanded in the face of growing pan-Arab and pan-African sentiment.<sup>13</sup> However, this attempt at re-legitimising and standardising imperial rule also built on an older process, as demonstrated at the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, which concluded with a General Act seeking to regulate European colonisation of Africa, and the 1889–1890 Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference prohibiting the slave trade in Africa.<sup>14</sup> Inevitably this played out differently between empires, but the principle of regulation was accepted and Germany's failure to meet these standards in its African colonies was deployed to dramatic effect by British propagandists both during and after the First World War.<sup>15</sup> The institutionalisation of these 'standards' was, thus, shaped by those colonial powers which had maintained a higher standard in their 'civilising' missions, with Britain, Trentmann argues, providing an 'embryonic model of global governance' that emphasised 'spiritual ties and mutual social service'.<sup>16</sup> This re-

legitimation of empire in a new international context was an essential precursor to the British campaign against handing colonies back to Germany in the 1930s, with the notion that there was a high standard of British imperialism against a more exploitative, overtly racialised German approach being central to the debate.

As 'mandates', the former German colonies enjoyed a unique legal status and were to be administered with an explicit commitment to aiding the economic, social, and political development of their inhabitants, with the ultimate goal of granting self-government within the new comity of nations. Established in December 1920, the PMC embodied the ambition of internationalising and codifying standards for colonial rule by receiving annual reports from the mandatories and advising the League Council on their conduct, thereby becoming, Gonçalves notes, a forum for defining 'good' colonial practice.<sup>17</sup> In turn, Dimier has demonstrated how defining 'good' colonial government in this way naturally prompted powers to seek compare themselves favourably against one another in this respect.<sup>18</sup> This ambitious approach was driven by influential internationalists, including Britain's Lord Robert Cecil and Sir Eric Drummond, who vested great hopes in the new League to standardise international relations more generally.<sup>19</sup> The influence of these idealists, who were instrumental in designing the League and populating its secretariat, faded as the system came into contact with, and began to be shaped by, the reality of imperial rule.

There was an established Whiggish tradition of seeing British rule as more benevolent than that of other imperial powers, in which Britain played the role of trustee until the time when her subjects, as had happened in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa could govern themselves within a more decentralised imperial model. Hyam has identified how this attitude gained greater prominence in official circles with the advent of the Liberal government in 1906, in which one Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, compared favourably Britain's 'mild autocracy' in her colonies to that exhibited by continental counterparts.<sup>20</sup> The First World War did nothing to change this shift, adding fuel to national consciousness in large parts of the British Empire, particularly in India, and therefore demanding some kind of attempt to re-legitimise imperial rule. This growing conflict over the continuation of empire, especially now that Germany and Austria-Hungary's territories in Europe were being hived off into new states, was met by what Porter describes as British rule settling into a 'more gentle, conservative and caring mode'.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most obvious example of this shift were the increasing public references to the 'British Commonwealth', rather than 'Empire'. This, Mazower notes, was driven by those like Jan Smuts who sought to counter growing African and Asian national consciousness by binding together Britain and her white colonies through collective security in a 'British Commonwealth of Nations'.<sup>22</sup> However, in turn, Smuts, an early proponent of a League of

Nations, recognised this voluntary association of British-aligned states across the globe, based on the ‘true principles of national freedom and political decentralisation’, as a precursor to a wider League of likeminded states.<sup>23</sup> And then, of course, there was the work of Alfred Zimmern took this idea further in theorising about a ‘Third British Empire’ setting standards for a devolved approach to imperial governance, based on trusteeship, framed as a direct successor to earlier examples of British rule.<sup>24</sup>

One particularly insightful commentator in this regard was Sir Frederick Lugard, a colonial governor who pioneered ‘indirect rule’ in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. Taking inspiration from the collaborative relationship between the British Raj and the Indian princely states, Lugard’s approach involved securing the co-operation of existing native political structures to buttress imperial rule.<sup>25</sup> Writing in his 1922 work *The Dual Mandate*, he summarised this ‘hands off’ approach as the ‘dual mandate’, under which Britain was entrusted with the development of Africa’s resources for the benefit of humanity and the proactive improvement of native welfare.<sup>26</sup> This, he went on, was embodied in the League Covenant, the ‘latest expression of the conscience of Europe’, and implicitly constituted a ‘pledge and an aspiration’ for the good governance of both the mandates and those imperial territories not under the PMC’s purview.<sup>27</sup> Despite recognising that the League had no mechanism to coerce members into compliance and that that mandates were ‘practically irrevocable’, Lugard emphasised that the creation of the mandate system was nevertheless significant by implying that these territories held in ‘sacred trust’ would inevitably influence conduct in other colonial possessions.<sup>28</sup> Of course, this was the perspective of one who was intimately involved in imperial administration, but Lugard went on to become a long-standing PMC member, using that post to further develop his thinking on promoting native wellbeing and developing colonial resources through indirect rule.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the mandate system served to codify the British approach to empire, without conceding any substantive ground on either enforced maintenance of standards or a firm deadline for granting independence.

Proof that the reality of imperial rule in the mandates was less markedly different in practice than the change in legal terms implied became clear through the 1920s, with there being little drive to develop a native political culture that would meet expectations for self-government.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Louis goes so far as to argue that the fundamental questions of sovereignty and nationality which interested international lawyers were mostly ignored by those colonial experts involved in establishing and administering the mandates.<sup>31</sup> An assessment seemingly confirmed as the 1920s unfolded. In August 1920, for instance, the British Cabinet accepted Belgian Foreign Minister Paul Hyams report to the League Council which accepted that the mandatory powers exercised their authority on the League’s behalf.<sup>32</sup> In 1924, Britain’s PMC representative William Ormsby-Gore also told a Royal Society of Arts



meeting that Britain lacked a 'sense of security' in its ownership of the mandates.<sup>33</sup> However, by July 1926, Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was telling the House of Commons that Britain's mandate in Tanganyika was permanent.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, in February 1927, Colonial Secretary Leo Amery, who exerted a great deal of energy resisting the PMC's claim to oversight in these territories, also assured MPs that there was no possibility of the mandates passing from British control and that the League could not 'transfer them or take them away'.<sup>35</sup>

Historians have accordingly tended to be critical of the mandate system. For example, Hewitt identifies the system as a means of internationalising Britain's imperial challenges by developing a legal framework that reaffirmed her right to rule.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Pedersen, though acknowledging that the PMC could be more independent than has often been credited, makes the valid point that it was largely composed of representatives from colonial powers, such as Lugard for Britain, (four of which held mandates) who tended to defend their own country's conduct.<sup>37</sup> And Mazower points out that the PMC's main weapon, the power of international public opinion, was of mixed value, being successfully used to curb South Africa's 1922 attempt to annex South West Africa, but doing nothing to moderate French brutality in the 1925 Syrian Revolt or Britain's use of aerial bombing in Iraq and India.<sup>38</sup>

However, this paradox at the heart of the mandate system should not obscure the fact, as Lugard himself claimed, that the institutionalisation of formal responsibilities was a major symbolic step. That this served the purposes of the imperial powers by offering a source of legitimacy at a time when empire was coming into question does not detract from this fact. Indeed, as Callahan points out, the emergence of the mandates was essential for overturning the overtly exploitative approach to empire, forcing a reassessment of colonial responsibilities in line with the principle of trusteeship and to develop policies towards the mandates that were both 'more restrained and more internationally-oriented'.<sup>39</sup> And, it was that this principle that formed the cornerstone of the British opposition to the attempt to use colonies to appease Hitler.

