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POLICY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

C. J. BARTLETT

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In loving memory of my wife, Shirley

INTRODUCTION

JAMES JOLL has suggested that we may have to resign ourselves to a 'kind of two tier history' – at one level 'the broad lines of social and economic development', at the other 'the decisions of individual leaders' which might profoundly affect the course of events in the shorter term, or perhaps even for a decade or two. In recent years the first level has begun to attract increasing attention from students of British foreign policy, a development exemplified in two thought-provoking books, *The Realities behind Diplomacy* by Paul Kennedy, and yet more radically by Bernard Porter in *Britain, Europe and the World*. At the same time controversy has continued to flourish among scholars over the minutiae of decision-making, so that the detailed conduct of British foreign policy during the years leading up to both world wars, in the Cold War, and in Britain's post-war relations with the United States, Western Europe and Afro-Asia has all been subject to examination, re-examination and criticism from widely differing angles and points of view.

Various approaches to the study of British foreign policy in the twentieth century are thus feasible, and each is replete with controversy. The present work is deliberately selective, with a definite bias towards high politics, or the more traditional approach. For Joll's first 'tier' the reader should turn initially for more detailed analysis to Kennedy and Porter, though any study directed at the second 'tier' must of necessity draw upon their work and that of the many scholars who have begun to

deepen our knowledge of the influence of domestic politics and of diverse social and economic forces upon the policy-makers. No analysis of the controversies surrounding British foreign policy-making is possible without reference to the varied constraints and pressures to which those who took the crucial decisions were subjected, and only by so doing can one begin to suggest answers to questions on their range of choice and, within that range of choice, the appropriateness of their responses and subsequent conduct. By so doing it may be possible to chart a course between the conflicting currents represented by such scholars as Keith Wilson and Bernard Porter. Where the latter sees little freedom of action, arguing for instance that there was little that Sir Edward Grey could have done to alter the course of events leading to 1914, Wilson retorts: 'There was no inevitability about the content of British foreign policy. Nothing need have been as it was. There were always alternatives. There always are.'¹

Those with experience of authority at the highest level have sometimes commented on the extent to which the power at their disposal fell short of their eager expectations as they climbed the 'greasy pole'. As early as 1895 Lord Salisbury commented: 'Governments can do so little and prevent so little nowadays. Power has passed from the hands of the statesman, but I should be very much puzzled to say into whose hands it has passed.' Some sixty years later Anthony Sampson embarked upon a search for 'the sources of power', analysing in the process individuals as well as institutions. He concluded that 'the rulers' were not to be found at the centre of a solar system. Indeed there was no real centre, only 'a loose confederation of institutions . . . compounded not so much of hard round balls of material advantage, as of vague clouds of moods and feelings'. He discovered muddle rather than order, with means often receiving more attention than ends. Yet he still reached the interesting conclusion that 'in the age of the common man . . . much of the history of our time has been forged by a handful of men'.²

Christopher Thorne takes one of the most controversial examples of British policy-making in this century – the era of appeasement in the 1930s – and suggests that scholars may have

gone too far in substituting 'helpless men' for 'guilty men'. In a more positive context Kenneth Bourne reminds us that policies 'have by their nature their own momentum and the paths of power and glory often tend to diverge. In such circumstances the direct and usually sudden inspirational intervention of a statesman . . . alone seems able to restore the harmony of purpose.'³ Naturally one cannot separate the statesman from his times, and it has been argued, for instance, that even Lord Salisbury, so often acclaimed for his intellectual and detached approach to foreign policy, was greatly influenced by his personal identification with the interest of the landed aristocracy in low taxation. This concern reinforced his preference for a peaceful and relatively inexpensive foreign policy.⁴ On influences of this kind, and on *innenpolitik* in general Zara Steiner remarks that almost everything begins to seem relevant. Yet in the end, whatever the vulnerability of those in authority to outside pressures, their subjective responses to and their selective interpretations of the information before them are crucial. The personal element in decision-making cannot be ignored even when the constraining forces may seem overwhelming.

While it may seem improbable that alternative decisions and strategies could have significantly lessened Britain's relative decline in the world of the twentieth century, the courses of action – and inaction – chosen by Britain profoundly influenced developments in Europe and many other parts of the world. This was especially true of the first half of this century, but remained so to no small extent thereafter. With so much at stake British foreign policy therefore should be approached in neither too deterministic a frame of mind nor with exaggerated notions of what the British might have been able to achieve if only they had acted with sufficient vigour and imagination.