

England's Response to Hitler in the 1930s

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*Empire, Appeasement,
and the Cliveden Set*

By

David M. Valladares

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For my wife Letty-Ann Valladares

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CHAPTER ONE

A FREE HAND IN EASTERN EUROPE

Who Sent Halifax?

On November 10, 1937, a report appeared in Britain's *Evening Standard* that the Lord President of the Council of the United Kingdom, Viscount Halifax, had been invited to attend an international hunting exhibition in Berlin. The exhibition had been arranged in 1936 by Hermann Göring in his capacity as Game Warden of the Third Reich. Because Lord Halifax was a proficient sportsman and Master of the Middleton Hounds, an invitation to him and his projected attendance appeared unexceptional. The *Evening Standard* added, however, that Lord Halifax would meet with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and that Anglo-German relations would be discussed, "but no negotiations or specific issues are contemplated. If the present plan is carried out, Lord Halifax will leave for Germany on Monday week."¹

The following day, an *Evening Standard* diplomatic correspondent provided additional details about the possible negotiations:

I am able to give certain indications of the attitude of both the German and British Governments towards the coming talks. The British Government have information from Berlin that Herr Hitler is ready, if he receives the slightest encouragement, to offer to Great Britain a ten-year 'truce' on the Colonial issue. During the 'truce'; the question of Colonies for Germany would not be raised. In return for this agreement Herr Hitler would expect the British Government to leave him a free hand in Central Europe.²

Official British reaction to the allegation that Lord Halifax would be conducting negotiations with Hitler that would give Berlin a free hand in

¹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* Series D, (1937-1945) Volume IV: *The Aftermath of Munich*, Oct. 1938—March 1939 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 39.

² Alan Campbell Johnson, *Viscount Halifax: A Biography* (Ives Washburn, Inc., 1941), 430.

Central Europe to relieve German pressure on British colonies was rapid and violent. Even the British press engaged in a lively argument as to the authenticity of the *Evening Standard* report. From *The Times*' conclusion that the allegation was merely "artless suggestion" to the *Yorkshire Post*'s political correspondent independently obtaining similar information "from sources satisfactory to any reputable journal," rumblings within the British journalistic world that Halifax might indeed be heading to Berlin started to appear in several newspapers.³ Two days later, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, made a formal announcement in parliament that Halifax had accepted the invitation, thus showing that these "rumors had real substance."⁴

Halifax's visit to Berlin on November 17, 1937 spurred more than just journalistic speculation and the British public's dissatisfaction with the country's current foreign policy. Questions and concerns began to arise as to why Halifax and not the foreign minister, Anthony Eden, would be conducting negotiations. Had Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain sent Halifax without support of the cabinet? And if the Foreign Office did not send Halifax, then who did? Had the British government decided to farm out foreign policy to outsiders or was Halifax acting on his own accord? The answer to these questions could have serious political ramifications for the Chamberlain Government.

These questions spawned a series of journalistic articles that claimed to have uncovered a "shadow cabinet"⁵ so well hidden within the British government that it had for years "exercised so powerful an influence on the course of 'British' policy."⁶ These articles suggested that a sinister elitist conspiratorial group was set to appease Germany while undermining the true interest of Britain. This piece of startling information quickly caught fire, and the nickname given to the conspiratorial group was "The Cliveden Set."⁷

The Cliveden Set was a right-wing, upper-class group of prominent personalities who were politically influential in Britain in the 1930s. The group's members included notable politicians, journalists, aristocrats and entertainers such as Nancy Astor, Geoffrey Dawson, Philip Kerr, Edward

³ Johnson, *Viscount Halifax*, 433.

⁴ Norman Rose, *The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity* (Jonathan Cape, 2000), 174.

⁵ M. Brooke Henderson, *The Cliveden Set: Myth and Reality* (Madison, 1993), 2.

⁶ Christopher Sykes, *Nancy: The Life of Lady Astor* (Collins, 1972), 366.

⁷ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 4.

Wood, Robert Brand, T.E. Lawrence, and Rudyard Kipling. The name Cliveden itself comes from the stately home located in Buckinghamshire, England, which was owned by Lord and Lady Astor. The term Cliveden Set, meant as a pejorative, was coined by the journalist Claud Cockburn, who wrote for the newspaper *The Week*. According to Cockburn, the Cliveden Set was a social network that was comprised of aristocratic Germanophiles who favored appeasing Germany and who attempted to influence British foreign policy in Berlin's favor.⁸

The claim that an aristocratic group existing within the upper echelons of the British government was influencing foreign policy in order to promote German interests was a socially scandalous idea for some. However, there were many powerful politicians and aristocrats in England who thought that the best way to secure Britain's interests both home and abroad was by cooperating with Germany. What seemed to set the accusations against the Cliveden Set apart was the degree to which they focused on the group's aristocratic background.

Indeed, members of the group such as the Astors, Sir Montague Norman,⁹ and Sir Henri Deterding¹⁰ were the social and industrial elite of Britain. They held substantial positions of power, and their world consisted of ostentatious estates and lavish social events. But more than flaunting their great wealth and power, they were frequently in contact with both British and German policy makers. In other words, their potential influence reached into the political world.¹¹

Initial reaction to Cockburn's accusations was largely muted. As Cockburn put it, "Absolutely nothing happened. It made about as loud a bang as a

⁸ Alfred Leslie Rowse, *All Souls and Appeasement: A Contribution to Contemporary History* (Macmillan, 1961), 97.