### Germany's Colonial Question

Though regaining the former colonies remained a secondary aim for policymakers in Berlin, even after Hitler's accession to power on a demand for 'living space' in Eastern Europe, Germany retained a sizeable colonial lobby.<sup>40</sup> Like the so-called 'War Guilt Clause', which prompted such resentment in revanchist circles, the endurance of the German colonial movement rested on the *Kolonial Schuldliüge* (Colonial Guilt lie), a belief that wartime propaganda and the resulting redistribution of the colonies had falsely indicted Germany as unfit to participate in the colonial enterprise.<sup>41</sup> Though Hitler was initially wary of friction with Britain over this marginal issue, in April

1933 the *Deutscher Bund für Ostafrika* was formed in Tanganyika, the largest former German colony, to unite the settlers against alleged British attempts to attenuate the spirit of the mandate.<sup>42</sup> However, the matter was yet to be significant since, as Wempe argues, relations between German colonists and the Nazis were not clear cut due to the latter's prioritisation of Eastern Europe.<sup>43</sup>

Compared to what the Nazis depicted as integral components of an indivisible, historic Greater German Reich, the African colonies had only been acquired in the late nineteenth century and then more as a status symbol than being of economic value. Nevertheless, there was obvious value in feigning a desire to reacquire the colonies as leverage in negotiations with Britain, whilst championing the rights of German colonists served Berlin's foreign policy aims as claiming to 'protect' ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia and Poland did in the later 1930s. Furthermore, as Bernhard has demonstrated, Africa interested the Nazis, especially in light of Fascist Italy's desire to create a racially homogeneous empire that made way for European settlers by marginalising indigenous peoples in less fertile enclaves.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, the less overtly racial British and French empires became negative reference points, with the former respected for its size but a shadow of its former glory and the latter viewed as 'degenerate' for encouraging racial assimilation into a greater French identity.<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, in May 1934 the German colonial movement was brought into line with the wider state apparatus as part of the *Gleichschaltung* (Nazification and 'co-ordination') to ensure its conformity with Nazi foreign policy, with General Franz Ritter von Epp as head of the NSDAP Colonial Policy Office. As a young army officer between 1904–1908, Epp had participated in the Herero genocide in South West Africa, before launching Hitler's political career by sending him to spy on the German Workers' Party and, from 1933, overseeing the 'liquidation of virtually all Bavaria's Jews and Gypsies'.<sup>46</sup> Madley identifies Epp's career, encompassing some of the most infamous episodes in modern German history, as one of several personal conduits by which the genocidal methods used in Africa 'flowed into the highest echelons of the Third Reich'.<sup>47</sup> Under his leadership, the colonialist bodies willingly complied with the new regime, becoming another expression of the dictatorship's all-encompassing authority.<sup>48</sup>

In March 1935, Hitler privately raised the reacquisition of the African colonies with British Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon, but it was only after the remilitarisation of the Rhineland a year later that the matter became live, with the German leader publishing proposals for revising the 1919 peace treaties in return for Germany rejoining the League of Nations.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in contravention of the Versailles settlement was a significant moment but the inclusion of the demand for the return of the colonies reflected, Crozier concludes, Hitler's disappointment that his deliberate lack of interest hitherto had not made Britain more amenable to his demands.<sup>50</sup> Ironically, this was the moment in which British minister became fixated on using the colonies as bargaining chips.

Shortly after Hitler's peace plan was published in March 1936, the German colonial movement was subsumed into the new *Reichskolonialbund* (Reich Colonial League) under Epp's leadership. This new body was to foster a 'colonialist' identity amongst Germans, to encourage a groundswell of support for reclaiming the colonies, and to seek to re-open the debate around Germany's 'fitness' to rule. Its case rested on three points: (1) that colonialism was central to Germany's identity; (2) that German scientific advances and the loyalty of her Askari troops in the last war demonstrated her capacity to rule; (3) that charges of brutality were unfounded, and the methods used were more successful than those of either Britain or France.<sup>51</sup> Epp led the charge, writing in the *British Journal of the Royal African Society* in January 1937 that Germany was 'neither willing nor able' to accept a position of inferiority in the colonial sphere.<sup>52</sup> He further claimed that Germany's demand for colonies was 'a matter of right' and, implausibly, that Nazi racial policy, being rooted in 'reputable' scientific studies, would not interfere with native welfare and only existed to prevent 'the intrusion of foreign racial elements' into the German population.<sup>53</sup> He was in tune with Hitler, who spoke on the issue in the Reichstag that same month, claiming that Germany's colonial empire had been constructed 'without robbing anyone and without violating any treaty', before being 'taken away', the arguments for which were no longer tenable, without consulting the indigenous populations.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, it was the charge that Germany had proven herself 'unfit' to share in the colonial enterprise that attracted the most comment and, as discussed below, was at the core of the British opposition to handing colonies to her.

For now, though, the Reich Colonial League was embedding itself and becoming a useful and willing tool of a state geared towards expansionism, growing from 50,000 member in 1936 to more than two million by 1941.<sup>55</sup> The references to either the loyalty of Germany's African troops in the First World War or the failure to consult the native populations at Versailles were little more than an appeal to liberal sensibilities by those who viewed a colonial empire in an explicitly racialised and exploitative way. Nazi racial policy was not hidden in this respect, making any indication that there was concern for the attitude of natives to their imperial overlords insincere. And, as Epp told a rally in February 1939, their real aim was 'the abolition of the ridiculous trusteeships over our overseas property'.<sup>56</sup> At the least, these colonies could be a diplomatic expedient, encouraging the imperial powers to make concessions on, for instance, rearmament or Germany's former European lands rather than the colonies that were never a high priority. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that the return of these territories would not be welcomed as part of a bigger agreement, with the native peoples certain to be exposed to the racial laws applied in Germany itself. However, the mistaken belief that these territories of questionable economic value could sate the Nazi hunger

for expansion took root in London, forcing the debate to become a live one in British politics.

### **The British Imperialist Response**

The first serious British engagement with the idea of using colonies to secure Berlin's friendship came on 9 March 1936, almost a month before Hitler raised the prospect publicly in his 'peace' plan, when the Earl of Plymouth, a junior Colonial Office minister, was appointed to chair a committee to investigate the viability of the proposal.<sup>57</sup> The Plymouth Committee concluded that there were major legal and strategic impediments to a transfer, citing Germany being outside the League of Nations since November 1933 and so unaccountable under the mandate system, Nazi racial policy, and the risk of allowing German military installations to be built near to vital arteries of the British Empire. They could only recommend that Britain and France transfer Togoland and the Cameroons (partitioned between them since 1919) to Berlin as the least strategically risky step.<sup>58</sup> Frontloading their conclusions with legalistic concerns about German colonial administration without League oversight should not obscure the fact that the ultimate determinant was the security of Britain's imperial interests, but this was also reflective of the real shift in official attitudes to imperial questions. The idea of transferring colonies continued to appeal to British ministers, but it was the reaction from outraged imperialist politicians that is most instructive for revolving around the notion that Britain had obligations to her subject peoples that meant they could not simply be handed over to the Nazis. The imperialist opposition has been analysed by N.C. Fleming, but it is worthy of further consideration for the centrality of native and settler welfare, understood as benefitting from the British model of empire and rooted in the 1920s debates on standardising colonial administration through the League, that so informed their later campaigning.<sup>59</sup>

The backlash came in early April 1936, after Hitler's 'peace' plan was made public, in response to rumours that a meeting had been held in Conservative Central Office to discuss giving Tanganyika back to Germany.<sup>60</sup> Outraged at the prospect of handing territory to Germany simply because her new, more assertive leaders demanded it, a group of Conservatives MPs formed the Imperial Affairs Committee to 'keep a watch on the whole situation and look out for opportunities for debate'.<sup>61</sup> Members included former colonial governor Sir Edward Grigg, long-standing backbencher Lord Winterton, the recently-elected Duncan Sandys, and the diehard warhorse Sir Henry Page Croft.<sup>62</sup> All were acutely conscious of Britain's strategic weaknesses and were active participants in the wider debate about rearming to enable the country to take a firm stand on the world stage. But it was Croft, the veteran of Winston Churchill's campaign against granting home rule to India (1930–1935), who expressed the typical attitude of British imperialists when he subsequently reflected that the British Raj was 'vital for the welfare of Indians and the

safeguarding of British interests'.<sup>63</sup> This belief that British rule was 'good' for the colonised peoples, and conveniently compatible with imperial interests, was at the core of the whole subsequent debate about Africa.

At the core of this group was the senior backbencher Leo Amery, whose tenure as Colonial Secretary in the 1920s had actually seen him strive to repudiate the claim of the League of Nations to have oversight into administering the colonial mandates on the grounds that the international body had no place interfering in British affairs in territories won by right of conquest.<sup>64</sup> Faced with the prospect of those same territories being handed back to the defeated Germany, Amery took a dim view of paying 'danegeld' only to encourage Berlin to make further such demands. Of all the imperialist politicians in Westminster, he had the most clearly developed world view, offering some insight into the mindset of these figures who, Fleming surmises, were motivated chiefly by a 'customary objection to anything perceived as a diminution of British imperial power'.<sup>65</sup>

Amery welcomed the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which formalised the equality and sovereignty of the British dominions, as a positive step towards the 'free co-operation' that would enable the empire to endure.<sup>66</sup> And, in 1935, he published *The Forward View*, a book setting out the need for replacing the 'make-believe machinery of an over-ambitious, all-embracing League of Nations' with a system of regional blocs based on geographic, historic, and economic ties.<sup>67</sup> Taking Britain's empire as a template, with its Imperial Preference tariff policy, internal independence (for the Dominions), and military interdependence, Amery proposed a Central European bloc, with Germany at its core, incorporating the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, and Turkey as an economic and trading area, with mutual defensive arrangements.<sup>68</sup> Germany would then have untrammelled access to the resources, markets, and outlets for migration that she needed in her traditional sphere of interest, whilst leaving open the option of discussing colonial redistribution with Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands, but crucially not Britain.<sup>69</sup> There is no evidence of a comparable depth of thought on this issue by other anti-colonial appeasers, which only really required the negative act of refusing German demands, and that was seemingly enough for most of them. However, Amery's leading role in this movement meant that, for a few like Sandys, *The Forward View* became 'their Bible' as a positive vision to challenge the official view that the colonies would be part of a European settlement.<sup>70</sup>

The Imperial Affairs Committee's position rested on three points: (1) the mandates were compensation for the costs of the last war; (2) colonists had gone on the understanding that they would remain under British rule; and (3) handing colonies to Germany took no account to the wishes of the native populations. All of which were deployed when a deputation of the committee was received by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, on 20 May 1936.<sup>71</sup> Their chief aim for the meeting was to compel the government to publicly

rule out any suggestion of a colonial transfer. Though led by their chairman, Lord Winterton, it was Amery who served as chief spokesman, deploying all three of these arguments in his statement, but notably asking Baldwin whether he could justify ‘handing over millions of natives ... to a government inspired by Nazi racial conceptions’.<sup>72</sup> Amery had read the unexpurgated German version of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* whilst on holiday in Germany in May 1934, concluding that the German leader was ‘quite insane about Jews and Socialists’.<sup>73</sup> Of course, it was the British interest that came first, but it was the professed concern for the colonists and colonised that formed the bulk of the argument, especially in light of Nazi racial policy and their treatment of minorities in Germany itself that was clearly geared to provoke the government to publicly distance itself from the proposals.

Members of the committee continued to deploy these arguments in the Commons during the next two years in increasingly vain attempts to secure the desired public renunciation of a colonial transfer. For instance, on 7 May 1936, Duncan Sandys rose in the Commons to demand that, since the Australian, New Zealand, and South African governments had made clear that they would not hand over their mandates, the British government should do the same.<sup>74</sup> In mid-July, Croft similarly drew the attention of MPs to the reality that returning Germany’s African colonies would leave South Africa with large territories on its borders managed by an antagonistic power.<sup>75</sup> However, it was Amery, speaking at Chatham House on 20 October, who encapsulated the paternalistic attitude to empire when he declared that, in being awarded the mandates, Britain had accepted an ‘obligation which we are not entitled to get rid of, merely to secure some settlement in Europe’.<sup>76</sup> The following January, in the same edition of *The Journal of the Royal African Society* discussed above, in which Epp argued Germany’s case, Amery dissected his arguments, again pointing to native welfare as precluding a transfer, then jibing that the ‘economic value of colonies ha[d] assumed, in German eyes, wholly disproportionate importance’.<sup>77</sup> And then, in a debate at the Royal Empire Society in March 1937, he took his case further, charging that, if Germany suffered material shortages, it was not due to a lack of colonies, but the public works and rearmament programme of the Nazis.<sup>78</sup> Despite being one of the foremost voices in the 1920s against the notion that, through the League’s oversight, the mandates imposed formal responsibilities on Britain, this dramatic declaration made clear that even Amery, the most vocal opponent of colonial appeasement, had embraced the shifting attitude towards empire as a primarily benevolent enterprise and which should now be a serious consideration in diplomatic thinking.

At this point, though, the discussion was purely theoretical, with the government refusing to take a position so as not to waste a potential bargaining chip in the pursuit of a permanent European settlement. One implication was that the debate on this question continued to tick over, with concerned Conservatives

attempting to keep up the pressure through the last year of Stanley Baldwin's premiership. Indeed, the Imperial Affairs Committee had some success in early October 1936 when the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, the forerunner to the modern party conference, overwhelmingly endorse a motion demanding a clear government statement ruling out any discussion of returning colonies.<sup>79</sup> This indecisive raising of the idea and then refusing to rule it out reflected a common complaint that, under Baldwin, foreign policy drifted, but this very clearly came to an end in July 1937, when Neville Chamberlain succeeded as prime minister and set to his famous dogged pursuit of a negotiated settlement with the dictators. When the idea of colonial restitution as part of this deal had first been posed in 1936, Chamberlain was a keen supporter, with Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore describing him as 'the villain of the piece' who had got it into his head that 'the surrender of Tanganyika did not matter'.<sup>80</sup> Given his overarching aim to reach a settlement with Germany, preferably by buying time to rearm and strengthen Britain's position, it was inevitable that such a low cost means of assuaging the Nazi dictatorship would remain at the forefront of Chamberlain's foreign policy and assume a more significant role in this quest.

However, the reality was that this, in turn, meant that the colonies became a more useful stick with which the Nazis proposed to beat a more favourable deal out of the British. This was clear in November 1937, when Lord Halifax, then Lord President of the Council, went on a semi-official visit to Germany. Despite insisting that he had no mandate to discuss Central European matters and no role in foreign policymaking, Halifax found that Hitler turned to the subject of colonies and insisted that their return was a matter of right, not one to be bartered, but that this was the only outstanding difference between Britain and Germany and so not in need of immediate resolution.<sup>81</sup> Through 1937, France, with few alternatives available, increasingly fell into line with Britain's strategy, whilst the United States, with Roosevelt privately open to facilitating a settlement based on colonial concessions was essentially in line with Chamberlain's approach. This was clearest in February 1938, when the British Prime Minister proposed, as the first step to a general settlement, a Congo Basin Scheme which would pool control of British, French, Belgian, and Portuguese colonies in the region, with Germany invited to join in the administration and American capital underwriting the plan. MacDonald argues that this was intended to signal Britain's acceptance of the principle of colonial concessions, whilst seeking to draw the Germans into clearly stating the extent of their claims.<sup>82</sup> This came to nothing as Hitler was unwilling to be drawn into a settlement on this basis, but it was telling that, less than two years since the publication of his March 1936 'peace plan', his former commitment to rejoining the League in return for regaining the colonies had been subsumed into a brinkmanship approach to foreign policy. And, in this instance, it proved effective by offering the tantalising promise that a final settlement was within reach, enabling the German leader to secure easy concessions, with Neville

Chamberlain concluding from this that colonial restitution was a simple way to achieve this.<sup>83</sup>

## The Colonial League

Framing the opposition to colonial appeasement as a principled clash between a benevolent, essentially philanthropic British imperialism in trust to civilisation and an exploitative, racialised Germanic rival became significant in late 1938, when Chamberlain's appeasing strategy was stepped up and the political opposition in Westminster was reorganised on cross-party basis. Legitimising empire as a benevolent force continued to be a live issue in late 1930s British colonial policy, with the ongoing work of the Colonial Development Advisory Committee to support the development of agriculture and industry in the colonies and the establishment in 1938 of a Royal Commission to investigate West Indian living conditions. And yet, against this background, it was clear that the British government was prepared to dispose of the mandated territories as though they were any other colonial holding.