⁹ Sir Montague Norman served as the Governor of the Bank of England from 1920 to 1944. Martin Connolly, *Hitler's Munich Man: The Fall of Admiral Sir Barry Domville* (Grub Street Publishers, 2017) Sir Montague Norman was suspected of being a closet Nazi sympathizer; he helped ensure Nazi gold was sold and the money returned to them in 1939. The full facts are buried in the archives of the Bank of International Settlements. Americans were so suspicious of Norman's dealings with the Nazis that in the summer of 1942 President Roosevelt sent a report on his activities to Sir Winston Churchill. The British Prime Minister asked Anthony Eden, his Secretary for War, to look into the American concerns.

¹⁰ Sir Henri Deterding was the first executives of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company, and was also chairman of the combined Royal Dutch/Shell oil company.

¹¹ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 5.

crumpet falling on a carpet.”¹² Weeks later, however, journals began to publish and embellish the sensational report of the existence of a shadow cabinet in Britain. Newspapers in Singapore, New York, and Buenos Aires, and elsewhere began to investigate and scrutinize the members of the Set.¹³

Pronouncements about supposed influence of the Cliveden Set on British foreign policy began to extend to Britain’s political class. In 1938, former Member of Parliament (MP) for Bradford North and Nobel Prize winner Norman Angell wrote in the periodical *Time and Tide* that the Cliveden Set “occupied a strategic position in forming the policies of the country.”¹⁴ In his book *Who Helped Hitler?*, the Soviet ambassador to Great Britain, Ivan Maisky wrote that, “[The Cliveden Set] had very great influence on the appointment of Ministers, the formation of governments and the determination of the policy of those governments.”¹⁵ Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the cabinet, placed them “among the most influential” of the “Political congeries” operating in London.¹⁶ The Labour Party leader Hugh Dalton describes the members of the group as “These traitors of Printing House Square, this residue of the Cliveden Set, Hitler’s Fifth Column in London.”¹⁷ A Labour MP stated at a meeting in Hyde Park that, “the foreign policy of this country is no longer settled by the Cabinet in Downing Street but at the country home of Lady Astor at Cliveden.”¹⁸ That such prominent political figures in Britain made similar remarks about this issue suggests the extent to which this narrative about the Cliveden Set began to take hold in Britain.

Research developed on the Cliveden Set reveals that little scholarly work has been undertaken or completed. The extent of work on the Cliveden Set’s is limited to a minor reference or a brief rebuttal to the level of the Set’s influence on British foreign policy. Conversely, there is an extensive selection of biographical work available on specific members of the group. These biographical contributions, however, are limited in focus and analysis. While they may provide useful information on individual experiences

¹² Claud Cockburn, *Crossing the Line* (Monthly Review Press, 1960), 19.

¹³ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 4.

¹⁴ Norman Angell, “Foreign Affairs: Clivedenism,” *Time and Tide*, April 2, 1938.

¹⁵ Ivan Maisky, *Who Helped Hitler?* (Trans. Andrew Rothstein, Hutchinson, 1964), 69.

¹⁶ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 1.

¹⁷ Hugh Dalton, *Call back yesterday: memoirs 1887-1931* (Muller, 1953), 243.

¹⁸ Anthony Masters, *Nancy Astor, a biography* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 193.

and personal accounts, they devote little effort to examining wider historical concerns surrounding the Cliveden Set.

Biographical studies consistently deny that the Cliveden Set had any effect on Neville Chamberlain's decisions leading to the Munich Conference or Britain's strategy of appeasing Germany. Nancy Astor biographer Christopher Sykes argues that Claud Cockburn fabricated the claim that the Cliveden Set sought to influence Britain's foreign policy in favor of Germany, and that all of Cockburn's accusations were ideologically motivated and by no means substantial.¹⁹ Biographer James Fox states that "what started as a Marxist kite flying in a cyclostyled news sheet (referring to Cockburn and *The Week*) grew into a myth that helped to end Nancy's (Lady Astor) political career, damaged her reputation irreparably, and closed down Cliveden as a social and political powerhouse."²⁰

Additional contributions align in some variation with both Sykes and Fox's conclusions. Lady Astor biographer, John Grigg, writes that "...the main reason for the myth's growing (Cliveden Set)–and lasting–currency is that it offered a scapegoat for the general failure to stop Hitler..."²¹

Although these arguments eventually gained acceptance among historians, they are cursory. Nonetheless, these conclusions follow a biographical process of reasoning that results not from in-depth analysis, but from an academic approach that limits the focus on individual characters of the Cliveden Set. A strength of using a biography is that it can give additional depth and detail to a general approach; it also provides a human element that can make the subject matter much more engaging. Still, there is a danger of bias that can lead to an interpretation of intention and not facts.²²

Whether it is Anthony Masters' biography of Nancy Astor, David Billington's biography of Philip Kerr, or Michael Astor's presentation of his family history in *Tribal Feeling*, much of the research that has been produced on the individual members of the Cliveden Set altogether discredit Cockburn's claims. Such refutations occur because biographical contributions are not aimed at piecing together the foundational significance of the Set's very purpose, which is much more convoluted and intricate than any single

¹⁹ Christopher Sykes, *Nancy: The Life of Lady Astor* (Collins, 1972), 365.

²⁰ James Fox, *Five Sisters: The Langhorne of Virginia* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), 423.

²¹ John Grigg, *Nancy Astor: Portrait of a Pioneer* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 149.

²² S.A. Abejunmobi, "The Biographical Approach to the Teaching of History," *The History Teacher* vol. 12, No. 3 (May, 1979), p. 349-357.

member. Biographies do a good job of reviewing the motivations and activities of individuals; however, in examining the Cliveden Set, there is a concern in determining which individuals were truly representative of the group.

An additional weakness of a biographical approach is the overreliance on the writings of the members themselves as primary sources. Due to the nature of informal organizations and the complete failure of appeasement during the 1930s, a close reading of diary entries, personal correspondences, or completed memoirs can lead to misguided conclusions. An even greater concern arises when the body of personal production of Set members regularly contradicts each other or appears incomplete.