Though the British government's pursuit of a settlement with German through colonial concessions has been the subject of historical enquiry, with A.J. Crozier prominent amongst them, there is little on the British political opposition to the idea in the late 1930s.<sup>84</sup> For instance, Tim Bouverie's 2019 recounting of the appeasement debates fails to even address this matter, a fact only explicable by the contemporary focus on the more immediate crises caused by Hitler's move against Austria in March 1938 and Czechoslovakia in September.<sup>85</sup> But that should not obscure the significance of this ongoing debate over colonial appeasement, not least because, in the context of increasing international tension, it remained at the forefront of Chamberlain's attempts to solidify the promised 'peace for our time'. After his triumphal return from the Munich Conference in September 1938, Chamberlain enjoyed a wave of popularity which initially cowed his critics into a grudging silence, but the result of his agreement to hand part of Czechoslovakia to Berlin left a greater uneasiness about any further surrenders and generated a paranoid atmosphere that the African colonies would be next.

The paranoid atmosphere was captured by Conservative peer and former colonial administrator Lord Selborne on 7 November, when he wrote to warn Amery about rumours that the government was considering handing Nigeria to Berlin, prompting the latter to respond that a 'Colonial Defence Committee' might have to be organised to campaign against this.<sup>86</sup> Nigeria, of course, had not been a German colony, was not a League mandate, and was not actually under discussion. Nevertheless, Amery was determined on this course of action, as he told the now Lord Lugard, who shared his anxiety about the possible colonial transfer, with the intention of offering Dominion Secretary Malcolm MacDonald one final chance to give an 'effective and



conclusive' public statement to rule out the idea entirely.<sup>87</sup> This came on 7 December, when he asked for such a reassurance in the Commons, only for MacDonald to lamely respond that a transfer was 'not now an issue in practical politics', thereby confirming Amery's fears by leaving a fairly substantial loophole for a later change of mind.<sup>88</sup> Given Chamberlain's strategy, such reassurance was unlikely to be forthcoming, but the spark was lit and, on 19 December, Amery convened the first cross-party meeting of MPs and businessmen with African interests to form the Colonial Defence Committee to monitor the situation and to counter German propaganda.<sup>89</sup>

On a far wider basis than the old Imperial Affairs Committee, this new body's makeup demonstrated how the opposition to colonial appeasement had entered a new, more politically diverse phase and, in this case, was not a solely Conservative affair. Chairing the council of this Colonial Defence Committee was Lugard, who, in a December 1935 Chatham House address, had criticised Italian and German ambitions in Africa, but caveated this by arguing that their needs should be addressed by the League of Nations, not colonies unless with the 'willing consent, or at least the complete indifference, of the Natives concerned'.<sup>90</sup> Giving the presidential address to the Colonial Empire Union, a pressure group formed to 'promote the impartial study of Colonial affairs', in June 1937, Lugard had further reaffirmed this imperial benevolence by calling for an 'Advisory Colonial Council' to advise the Colonial Secretary on 'long-range policies and to plan development'.<sup>91</sup> Of the 100 supporters in the Commons, most were Tories, but this should not mask the greater ideological diversity in the ranks. This included former head of the Indian Civil Service Lord Hailey, the reforming former Colonial Secretary Lord Harlech, the Labour MPs Josiah Wedgwood and Philip Noel-Baker, the Liberal James de Rothschild (as chairman of his party's colonial policy committee), and National Labour's Harold Nicolson.<sup>92</sup>

Particularly significant was the unanimity amongst these ideologically diverse figures that the British Empire, based on the principle of trusteeship, was a force for good. This was nowhere more clear than in the case of Lord Harlech. As William Ormsby-Gore, he had served as Britain's first representative on the Permanent Mandates Commission, chaired commission into improving social conditions in East Africa and education in tropical Africa, and then spent extended periods at the Colonial Office, culminating in his service as Colonial Secretary from 1936 until May 1938. During that time, one historian has noted, ongoing conflict between Arabs and Jewish migrants in Britain's mandate of Palestine meant that he had little time for the constructive work in the colonies for which he was better equipped by direct experience than any of his predecessors.<sup>93</sup> And yet, he had done much to foster the notion of trusteeship in Britain's policies in its colonies. In May 1937, he gave a BBC radio broadcast on the 'Responsibilities of Empire', stating the aim of Britain's experiments in indirect rule in some African colonies as to be to foster an

educated native civil service capable of managing a range of government responsibility.<sup>94</sup> And, when addressing the newly-assembled Colonial Empire Marketing Board in October, he made clear that Britain was 'not a Colonial Power simply for what we ... can get', but was guided by 'the doctrine of trusteeship'.<sup>95</sup> In May 1938, shortly after supporting an Oxford University Summer School to study native administration of the colonies, he used his accession to his father's peerage as cover for resigning over his increasing discomfort at Neville Chamberlain's attempts to appease Hitler.<sup>96</sup> By 11 October, Harlech was privately assuring Amery that he was a 'die-hard' in his opposition to handing Tanganyika to Germany.<sup>97</sup>

Opposition to the colonial appeasement was also a live issue on the Left, with the Labour MPs Wedgwood and Noel-Baker, the Liberal Rothschild, and National Labour's Harold Nicolson reflecting a growing recognition that, even amongst those generally opposed to imperialism, its British manifestation was inherently better than its Nazi counterpart. Nicolson's attitude was the most straightforward, with him being elected to Parliament in the November 1935 General Election with a long record for criticising Nazism and Fascism, before becoming one of the foremost critics of the foreign policy of the government which he nominally supported.<sup>98</sup> Though a member of the small National Labour contingent in the Commons, by 1938 Nicolson was a core member of the group of Conservative dissidents around anti-appeasing former Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. His opposition to granting colonial concession to Germany had become clear in late 1937, when he spoke at Chatham House about the strategic risk of trading colonies as exchanging 'substance for a shadow' and distracting from the threat Germany posed in Europe.<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, Rothschild, who chaired the Liberal Party's colonial policy committee, reflected both his party's shift in the late 1930s towards opposing any appeasement of Nazi Germany, as well as their support for extending the mandate system to all colonies.<sup>100</sup> This was reflected in his speaking on behalf of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons. In June 1937, Rothschild argued that British administration of the colonies was better able to act as 'trustees for the natives and as trustees for civilisation' than any other power.<sup>101</sup> A year later, he welcomed the publication of the Colonial Office's Colonial Empire Report as a supplement to the annual report to the Permanent Mandates Commission and as a 'record of the manner in which Great Britain is fulfilling her Colonial responsibilities'.<sup>102</sup>

From a different position was Wedgwood, whose long career in the Liberal and Labour parties had seen him establish a reputation as an unorthodox radical and, in 1917, proposing peace aims to US President Woodrow Wilson that included governing Africa under an international commission to guarantee the good treatment of native peoples.<sup>103</sup> Wedgwood built on the ideas of radical journalist J.A. Hobson, whose writing after the Boer War in 1902 had enduring influence in left-wing circles, particularly in eliding 'sane' imperialism with internationalism to the benefit of indigenous peoples.<sup>104</sup>