Some of the first historians to reevaluate how the early historiography depicted the Set are Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott. They state that, "The talk at Cliveden was certainly of appeasement, but it was a side show."²³ In 1965, the historian/novelist Margaret George committed some brief primary research to substantiating Cockburn's accusations. Although minimalistic in analysis, she concluded that there was a group of influential people who did meet at the Astor's estate and who did discuss critical foreign events, "but the Cliveden Set, with its shifting personnel, had no monopoly on enthusiasm for Fascism; they were one circle among many, all of them made up of people of similar social status and public prestige."²⁴

In short, any mention of the Cliveden Set by academic contributions are either supplemental interwar appeasement or to fulfill a biographical contribution of the high-profile people who comprised the Set. In both instances, authors and historians dismiss the claim that the Set was as perfidious as Claud Cockburn suggested. Gilbert and Gott go so far as to say that "were the archives of Cliveden ever on view, they would be more useful to the novelist than to the historian."²⁵

However, Gilbert and Gott's contentions on this specific issue are erroneous. They, as do many other scholars, view the existence and function of the Cliveden Set through the general lens of Germanophile appeasement. Because they do not identify the Set as the sole or primary source of political appeasement during the interwar period, they disregard it as inconsequential

²³ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1963), 31.

²⁴ Margaret George, *The Warped Vision: British Foreign Policy, 1933-1939* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965), 137.

²⁵ Gilbert and Gott, *The Appeasers*, 31.

within historical analysis. Consequently, early work on the Cliveden Set is both general and mediocre.

It was not until 2000 that Norman Rose published a comprehensive monograph on the Cliveden Set. Titled *The Cliveden Set: Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity*, the monograph is divided into twelve chapters. The eighth chapter contains the key arguments. There Rose engages in sustained analysis about the existence and function of the Set and its effect on British foreign policy. In addition to examining the core members of the Set, Rose evaluates the October 1937 dinner that centers on Cockburn's claims that a conspiracy occurred at that gathering aimed at replacing Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden with Viscount Halifax. Rose concludes that the group was not a conspiratorial cadre, but rather a close-knit band of friends and like-minded people who were actively engaged in public life and were close to cabinet ministers. However, Rose does recognize the Cliveden group supported the government's attempts to reach an agreement with Hitler.²⁶

Rose's work is thoroughly researched and provides a substantial contribution to the literature. Much of monograph is a biographical exercise that recounts the grandeur of the Cliveden Estate and its habitués. Though not being a work of fiction, the book itself is constructed as a work of fiction. Not only is it replete with Oedipal characters whose good intentions are tragically ineffective due to cruel circumstance and inherent hubris, but it begins with a colorful prologue and ends with an emotional epilogue. Rose concludes that the Cliveden Set tended to take themselves too seriously and that they were idealistically misguided.

The primary limitation to Rose's work, however, is that it excludes necessary elements that would provide for a more comprehensive understanding of events surrounding the Cliveden Set and its activities. For instance, he appears to show greater concern with describing the grandeur of the estate than piecing together the Set's agenda and whether there was any real credibility to Cockburn's claim. Alfred Milner, who played a crucial role in the development of Kerr, Brand, and Curtis' political ideology, is barely mentioned.

In the same manner, Milner's Kindergarten (a group of young men from Oxford, many who were central figures in the Cliveden Set) is given the same scant treatment. Rose's oversight limits any incisive interpretation of Halifax's November 1937 visit because Rose is more concerned with

²⁶ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 6.

absolving the Astors of any conspiracy than questioning the aims behind Halifax's negotiations with Hitler.

There are several questions that Rose could have usefully raised. For example, as part of its negotiations, why did the British government seek a ten-year truce with Germany when dealing with the colonial issue? This is what Halifax was sent to negotiate, yet Rose fails to dig deeper into the matter except to insist that Halifax's visit was not a plot determined at Cliveden.²⁷ By doing so, Rose confines his analysis and almost completely excludes, when questioning the Set's goals of imperialistic preservation, additional concerns that push beyond Cockburn's heavy-handed accusations. The line of reasoning being that if Cockburn were shown to be overzealous and jejune in his style of tabloid journalism, then the members of the Set would be vindicated. It still does not answer, however, why Halifax and whoever sent him were so concerned about Germany's presence in South Africa and the free hand that they were hoping to secure if Central Europe were abandoned to Hitler.

If research on the Cliveden Set has been limited to Germanophile concerns and whether its members were pro-Nazi, then Rose's analysis would be extensive enough to answer the question of Cliveden's involvement, and his contentions would be viable. Yet, the extensive role that the Set played on a global level is ignored altogether, and their dealings with Hitler were resonant with a broad, general goal of unifying British Dominions. Still, Rose's work is currently the most extensive research produced, and it is the first to consider the Cliveden Set to be an important historical issue.

The primary caveat when conducting research on the Cliveden Set is the extremely limited availability of primary sources. This is not a novel obstacle. Indeed, the perennial challenge facing all historians is the accuracy and availability of an adequate source base. These challenges become increasingly difficult when dealing with nebulous groups that intentionally conceal, distort, or even destroy documentation about them. Carroll Quigley states that, "it is not possible for an outsider to write about a secret group without falling into errors."²⁸

²⁷ Rose, *The Cliveden Set*, 176.

²⁸ Carroll Quigley, *The Anglo-American Establishment: From Rhodes to Cliveden* (Books in Focus, 1981), x.

Primary Sources and Informal Groups

Documentary concerns are compounded when considering the vilification of the Set's members prior to World War II and the atrocities that resulted from that conflict. Due to the nature of concealment, what is left available to the scholar are personal papers that reveal little about what may have occurred behind closed doors. In attempting to qualify the function and effect that Cliveden had on British foreign policies, the scholar is forced to review the chronology of events, analyze (through documentation) the psychologies of prevalent figures, and construct inferences based on outcomes.

When dealing with secret societies and its members, the questions themselves garner just as much significance as the findings that are presented. For instance, if the historical question remained "Was the Cliveden Set a conspiratorial, fascist cadre responsible for promoting Nazi propaganda in Britain?", then the answer is no. The evidence fails to support such a finding, and the question is quickly refuted. The danger remains that such a query proves to be more of a distraction than historical contribution. In contrast, if the question is more pointed and less nefarious, such as, "Was British Government's treatment of the Anschluss or the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia a result of strategy pushed on Chamberlain by the Cliveden Set?" then the significance of the Set reemerges, and the thesis contributes substantially to the historiography.

To avoid falling into error, this work avoids questions that cannot be adequately answered within the sources. Thus, this work adopts a wider academic lens that extends beyond the borders of the Cliveden Estate, taking a closer look at the individuals and groups that influenced the Set (i.e., Alfred Milner, the Kindergarten, and the Round Table Group).

From Milner to Cliveden

Beginning in the late 1940s, many academics began to debate the purpose and cause behind Britain's strategy of appeasement. This extensive debate has developed a rich historiography comprised of four general schools of thought. The first school emphasizes Hitler's personality; the second emphasizes domestic constraints; the third emphasizes international restraints, especially empire, and the fourth emphasizes the increase in British international commitments and the corresponding decrease in British economic and military strength. Analyzing the Cliveden Set within these constraints is the purpose of this work.

Early research on British appeasement, however, consistently constructs the Set's role as historically insignificant and assigns all indictments against it under Cockburn's tabloid journalism. This early research therefore explains why current scholarship, such as Christopher Sykes' *Nancy: The Life of Lady Astor* and Anthony Masters' *Nancy Astor*, lends itself to perceiving the Cliveden Set as a scapegoat for Britain's failed foreign policy. The deficiency with this approach is that it limits analysis of the Set to interwar appeasement. The relevance of the Cliveden Set within the discourse of German appeasement is peripheral compared to the actual influence and goals that it pursued within a broader promotion of empire preservation.

With further analysis, we see that the Cliveden Set holds a significant position within the historical literature. Not only does research on the Cliveden Set produce greater understanding of the cause behind the British policies and strategies that led to German appeasement during the inter-war period, but it also brings to light the efforts of British imperial preservation that existed between persons of power and influence. Consequently, historical research has examined the influence and construction of Cliveden primarily through a domestic lens; however, the Cliveden Group cannot be understood separate from an imperial context. That is why it is essential that this work considers both the domestic influence that Cliveden garnered at home and the sources of their motivations that were substantially influenced by Alfred Milner during his tenure as High Commissioner for Southern Africa and Governor of Cape Colony.

Halifax's visit to Berlin to negotiate a ten-year truce that would allow Hitler a free hand in Eastern Europe adds additional consideration to the international allowances behind both Germany's annexations of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This study fortifies the link between the Cliveden Set and why it supported Hitler's call for *Lebensraum*.²⁹ The Set's support of German expansion far exceeds Chamberlain's mantra of "peace in our time"

²⁹ The term *Lebensraum* was coined by the German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel in the late nineteenth century. Ratzel developed a theory which claimed that the development of all species, including humans, is primarily determined by their adaptation to geographic circumstances. Adolf Hitler developed the belief that Germany required *Lebensraum* "living space" to survive. Hitler believed that the living space Germany needed could only be gained only in the east, and specifically from Russia. For additional information, see Charles Kruszewski, "International Affairs: Germany's *Lebensraum*," *The American Political Science Review* vol. 34, No. 5 (Oct., 1940), p. 964-975; and Woodruff D. Smith, "Friedrich Ratzel and the Origins of *Lebensraum*," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Feb., 1980), p. 51-68.

and, instead, directly supports a movement toward empire preservation resulting from the decline of British industrial exports after World War I.

Discovering the objectives and aims of the Set within the promotion of Empire is difficult to ascertain if the focus remains solely concentrated on its public contributions or private socializations. Both a domestic and imperial analysis must be applied. For instance, even before 1914, Britain had become less competitive in its traditional exports; however, a combination of World War I and the Great Depression accelerated the process of decline by disrupting markets and necessitating imported goods. In terms of volume, British exports never regained the prominence it had before World War I.³⁰ By the 1930s, British industry had become dependent on imperial markets, thereby resulting in a strong dependence on overseas interest in industry and finance.³¹ As a result, when analyzing the development of British domestic policy during the inter-war period, one needs to broaden those evaluations to considerations of empire.

Preservation of empire was among the Set's primary motivation when meeting at the Cliveden Estate.³² With their finery on display, they would dine and recruit people of influence and political power to their Milnerian ideology. It was the structure of an aristocratic merriment that allowed its members to politically maneuver and promote their agendas while avoiding the scrutiny of public accountability. Although readily dismissive, Gilbert and Gott are likely correct in their assertions that the Cliveden estate archives would prove useless to a historian if the attendance of party goers was the only point of scrutiny when gauging the Set's influence.

The claim that Cliveden Set was a cabal that intended to circumvent proper political conventions by spreading its views without the possibility of public scrutiny is a difficult assertion to support because it lacks the aforementioned concrete evidence. Tracing the driving force behind Halifax's concessions to Hitler back to the Cliveden Set, however, raises the question of purpose. How would the Set benefit from a ten-year "truce" with Germany on the colonial issue?