This resulted in his 1921 work, *The Future of the Indo-British Commonwealth*, which proposed to use the superiority of Britain's institutions to make the British Empire 'the nucleus of a World-Union, by becoming herself the centre of a Commonwealth of free peoples enjoying equal rights'.<sup>105</sup> Though not of great significance in itself, this earlier stance was an obvious precursor to Wedgwood's backing in the 1930s of a campaign group predicated on the inherent benevolence of British rule, with him taking the typically novel line that it would be better to enable the colonies to elect MPs to Westminster.<sup>106</sup>

But, whilst Wedgwood was an uncommon Labour politician, his commitment to internationalised imperialism through the League mandate system was widespread in the Labour Party, with its leader Clement Attlee, in November 1938, signalling his support for empire as a move away from the old exploitative approach.<sup>107</sup> A month later, Philip Noel-Baker insisted in the Commons that Britain had responsibilities to indigenous populations and that the ultimate aim of self-rule should be enshrined by making all colonies mandates.<sup>108</sup> He followed this up in a Labour Party pamphlet in which he pointed out that the natives were 'human beings; they belong ... to highly gifted races; and they are destined very soon ... to rule themselves.'<sup>109</sup> This same tendency resulted in the 1940 launch of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, to facilitate research and the development of constructive colonial policy in light of an increasing number of commissions, as part of the influential, gradualist, social democratic Fabian Society. There was a long history of Fabian interest in empire, with George Bernard Shaw producing a manifesto in 1900 that envisaged the British Empire as the vehicle for the expansion of socialism.<sup>110</sup> As Labour MP Arthur Creech Jones, a leading Fabian Colonial Bureau member, put it in a 1945 collection of essays, the 'predatory and possessive character of imperialism in the past' was irrelevant, what mattered was discharging the 'legacy of service and contribution' to the native peoples and humanity.<sup>111</sup> In the British Empire, this demanded that policymakers 'co-operate[d] generously, energetically, and speedily with her colonial peoples for their freedom and good social and economic well-being'.<sup>112</sup> It was these same instincts that meant that these left-wingers could sit comfortably within the Colonial League.

With this parliamentary committee in place, Amery chaired a further meeting on 3 February 1939 to launch the Colonial League, a nationwide, cross-party organisation to educate the public about the 'importance of the British Colonial Empire' and to lay out the human, moral, and political objections to colonial appeasement.<sup>113</sup> The new League's activities included a weekly bulletin, writing letters to newspapers, arranging guest speakers to address meetings, and fundraising for groups in the colonies working to oppose a transfer. From the beginning, the benevolent attitude to empire was baked into the organisation. When prominent Labour supporter Charles Roden Buxton wrote contemptuously to *The Times* about this new group really being a front for those only interested in 'standing up to the dictators', Amery's barbed reply

asked whether Britain had given up on her 'pledged responsibilities to the native'.<sup>114</sup> He followed this up with a book, *The German Colonial Claim*, arguing that the colonies were won by right of conquest and restating the strategic imperative of retaining control of them, but, more significantly, given his contempt for the League of Nations having oversight into imperial rule, that the Permanent Mandates Commission could not supervise German colonial administration.<sup>115</sup> Instead of handing over colonies of marginal value, Amery claimed that carving out the Polish Corridor had left a greater psychological wound that would not be healed by a 'partial surrender' or 'limited concession' because, again, 'paying Danegeld has never been a success'.<sup>116</sup> This combination of arguments reflected the whole array of opinion from those on the Left wanting to extend the mandate system to all colonies to Amery's unrepentant imperialism, exemplifying the far more ideologically diverse complexion of the opposition to colonial appeasement in the last year of peace.

The significance of the Colonial League was reflected in the stature of its leading members and the reaction in Germany. Its council was composed of Lords Lugard, Stonehaven, and Selborne, Sir Donald Cameron, and Sir Cecil Rodwell, all of whom had been colonial administrators, and party representatives Amery (Conservative), James de Rothschild (Liberal), and Philip Noel Baker (Labour).<sup>117</sup> But, of course, most of these figures had been part of the opposition to colonial appeasement for some time. More significant was the German press reaction which, given the nature of the Nazi regime, reflected the irritation of the dictatorship itself. For instance, the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* expressed the surprise Germans felt at their 'just' demands being met in 'such a refusing nature' and the *Boersen Zeitung* claimed that the League's real purpose was to perpetuate lies about Germany's colonial record and to 'instruct the British nation falsely'.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps most triumphantly, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's own paper, effusively reported Goebbels' description of the League as 'a blatant piece of impudence'.<sup>119</sup> Such reporting could not but boost the League's sense of its own importance, as was reflected in it readily reproducing these critical headlines in its weekly bulletin, and the more prosaic fact that few British pressure groups could expect to attract such hostile foreign press interest.

Whilst attracting the ire of the German press was significant, the emergence of the Colonial League came amidst a much livelier British press debate which served as a platform for the projection of the cases both for and against colonial appeasement. In the latter half of the 1930s, the letters pages of generally pro-appeasement *Times* newspaper became the forum for lively debate on the question of colonial appeasement, legal sovereignty in the mandates, and making all colonies subject to League of Nations oversight.<sup>120</sup> The status of *The Times*, which was widely seen as the British establishment's 'official' newspaper, made such debates within its pages logical, with the strong likelihood that they would be read by policymakers. And whilst its editorials rarely deviated

from supporting Chamberlain's appeasement strategy, *The Times* nevertheless reported faithfully on the emerging opposition to the proposed colonial appeasement, including listing Amery's *The German Colonial Claim* as one of its 'books of the week'.<sup>121</sup> The liberal *Manchester Guardian* had a record for criticising Britain and France for failing to live up to the promise of the mandate system, which one editorial claimed made it harder to oppose Germany's demands, whilst also being an outlet for opponents of colonial appeasement, like Lord Lugard, to express their views on the matter.<sup>122</sup> The right-wing press was divided, with the *Daily Mail*, under the guidance of its proprietor Lord Rothermere, was open in its support for restoring Germany's colonies on the grounds that a joint British-French-Belgian offer of African territory would, at relatively low cost, stabilise European relations.<sup>123</sup> By contrast, the *Daily Telegraph* was more critical, demanding that Germany prove her commitment to peace before receiving any colonial concessions, whilst providing a platform for Conservative opponents, such as Henry Page Croft and Lord Winterton, to air their views.<sup>124</sup> In these ways, the various press organs were both used by both sides in the debate on colonial appeasement and, through their editorials and choice of reporting, sought to be part of the debate. However, their role was quite evidently peripheral, following in the wake of politicians seeking to shape the debate.

### Colonial Resistance

However, the Colonial League did not have much of an opportunity to inform the British debate, not least since the following weeks saw Germany invade the rump Czechoslovakia, Italy occupy Albania, and the Chamberlain government issuing guarantees to Poland, Romania, and Greece. In that time, there was little prospect of a colonial transfer, but this did not make the League irrelevant since its launch inspired those in the colonies who, since 1936, had been trying to resist being handed over to German rule. The result was a campaign stretching from Britain to southern Africa, reflective of the diverse complexion of empire, all with the shared aim of preventing colonial appeasement on the basis that Britain had responsibilities to her subjects. As early as 25 April 1936, *The Times* was reporting that, due to the growing opposition in Westminster, there were increasing demands in East Africa, notably from war hero and Tanganyikan colonist Lord Francis Scott, for the government to rule out transferring the mandates.<sup>125</sup> By August, it was further reported that Tanganyika's governor had publicly denounced a transfer to Germany, whilst South Africa's defence minister, Oswald Pirow, had told a meeting that there were no circumstances under which the colonies would be transferred.<sup>126</sup> From their perspective, there was a greater urgency to have clarity about the future of the mandates since, in the settlers' case, it meant a potentially radical change of regime and, for the South Africans, a direct military threat to their country and it was here that the opposition to colonial appeasement continued.