Following the ideology of Alfred Milner, his South African Kindergarten, and the Round Table Movement that operated within the British political

³⁰ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000* (Pearson Education, 2001), 427.

³¹ Piers Brendon, *Winston Churchill: A Biography* (Harper & Row, 1984), 78.

³² John Taylor, *A Reevaluation of Cockburn's Cliveden Set* (Ex Post Facto, vol. VIII, 1999), 95.

environment, members of the Set believed that establishing British cultural norms internationally was the only means by which its colonies, Dominions, and the rest of the world would modernize to a *Civitas Dei*.³³ Thus, the structure and method developed by Milner in South Africa was applied in order to influence public opinion. The Set did everything in its power to preserve British imperial growth, even if that meant promoting ill-advised concessions to Hitler.³⁴ This closer union of societies and the State was an assertive attempt to duplicate on an imperial scale what had been perceived as successful in South Africa under the efforts of Milner's Kindergarten.³⁵ Thus, the experiences of the Kindergarten in South Africa, whose leading members became part of the group within Cliveden, convinced them that the methods of organization and propaganda techniques that worked in South Africa could be duplicated and would be effective in bringing about their goals.³⁶

This study seeks to accomplish two objectives. The first is to establish a direct chronology that ties Alfred Milner, his Kindergarten, and the Cliveden Set to a political ideology that directly promoted a British rule of imperial governance. Establishing the transference of a political ideology that viewed any democratic process as an obstruction to the promotion of civil society within British imperialism reveals the subversive qualities of the Cliveden Set. Although there are limitations to the primary source base when researching informal groups, a template of action and influence supports such a pattern of repeated interference. Such a pattern establishes a strategy applied by Milner's followers in South Africa, India, and Europe. From the open manifestos of Cecil Rhodes and Alfred Milner to the way that they ingrained such an ideology in their disciples, i.e. the Kindergarten and Cliveden Set, the evidence reveals both the end goals of the group and the methods through which they attempted to achieve such goals. Piecing together their motivations require a broader historical lens that considers both chronology of events, disparate geographical locations of the British Empire, and the secondary literature that develops each piece of the mosaic that best explains the purpose of Halifax's meeting with Hitler. By doing

³³ Derek Drinkwater, *Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations: The Practitioner as Theorist* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 179.

³⁴ Walter Nimocks, *Milner's Young Men: the "Kindergarten" in Edwardian Imperial Affairs* (Duke University Press, 1968), 120.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁶ John E. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (University of Toronto Press, 1975), 45.

so, a pattern of behavior and the extent of their influence can be duplicated and measured.

The second goal of this work is to review and analyze the way the Set exerted its influence within the British political system. To do so, it establishes a delineation between members of the Set who directly experienced the tutelage of Milner's Kindergarten (Philip Kerr and Lionel Curtis), and members who inherited the legacy (Waldorf Astor). This strengthens the contention that men such as Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax were not central members of the Set but that they were, nevertheless, influenced by the Cliveden Set. In addition to agreeing with their methods of preserving the British Empire, Chamberlain and Halifax helped implement strategy similar to that promoted by the Set. This research counters the historical literature that contends that there is no evidence that the individuals associated with the Set had any excessive influence on the members of the government.³⁷ Ultimately, this research argues that Chamberlain helped arrange Lord Halifax's visit to Berlin in 1937, and that this meeting and the terms of negotiations that he was instructed to present to Hitler resulted from the careful planning and direction of some members of the Cliveden Set.

Although this study takes into consideration outlets of corroboration with The Round Table Groups, it is primarily concerned with the Set's access to power and the exercise of such power to promote its interests. This research also contends that the attempted application of Milner's world vision directly reproached the established electoral, political system in Britain and that interwar British foreign policy was aimed at German appeasement due to the Set's supplemental meddling.

One point of confusion that may arise throughout this research is that the various monikers given to the various groups associated with Set may overlap. The cluster of individuals that this research evaluates has been known at various times as Milner's Kindergarten, The Round Table Group, the Rhodes crowd, *The Times* crowd, the All Souls group, and the Cliveden Set.³⁸ Since one of the central points of evaluation within this research is Halifax's meeting with Hitler, the Cliveden Set will be used in later chapters. When referencing Milner in South Africa, the group will be identified as the Kindergarten. Additionally, the Kindergarten term will be used as well when referencing the combined efforts of Lionel Curtis and

³⁷ M. Brooke Henderson, *The Cliveden Set: Myth and Reality* (Madison, 1993), 83.

³⁸ Henderson, *The Cliveden Set*, ix.

Philip Kerr. However, regardless of what sobriquet is being used, all these terms refer to roughly the same group of people who were chosen and trained either directly or indirectly by Alfred Milner.

This research provides an important contribution to the academic study of World War II and the interwar period by adding to the literature on the British strategy of appeasement. Although the Cliveden Set was not, by any means, the sole motivating force behind Britain's appeasement sentiments, it was one of the most effective and surreptitious forces in promoting a British foreign policy that encouraged German rearmament. It also was the central group that communicated to Hitler that Britain would not oppose Germany's annexation of Austria or Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia.³⁹

This study is organized as follows. The first chapter of this research reviews the historical literature of Britain's interwar strategy of German appeasement. The second chapter considers the decline of both the British aristocracy and the British Empire as the primary motivating factor for the development and implementation of the Milnerian model of empire preservation. Subsequent chapters follow Milner, his Kindergarten, The Round Table Movement, the Cliveden Set, and their activity in South Africa, India, and Europe. As a result, this research extends the evolution of the Cliveden Set over a longer period and a larger geographic area; thus, it fills in the gaps and makes connections where other works have failed to ascribe importance.

This study does not seek to prove or disprove the merits of Cockburn's accusations. It is irrelevant to the argument whether there existed a sinister or nefarious aspect to the Set's decisions. This work is instead committed to presenting how the ideology of Alfred Milner pervaded British avenues of power through individuals associated with the Cliveden Set, and how the framework that had been established in South Africa after the Boer Wars and in India during Lord Irwin's tenure as Viceroy. It ultimately shows the depth of the connection between empire and appeasement.

³⁹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy* D/1, No 146, p. 263, Ribbentrop to Hitler, March 10, 1938.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERWAR APPEASEMENT

Appeasement: Naïve or Necessary?

In the 1930s, there was no greater threat to Britain than Adolf Hitler's Germany. In 1933, Germany had officially withdrawn from the League of Nations, and by 1935 Germany had undertaken a massive rearmament program that was in direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles. The British were slow to act on reports of German rearmament, perhaps believing that concessions to Germany would pacify German desire for *Lebensraum*. However, Germany was not pacified, and by March of 1936 Germany disregarded the terms of the Locarno Treaty⁴⁰ and remilitarized the Rhineland. By 1938, Hitler had accomplished the Anschluss with Austria and was turning his sights toward Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European territories.

In response to German aggression in Europe, Britain decided to appease Germany. The incredulity of such a foreign policy is best illustrated by French Foreign Minister Jean Louis Barthou when he told Eden, "Your country is more afraid of Germany than we are."⁴¹ However, it was not fear that promoted a British foreign policy of appeasement.

⁴⁰ The Locarno Treaty of 1925 was a series of agreements between Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Italy. The treaty provided that the German-Belgian and Franco-German frontiers as determined by the Treaty of Versailles were inviolable. France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia agreed to provide support for each other against unprovoked attack by Germany. A further consequence of the pact was the evacuation of Allied troops from the Rhineland in 1930 five years ahead of schedule. The Locarno Treaty required Germany to renounce the use of force to change its western frontiers but agreed only to arbitration as regards its eastern frontiers, and that Great Britain promised to defend Belgium and France but not Poland and Czechoslovakia. See Gaynor Johnson, ed., *Lacarno Revisited: European Diplomacy 1920-1929* (Routledge, 2004).

⁴¹ Paul N. Hehn, *A Low, Dishonest Decade: The Great Powers, Eastern Europe, and the Economic Origins of World War II, 1930-1941* (Continuum, 2005), 173.

From 1933 to 1938, it does appear that the British and the French approach to German rearmament was to negotiate treaties and not to rearm itself in response.⁴² From the French perspective, historian Stephen A. Schuker argues that, “France, in short, faced a combination of political, economic, and military deterrents to action. Any one of them would have provided justification for their hesitation. Given their mutually reinforcing nature, no responsible French government could have risked a war.”⁴³

Considering Britain’s approach to Germany, historians such as David Edgerton reject the view that Britain was a faltering power and fearful of Germany. Edgerton argues, “If one of the forces was organized with Teutonic efficiency and regimentation, it was the RAF, not the Luftwaffe”⁴⁴ According to Edgerton, during the interwar period, Britain was the world’s leading import economy and remained so all the way up to World War II; this translated into a productive and technological capacity the Axis could not match. If anything, right before the World War II, Britain was a “first-class power”⁴⁵ and it possessed “the largest arms industry in the world.”⁴⁶

If Britain was a rich, aggressive, powerful empire with vast economic resources and access to global supplies, one that commanded huge flows of food and equipment through its unmatched navy, then why did Britain attempt to negotiate bilateral and multilateral treaties that would limit an armament race? An example of this would be the Anglo-German Treaty of 1935 that limited German naval acquisitions to 35 percent of Britain’s own navy.⁴⁷ Britain was not alone in attempting to prevent an arms race. There was the Washington Naval Conference (November 12, 1921 to February 6, 1922) and the London Naval Treaty (April 22, 1930) where treaties such as The Five-Power Treaty was signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France and Italy. Such treaties served as the cornerstone of the naval disarmament program.

⁴² Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

⁴³ Stephen A. Schuker, “France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936,” *French Historical Studies* (1986), 299-339.

⁴⁴ David Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (Penguin Books, 2011), 66.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ Joseph Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: How the Arms Race Drove the World to War, 1931-1941* (Basic Books, 2010), 123.

The suggested revision to boundaries in Eastern Europe would permit Germany to annex Austria, Memel, and Danzig.⁴⁸ Additionally, Britain would agree to a “peaceful evolution” of Czechoslovakia’s boundaries. Two influential figures who directly contributed to the annexations were Lord Lothian⁴⁹ and Lord Halifax.⁵⁰ It is significant to note that historians cite both Lothian and Halifax whenever referencing the establishment of the British strategy promoting annexation.⁵¹

In a letter from Lord Lothian to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, Lothian wrote:

The fundamental decision we have now to take is whether we are going to recognize that the basis of any stable peace must be that Germany must have

⁴⁸ From the Congress of Vienna in 1815 until the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Danzig and Memel formed part of Prussia and was primarily populated by Germans. At the end of World War I, a contentious issues facing the Peace Conference of 1919 was the future of Danzig and Memel. Although it was largely inhabited by Germans, the delegates of Poland demanded access to the sea through Danzig. Similarly, Memel was the port through which a great deal of trade was conducted with Lithuania. In the Treaty of Versailles, Germany relinquished its rights over Memel; however, on March 21, 1939, Hitler issued an ultimatum to Lithuania to cede Memel to Germany. Two days later, Lithuania did so. On the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, one of the first things that Hitler did was to reincorporate Danzig into Germany.