As with the Colonial League in Britain, these colonist groups really gained a head of steam in late 1938, after the conclusion of the Munich Agreement and at a time when Neville Chamberlain's appeasement strategy appeared to be garnering dividends. November 1938 saw the launch of the Tanganyika League to co-ordinate the efforts of British colonists with those opposed to colonial appeasement in London and across Africa.<sup>127</sup> Leadership was provided by settlers drawn from Britain's aristocratic elite, with Major F.W. Cavendish-Bentinck, a First World War veteran, colonial official, and subsequently eighth duke of Portland, as chairman. Supporting him, as president, was the same Lord Francis Scott who had been so vocally critical of a colonial transfer since 1936, who was the youngest son of the sixth Duke of Buccleuch and an uncle to Princess Alice, the duchess of Gloucester. However, there was a clear determination, as Cavendish-Bentinck explained early on, to get 'all races collaborating in one movement' against a transfer.<sup>128</sup> A reality that was, in part, reflected in the League's officers, which included leading figures in the Indian settler community.<sup>129</sup> There was no official African representation, but it is notable that leadership roles were not exclusive to white British settlers. One likely explanation is that this reflected the racial hierarchies within the British Empire and the changing dynamics of imperial rule, with Indians participating in governance in the Raj since 1935, as well as a clear class dimension for these officers being leading figures in their respective communities.

As noted in the introduction, this piece complements the work of Edward Kissi, who has studied the African response, such as it can be discerned, to their proposed transfer to Nazi rule. Kissi's conclusion that many Africans became more vocal in their professions of loyalty to the British Empire, rooted in anxiety about German racial persecution, elides with the anti-colonial appeasement propaganda distributed in the colonies at this stage.<sup>130</sup> Naturally, the British colonists deployed the language of kith and kin, with one leaflet stating their case under the heading 'Help Us To Remain Within The British Empire' and demanding protection for those who had 'devoted our lives and our savings to build up British interests'.<sup>131</sup> And yet, equally prominent were their concerns about the nature of German rule, which was starkly contrasted with the apparently more benevolent British administration.

This was most clear at the 'Hands off Africa' Conference, which opened in Bulawayo on 28th February 1939 with the mayor, Theodore Holdengarde, declaring that they were determined to remain within a British Empire that had been 'laid on democratic lines and inspired the principles of freedom, justice, and equal rights'.<sup>132</sup> The delegates agreed to form an African Defence Federation to bring together those campaigning against colonial appeasement in Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, North and South Rhodesia, Nyasaland, South West Africa, and South Africa.<sup>133</sup> Alongside the conference were large, open air meetings for the leaders, drawn from the pre-existing groups, of this new organisation to address indigenous people.<sup>134</sup> Again there was. no suggestion

of an independent African platform or of native representation on the Federation's executive committee. However, this does not invalidate the conclusion of Cavendish-Bentinck, who agreed to serve as chairman, that this conference demonstrated the 'most impressive evidence of the solidarity of British African opinion' since, as Kissi demonstrates, British rule was a known and far safer quantity than the certainty of racial persecution under the Nazis.<sup>135</sup>

One final, more complex, dimension is the response of the German colonists, whose continued existence kept open the possibility that their welfare could become an excuse for Hitler to incite a diplomatic incident like the Munich Crisis in 'defence' of his fellow Germans. The spread of Nazi propaganda in German settler communities was concerning enough that, on 20–21 January 1939, a conference of those opposed to colonial appeasement was held in Nairobi to discuss means of combatting it.<sup>136</sup> There is, however, evidence that the Nazis met with a mixed response and, in some cases, were actively resented, especially since the *Deutscher Sudwest Afrika Bund* had been attempting to coerce German colonists into contributing to their fundraising efforts and to join in persecuting Jews since November 1938.<sup>137</sup> This behaviour was so resented that, in February 1939, with apparent external encouragement, German settlers formed the German African Party to share 'more fully in the life' of the mandate and co-operate with authorities for its economic and social development.<sup>138</sup> Crucially, this party was anti-Nazi and aimed to appeal to German settlers over demands from Berlin for their allegiance, with a manifesto that called for resistance to returning to German rule and a repudiation of the Nazi system. Whilst British settler reaction was predictable, this response is a good illustration that, at least for some, the German efforts met with limited success. This should not be overstated, not least because the existence of local Nazi organisations demonstrates that this settler community was divided, and German settler opposition was more likely based on preferring the stability of the existing arrangement. But, these responses do explain how the anti-colonial appeasement campaign had roots in each of the racial groups in the colonies and that the response of British imperialists, whether in Westminster or Africa, was part of a much bigger body of opinion that was alarmed by the prospects of Nazi rule.

## Conclusion

In the end, the colonies remained under British control and, due to the outset of war, the question became moot. Compared to the major foreign policy challenges posed by Germany in Europe, from rearmament to union with Austria to the annexation of Czechoslovakia, the colonial question was marginal. They certainly were not a priority to the Nazis who were doctrinally committed to gathering together the Greater German Reich in Europe, where the lands were occupied by ethnic Germans and had long been industrialised. A

handful of small, economically insignificant African colonies could hardly have been deemed more significant than that. And yet, in Britain, the idea assumed an importance far greater than it otherwise might. Of course, atop a huge empire that had been financially weakened by the First World War, much of the British elite misjudged Nazi ambitions as being satisfiable outside Europe. It was this raising of the idea in Britain that encouraged Hitler to use the colonies as a negotiating tool from 1936, the idea that they were up for negotiation had already been conceded and so it was, quite sensibly, seized on as a possible foreign policy victory. Hitler came back to the issue when it was useful, whilst taking the German colonial movement into hand to ensure that its activism was deployed in pursuit of his foreign policy aims. This inconsistency in raising the issue meant that it ebbed and flowed in Britain, but it persisted as an idea in government circles who hoped to use these colonies as a sweetener in a wider settlement to preserve peace. Starting from this perspective, it is understandable why so little attention was paid to the fact that these colonies could become a strategic threat to the British Empire in Africa and its oceanic communication routes. If this strategy succeeded, there would be no reason for the Germans to fortify the colonies with naval and air bases, whilst raising a native army. But this, as with the wider appeasement policy was based on a flawed understanding of the Nazi state.

Against this was a campaign that grew from a small group of Conservative M.P.s to include groups in most of Britain's African possessions. Led by the imperialist Leo Amery, as the campaign grew, so it took in a variety of perspectives on empire. From left-leaning internationalists who wanted to transition from the imperial model in every colony to League of Nations mandates to colonial officials who objected to the precarity caused by the government's refusal to rule out handing over colonies to buy German friendship. But all were agreed that British rule was inherently more benevolent than its German counterpart.

Coming alongside the successive crises in Europe, this campaign attracted many politicians who were otherwise opposed to the government's foreign policy. On this particular issue, they deployed a set of arguments which are telling about the changed rhetoric around empire in this period. The strategic danger, as well as questions around Britain's 'right' to rule because of its victory in 1918, were increasingly taken as, at most, equal to a paternalistic imperialism, building on the 1920s attempt to internationalise and formalise imperial obligations to the native peoples. A line which stood in stark contrast to Nazi racial politics. These standards, which were expected to be met by other colonial powers, suffused and shaped the subsequent language around the opposition to colonial appeasement. The British government's attitude reflected the old, and entirely practical view, that the colonies were possessions to be bartered with to Britain's advantage. Those opposed, including staunch imperialists, placed the



welfare of the native peoples, and Britain's legal and moral duties to uphold it, at the forefront of their message. Whether directly inspired by the vision of empires conforming to internationally agreed standards or, like Amery, picking up on this rhetoric in an internationalised context, the impact of a changing vision of empire was critical to the entire matter. And, without understanding this changed public attitude towards empire, it is impossible to properly understand either the imperialist response to the potential diminution of British power or the entire discourse around imperialism in a time of great flux.

Joining with fellow campaigners in the colonies themselves, this Colonial League and its affiliated organisations made the most of imperial ties to launch a multi-racial drive to resist being handed over to the Nazis and all that that entailed. It is difficult to say conclusively what most Africans thought of their lands being treated as a convenient tool by distant European governments but, given that the alternative was Nazism, it can be confidently asserted that many would have inclined to the status quo. Even nationalists, who might be inclined to moves to undermine colonial rule, would have been able to see that self-government was more likely with the British. What can be said with certainty is that the idea was unpopular amongst British settler communities and divided their German counterparts.

That the suggestion continued to resurface, without being a major feature of Anglo-German talks, leaves open the question of what would have happened if the issue had been forced. And, with the outbreak of war, the Colonial League went into cold storage, with its staff hired to work on colonial propaganda for the Ministry of Information.<sup>139</sup> This was in place by 1 May 1940, with the League's secretary telling Lugard that they could no longer justify charging for membership for propaganda which the government was now undertaking.<sup>140</sup> Returning the colonies resurfaced in War Cabinet discussions in May 1940, when Lord Halifax was pushing the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, to open peace talks with Hitler.<sup>141</sup> However, the suggestion came to nothing and, by the time that the war was won, the British Empire was exhausted and facing a world being swept by the spirit of decolonisation and the inter-war discussions about legitimising the endure of empire through conformity to new internationalist standards was a distant memory.

## Notes

1. The colonies were: Ruanda-Urundi, Tanganyika, Cameroon, Togoland, South West Africa, New Guinea, Nauru, Western Samoa, and several small Pacific islands. The former Ottoman territories of Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Syria were also taken on the same terms.
2. Trentmann, "After the Nation-State," 47; Nielsen, "Delegitimising Empire," 845.
3. The Covenant of the League of Nations, The United Nations Office, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/library-archives/league-of-nations/covenant>, accessed 13/8/24; Jerónimo, "A League of Empires," 89; McCarthy, *The British people*, 143. For further

- discussion on the mandatory system extending imperialism ‘in a less overt form’, see Mazower, *Governing the World*, 166 and Callahan, “Mandated Territories,” 1.
4. Louis, “Colonial Appeasement”; Crozier, *Appeasement*.
  5. Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz”; Wempe, *Revenants*.
  6. Kissi, “Caught”.
  7. Fleming, “Diehard Conservatives”.
  8. Callahan, *A Sacred Trust*, 10–11.
  9. Crozier, “The Establishment of the Mandates System,” 507–8.
  10. MacDonald, *The United States*, 5.
  11. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
  12. Anghie, *Imperialism*, 115.
  13. Mazower, *Governing the World*, 165–6.
  14. Craven, “Between Law and History,” 31; Mulligan, “The Anti-slave Trade Campaign,” 149.
  15. For examples, see *Correspondence Relative to the Alleged Ill-Treatment; Papers relating to German atrocities*; Weston, *The Black Slaves of Prussia*. For a fuller account of the capture and confiscation of Germany’s colonies, see Louis, *Great Britain and Germany’s Lost Colonies*.
  16. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, 48.
  17. The Covenant of the League of Nations; Goncalves, “The Scramble,” 11.
  18. Dimier, “L’internationalisation,” 333–4.
  19. See chapter 2 in Pedersen, *The Guardians*.
  20. Hyam, *Understanding*, 224–5; Harcourt, “The Crown Colonies,” 13.
  21. Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists*, 274.
  22. Mazower, *Governing the World*, 131–2.
  23. Smuts, *The League of Nations*, 9.
  24. Zimmern, *The Third British Empire*. For further details on Zimmern’s thinking, see Morefield, “A Liberal in a Muddle”.
  25. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, 62; Lange, *Lineages of Despotism*, 170–1.
  26. Lugard, *Dual Mandate*.
  27. *Ibid.*, 50–1.
  28. *Ibid.*, 56–7.
  29. Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 108–9.
  30. *Ibid.*, 45.
  31. Louis, “The United Kingdom,” 74–5.
  32. *Ibid.*, 76.
  33. Lugard, “The Mandate System,” 550.
  34. *HC Deb*, 197, 6th July 1926, c.1874
  35. ; *HC Deb*, 202, 15th Feb. 1927, c.747
  36. Hewitt, “Empire, International Development,” 32.
  37. Pedersen, “Settler Colonialism,” 113–4; Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 61–2.
  38. Mazower, *Governing the World*, 170–1.
  39. Callahan, *Mandates and Empire*, 58–9; Callahan, *A Sacred Trust*, 3.
  40. For a fuller account of the continuing German desire to acquire a colonial empire, see Schmokel, *Dreams of Empire*.
  41. The standard case against the ‘lie’ was put forward by the former governor of German East Africa, Dr Heinrich Schnee, who now served as president of the German Colonial Society, see H. Schnee, *Die Kolonial Schuldfrage*. Goncalves also demonstrates how the British government’s discussions about appeasing Germany with Portugal’s colonies

- in the 1930s also rested on this same judgement of ‘fitness to rule’ as Portugal was also increasingly seen as an ‘unfit’ imperial power due to its inability to develop its African possessions and the ‘old-fashioned’ methods of its administration (Goncalves, “The Scramble,” 15).
42. Crozier, *Appeasement*, 72.
  43. Wempe, *Revenants*, 218.
  44. Bernhard, “Colonial Crossovers,” 208–9.
  45. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler predicted that France’s policy of raising African troops and encouraging racial assimilation into the French populace would lead to the elimination of ‘all traces of French blood’ and the creation of a ‘Euro-African-Mulatto State’ inhabited by ‘an inferior race ... developed through a slow and steady process of bastardization’ (Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 355).
  46. Kiernan, *Blood and Soil*, 36.
  47. Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 452.
  48. Crozier, *Appeasement*, 136.
  49. ‘German Peace Plan in Detail’, *The Times*, 2 April 1936, 14.
  50. Crozier, *Appeasement*, 138.
  51. Sandler, “Colonial Education,” 186.
  52. Epp, “The Question of Colonies,” 4.
  53. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
  54. ‘On National Socialism and World Relations’, 30 Jan. 1937, German Propaganda Archive, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hitler1.htm>, accessed: 13/1/23
  55. Sandler, “Colonial Education,” 185.
  56. ‘Hitler says “Rise of Reich is Dreamlike”’, *Daily Mail*, 25 Feb. 1939, 10.
  57. Louis, “Colonial Appeasement,” 1176–7.
  58. *Ibid.*, 1178.
  59. Fleming, “Diehard Conservatives,” 420–7.
  60. Barnes and Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 412–3.
  61. *Ibid.*
  62. *Ibid.*, 414–5.
  63. Croft, *My Life of Strife*, 232. It might be wondered why Churchill, with his devotion to preserving the British Empire and his public campaigning to raise the alarm about Nazi Germany, did not play a significant part in this campaign. On 6 April 1936, he did demand clarity from the government on this issue in the Commons, emphasising that Britain’s duty, if not to govern the mandates herself, was to hand them over to direct League of Nations administration. It is probable that, had a colonial redistribution become an immediate possibility, Churchill would have become more vocal on the matter, but, at this point, he was striking an increasingly internationalist tone about British foreign policy by advocating a League-based alliance of powers against Germany, with an eye to building political alliances with left-leaning internationalists in the Labour and Liberal parties, as well as bodies like the League of Nations Union and the New Commonwealth Society (*Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 6 April 1936, cols.2482–2483).
  64. Pedersen, *The Guardians*, chapters 5–6.
  65. Fleming, “Diehard Conservatives,” 420.
  66. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 20 Nov. 1931, col.1199.
  67. Amery, *The Forward View*, 14.