⁴⁹ Philip Henry Kerr (Lord Lothian) was a member of Alfred Milner’ Kindergarten and worked with Lionel George Curtis established the *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, a journal which promoted closer union between the Britain and its self-governing colonies. Lothian would end up becoming a central member of the Cliveden Set and a close friend and confidant of Nancy Astor. Nancy was formative in Lothian, a staunch Roman Catholic, converting to Christian Science. Lothian would die in 1940 from a kidney infection but because of his Christian Scientist beliefs, he refused medical treatment.

⁵⁰ Edward Wood (Viscount Halifax, Lord Irwin), was a British Conservative politician throughout the 1930s. He represented Ripon in the House of Common, served as Viceroy of India from 1925 to 1931 and the foreign secretary between 1938 and 1940. He was sent by Chamberlain and the Cliveden Set to meet with Hitler in 1937.

⁵¹ Halifax would raise the possibility of altering the boundaries of the Sudetenland, Memel, and Danzig in his meeting with Hitler in November 1937. See the summary of these meetings in “Foreign Office Papers of Sir Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,” FO 954/10A, November 1937.

the position in Europe and the world to which she is entitled by her history, her civilization and her power...⁵²

Lothian's letter, written on June 3, 1936, fails to mention a military concern with Germany. The appeal that Lothian continues to make to the foreign secretary is one of equality. Lothian continues, "The Austrian issues, of course, is much more than a mere question of the reunion of Austrian Germans with German Germans. It is the issue between a European system based on encirclement, that is preponderance, and one based on balance – that is equality."

It is not until much later in his letter that Lothian reveals his solution to the "German question," and that solution was to allow for annexation. Lothian considered it futile to open negotiations with Germany if the status quo in Eastern Europe were to be maintained. He perceived the French, the Russians, and the Czechs as obstructionists because of their intransigence on the issue. According to Lothian, Europe would remain unsettled if Austria and Danzig were not given over to Germany.

I am more confident than some that once Germany is given justice and equality in the full sense of these words there can be twenty-five years' peace in the world... Once adjustment from the Treaty of Versailles position in favour of German had been made I think there is a good chance of lasting peace and of the cessation of the competition on armaments in favour of economic reconstruction.⁵³

On April 11 of the same year, Lord Halifax, in supporting concessions to Germany, stressed that it was of the "greatest importance that every effort should be made by the Czechoslovak Government to reach a settlement of the German minority problem," and that it should be done "by direct negotiation with Herr Henlein."⁵⁴ Konrad Henlein, a leading Sudeten German politician, had just told the Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya six days earlier that "Whatever the Czech government might offer, he would always raise still higher demands... he wanted to sabotage an

⁵² Letter from Lord Lothian to the Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden, June 3, 1936.

⁵³ J.R.M. Butler, *Lord Lothian, Philip Kerr, 1882-1940* (MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1960), 361.

⁵⁴ *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, vol. 1 (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1949), 142.

understanding by all means because this was the only method to blow up Czechoslovakia quickly.”⁵⁵

In hindsight, Britain’s appeasement strategy⁵⁶ appears naïve or irrational, but historians have disagreed as to why Chamberlain chose to appease Germany. However, before questioning the reasons behind Chamberlain’s approach to Germany, it is important to first step back and consider appeasement as a political tool. The historian Paul Kennedy asserts that appeasement was “the policy of settling international quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly very dangerous. It is in essence a positive policy.”⁵⁷

Despite Kennedy’s positive evaluation, since 1939, appeasement as a strategy has garnered a negative connotation. What was once perceived to be a long-accepted necessity to avert war ended up being a word that by June 1939, not even Neville Chamberlain was willing to utter. Dating back to the Napoleonic era, appeasement was a preferred option for British policy makers if the national interest were not at stake.⁵⁸ Britain relied on free trade and believed that prosperity was beneficial for business. It was pragmatic to avoid war against other industrialized states.⁵⁹

Despite its perceived benefits, the strategy failed to prevent the decline and fall of the British Empire, and appeasement during the interwar period seemed to support one-sided concessions to Hitler. In describing Chamberlain’s decision in promoting the strategy, German Social Democrat Friedrich Kellner wrote that, “Mr. Chamberlain has laid down his office at last. With that, an unbelievably sad dunce has disappeared for good. Now the Nazi folk with their burned-out brains will finally be shown what it means to make an enemy of the whole world. It will cost many sacrifices

⁵⁵ Neville Chamberlain Papers, 18/1/1042, Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, March 20, 1938.

⁵⁶ Policy refers to “ends,” while strategy refers to “means.”

⁵⁷ Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 16.

⁵⁸ Robert Cole, *A. J. P. Taylor: The Traitor Within the Gates* (Springer, 1993), 113.

⁵⁹ Paul Kennedy, “A Time to Appear,” *The National Interest*, 108 (2010), p. 8-9.

before reason, coming out of a better past, slowly begins to make an impact again.”⁶⁰

Kellner’s conclusion on Chamberlain’s decision emphasizes a historical evaluation on Chamberlain and why he chose to conciliate Germany. However, there are three schools of thought regarding Britain’s appeasement strategy. The first is a Traditionalist approach that argues, along with Kellner, that appeasement was a pathology that reflected the foolish decisions that British leaders, such as Chamberlain, made during this time. The second is a Revisionist approach that argues that appeasement was strategically sound, that Britain was not economically or militarily prepared for a war with Germany. The third is a Counter-Revisionist approach that asserts that Chamberlain was not cornered into applying an appeasement strategy, but that he had other alternatives and options available to him.

Traditionalist School

Friedrich Kellner noted in his diary in June 1940 that, “In my opinion, there was only one man among the opponents (to Nazis) who recognized the danger, and that was Churchill.”⁶¹ Churchill would have agreed. Baldwin once stated that Churchill would “make a drum out of his mother’s skin if he could use it to sound his own praise.”⁶² And from Churchill’s approximations as stated in his work *The Gathering Storm*, “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.”⁶³ Neither history nor Churchill extended such a consideration to Chamberlain.

Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm* and *Guilty Men* written by Cato (a collective pseudonym for Peter Howard, Michael Foot, and Frank Owen) adopt a Traditionalist view. Both argue that appeasement resulted from the short-sightedness of certain men in power, such as Neville Chamberlain, Stanley Baldwin, and Lord Halifax. Churchill claimed that appeasement was based on a “long series of miscalculations, and misjudgment of men

⁶⁰ Friedrich Kellner, Diary entry for May 11, 1940, *Vernebelt, verdunkelt sind alle Hirne: Tagebucher 1939-1945*, vol. 1, ed. Sascha Feuchert (Wallstein Verlag, 2001), 71.

⁶¹ Friedrich Kellner, Diary entry for June 14, 1940, *Vernebelt, verdunkelt sind alle Hirne*, vol. 1, p. 75.

⁶² Piers Brendon, *Winston Churchill: A Biography* (Harper & Row, 1984), 87.

⁶³ R. Gerald Hughes, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (A&C Black, 2014), 7.

and facts,”⁶⁴ and led to a strategy tantamount to the “complete surrender of the Western Democracies to the Nazi threat of force.”⁶⁵

Cato’s conclusion is even more condemning. According to the authors:

One final and absolute guarantee is still imperatively demanded by a people determined to resist and conquer; namely, that the men who are now repairing the breaches in our walls should not carry along with them those who let the walls fall into ruin.⁶⁶

Guilty Men was a passionate expression of contempt for Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement strategy. When it was published on July 5, 1940, it became a popular, divisive polemic.⁶⁷ Despite the success of the book, it is erratic and sarcastic in tone, and it was intended as character assassination. Like many of the Traditionalists, the popularity of *Guilty Men* was that it spoke clearly to a public in search for explanations. That is why the text declares, “Let the guilty men retire, then, of their own volition, and so make an essential contribution to the victory upon which all are implacably resolved.”⁶⁸ Cato’s work is an indictment. It accuses the Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain administrations of miscalculation, deception, and incompetence.

Accusations of connecting appeasement to Nazi sympathy within the British parliament is argued by Simon Haxey when he stated, “what are we to think of the promises of Conservative leaders to defend us against the encroachments of Fascism, when they cannot even exclude Fascists from among their members of Parliament.”⁶⁹ Also in 1939, the author and journalist Steven Macgregor contended that Chamberlain’s disastrous foreign policy arrangement with Hitler resulted from the influence of privileged elites in the Conservative Party.⁷⁰

Exactly who these Nazi sympathizers were, as asserted by Haxey and Macgregor, remains unclear. Regardless, there remained a strong fascist cohort within Britain during the interwar period, and much of Hitler’s

⁶⁴ Winston Churchill, *The Gather Storm* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), 293.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶⁶ Cato, *Guilty Men* (Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1940), 110.

⁶⁷ Michael Foot, *Another Heart and Other Pulses: The Alternative to the Thatcher Society* (London, 1984), 319.

⁶⁸ Cato, *Guilty Men* (Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1940), 110.

⁶⁹ Simon Haxey, *England’s Money Lords, Tory M.P.* (Harrison Hilton Books, 1939), 24.

⁷⁰ Steven Macgregor, *Truth and Mr. Chamberlain* (Fore Publications, Ltd., 1939), 13.

supporters in Britain were elites. Influential British fascists, such as Oswald Mosley, who founded the British Union of Fascists,⁷¹ and Unity Mitford, a British socialite who was enamored with Hitler,⁷² were both staunchly active in British politics and the elite social scene. But both were vocal supporters of fascism and Hitler, while those being accused by Haxey and Macgregor were not.

Both Haxey and Macgregor constructed their accusations eighteen months after the Munich Agreement was concluded on September 30, 1938. Much of their criticism can be attributed to a self-serving political attack on Chamberlain. However, after the Munich Conference, several other critical accounts of Chamberlain and appeasement raised significant concerns.

The British political activist and historian R.W. Seton-Watson saw appeasement as a movement toward the erosion of liberties in Britain. He stated that, "Most of all it is necessary to protest against the totalitarian tendencies inside our own government, which lead the P.M. himself to accuse anyone who dares to criticize his policy, of 'fouling his own nest,' and to unite with the Nazis in denouncing as war-mongers, and 'war-at-any-price men' men who have been his close colleagues in the past and might in the future be called to replace him."⁷³

Seton-Watson also believed that Chamberlain's hope that Hitler could be reasoned with was illusory, and that appeasement was simply the application of a naïve "good faith." He also thought that:

Appeasement... is unfortunately a phrase that is vague and open to miscalculation, for it does face up to the fundamental issue, that peace can neither be attained by yielding to dictation nor by suppression of awkward facts. We must first have the certainty that the State with which we are bargaining respects law, order, and justice at home, and in the foreign sphere puts the Rule of Law above the Rule of Force.⁷⁴

For Seton-Watson, there existed a middle course between surrender and aggression, and Chamberlain's blunder was that he failed to provide a clear definition of aims or a stern warning to Hitler. But as will be demonstrated, Chamberlain did clearly communicate with Hitler, via Halifax, and Hitler

⁷¹ Oswald Mosley, *My Life* (Black House Publishing Ltd; Illustrated edition, 2014).

⁷² David R.L. Litchfield, *Hitler's Valkyrie: The Uncensored Biography of Unity Mitford* (The History Press; First Edition, 2014).

⁷³ R.W. Seton-Watson, *From Munich to Danzig* (Methuen & Company Ltd., 1939), xi.

⁷⁴ Seton-Watson, *From Munich to Danzig*, 169.