68. *Ibid.*, 50. Grayson has made the valid point that, in so far as Europe was concerned, Amery's approach was not hugely dissimilar to that pursued by Neville Chamberlain after 1937 (Grayson, "Leo Amery," 514).
69. *Ibid.*, 250.
70. Barnes and Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 407.
71. Note on Imperial Affairs Deputation to the Prime Minister, 20 May 1936, TNA: Prime Minister's Office, PREM 1/190.
72. Leo Amery Statement, TNA: Prime Minister's Office, PREM 1/190.
73. Barnes, Nicholson, *Empire at Bay*, 380. Visiting again in August 1935, Amery met Hitler and afterwards reflected that they only got on amicably because they avoided controversial topics, namely the treatment of minorities and colonies (*Ibid.*, 397).
74. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 7 May 1936, col.1873. In a reflection of their 'coming of age' as part of the British Empire, these dominions had received the following mandates New Guinea (Australia), Western Samoa (New Zealand), and South West Africa (South Africa).
75. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 16 July 1936, col.2233.
76. Amery, "The Problem," 8.
77. Amery, "General von Epp's Case," 12–13.
78. 'African Colonies for Germany?', *East Africa and Rhodesia*, 25 March 1937, CAC: Papers of Leopold Amery, AMEL 1/5/50.
79. Minutes of Annual Conference of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, 1–2 Oct 1936, BL: Conservative Party Archive, NUA 2/1/51
80. Barnes and Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 421.
81. Harvey, *Diaries of Oliver Harvey*, 61–2.
82. MacDonald, *The United States*, 17.
83. *Ibid.*, 62–3.
84. Crozier, *Appeasement*.
85. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*.
86. Amery to Selborne, 7 Nov. 1938, AMEL 1/5/54.
87. Amery to Lugard, 5 Dec. 1938, BL: Papers of Frederick Dealtry Lugard, Baron Lugard of Abinger, MSS. Lugard 146.
88. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 7 Dec. 1938, col.1239; Amery to Lugard, 9 Dec. 1938, MSS. Lugard 146.
89. Amery to Lugard, 20 Dec. 1938, MSS. Lugard 146.
90. Lugard, 'The Basis', 14.
91. 'New Colonial Union', *The Times*, 29 April 1937, 11; 'Future Problems of the Colonies', *The Times*, 2 June 1937, 9.
92. List of Members of Parliament forming Colonial Defence Committee, CAC: Papers of Duncan Sandys, DSND 1/10.
93. Robinson, 'Gore, William George Arthur Ormsby-', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
94. 'Indirect Rule in the African Colonies', *The Times*, 29 May 1937, 16.
95. 'Colonial Trade', *The Times*, 21 Oct 1937, 9.
96. 'Study of Colonial Administration', *The Times*, 6 May 1938, 10.
97. Harlech to Amery, 11 Oct 1938, AMEL 1/5/54.
98. For example, see *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 19 Dec. 1935, cols. 2052 and 2076–81.
99. Nicolson, "The Colonial Problem," 40–1.

100. For example, see 'Liberals and Mandates', *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Oct. 1936, 12; 'Germany's Demand for Colonies', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Nov. 1938, 15; 'International Control of Colonies', *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Aug. 1939, 4.
101. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 2 June 1937, col.1045.
102. The Colonial Empire in 1938–1939: Report for Presentation to House of Commons, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and related bodies, National Archives, Kew, CO 323; *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 14 June 1938, col.113.
103. Mulvey, *Land, Liberty and Empire*, 70 and 72.
104. Mazower, *Governing the World*, 166–7. For further details, see Hobson, *Imperialism*; Long, 'Paternalism'.
105. Wedgwood, *The Future*, xv.
106. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 2 June 1937, col.1073; *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 8 Nov. 1937, col.1414.
107. 'Mandates for Colonies', *The Times*, 15 Nov 1938, 9.
108. *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): House of Commons Official Report*, 7 Dec. 1938, cols.1199–1212.
109. Noel-Baker, *Common Sense about Colonies*, 10.
110. Shaw, *Fabianism and the Empire*.
111. Creech Jones, "Introduction" in *Fabian Colonial Essays*, 13.
112. *Ibid.*
113. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin, n.d., DSND 1/10.
114. 'Germany and Colonies', *The Times*, 1 March 1939, 12; 'To the Editor of the Times', *The Times*, 3 March 1939, 10.
115. Amery, *The German Colonial Claim*, 110.
116. *Ibid.*, 122, 137.
117. 'M.P.s Form Colonial League', *Daily Mail*, 9 Feb. 1939, 12.
118. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin No.1, 24 Feb. 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
119. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin No.2, 3 March 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
120. For example, 'Germany's Former Colonies', *The Times*, 22 Feb. 1937, 15; 'The Question of Colonies', *The Times*, 7 Oct. 1937, 15; 'The Colonial Question', *The Times*, 17 Nov. 1938, 10; 'The Colonial Empire', *The Times*, 5 Dec. 1938, 8; 'Germany and Colonies', *The Times*, 1 March 1939, 12.
121. For example, 'Colonial Claims', *The Times*, 18 Feb. 1939, 14; 'Book of the Week', *The Times*, 12 May 1939, 11. And for examples of editorial support for colonial concessions, see 'Germany and Africa', *The Times*, 16 Nov. 1938, 15.
122. For example, 'League and Mandates', *Manchester Guardian*, 5 May 1936, 11; 'A Sacred Trust', *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1937, 10; 'Germany's Former Colonies', *Manchester Guardian*, 11 May 1939, 20.
123. 'Our War Mongers', *Daily Mail*, 8 April 1936, 12; 'I Want An Anglo-German Pact', *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1937, 12; 'Who Owns The German Colonies?', *Daily Mail*, 27 May 1937, 13.
124. 'Colonies and Armaments', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 Jan. 1937, 14; 'Germany and Her Claims', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 Jan. 1937, 10; 'Exploring Hitler's Declarations', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Feb. 1937, 14; 'Germany's Demand for Colonial Possessions', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Feb. 1937, 14.
125. 'British Mandates Policy', *The Times*, 25 April 1936.

126. ‘Tanganyika’s Future’, *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1936; ‘Germany’s Former Colonies’, *The Times*, 13 Aug. 1936.
127. Cavendish-Bentinck to Sandys, 14 Nov. 1938, DSND 1/10. This was technically the relaunch of the Tanganyika League, but there is little evidence that the earlier body was formalised or carrying out campaigns under its banner. This relaunch was most likely that formalisation, with earlier critics mirroring events in London after closely following the news there for some years.
128. Cavendish-Bentinck to Sandys, 14 Nov. 1938, DSND 1/10.
129. Tanganyika League memorandum, 12 Nov. 1938, DSND 1/10. These included Captain Sir Ali bin Salim of the East African Indian National Congress and A.H. Kaderbhoy as vice-presidents.
130. Kissi, “Caught,” 68. Kissi also notes that, aside from press reports, many educated Africans were aware of, for instance, Hitler’s justification of slavery in *Mein Kampf*.
131. ‘Help Us To Remain Within The British Empire’ leaflet, DSND 1/10.
132. ‘Keeping Germany Out of Africa’, *Manchester Guardian*, 1 March 1939, 15.
133. “Hands Off Africa”, *The Times*, 1 March 1939, 15.
134. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin No.2, 3 March 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
135. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin No.3, 10 March 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
136. The Colonial League Weekly News Bulletin, No.1, 24 Feb. 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
137. ‘Levy Resented’, *Daily Mail*, 22 Nov. 1938.
138. The Colonial League Weekly Bulletin No.12, 13 May 1939, AMEL 1/5/53.
139. Amery to Lugard, 12 Sept 1939, MSS. Lugard 146.
140. Summerscales to Lugard, 1 May 1940, MSS. Lugard 146.
141. War Cabinet Conclusions, May-June 1940, W.M.(40) 140th Conclusions Confidential Annex, 151, TNA: The Cabinet Papers, CAB 65/13.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Aberystwyth University.

## ORCID

Ewan Lawry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4542-5857>

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