RIBBENTROP, JOACHIM VON

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Relations with Britain

The first principle of his political career had been to promote understanding between England and Germany, he had never lost sight of this even in the years of war. He had not gone to Hitler as a party member; he could recall having at first viewed his ascendancy with misgiving. He had been sent for by Hitler as a business man of wide international acquaintance and a thorough knowledge of Britain. It was perhaps hard to believe in the light of events, that the Fuehrer's fondest dream had been of an Anglo-German alliance in the service of which he had been prepared to maintain a force of twelve divisions for the defence of any part of the British Empire. Such were the Fuehrer's sentiments that he was the more deeply hurt when Britain seemed to mistrust his motives and to obstruct his plans.

Anglo-German alliance had been his goal when he persuaded Hitler to send him as Ambassador to London in 1936; the year before he had helped to conclude the naval agreement and had almost arranged a visit of the Fuehrer to Mr. Baldwin at Chequers. His mission was marred from the outset by his part in the Non-Intervention Committee where British and German viewpoints often conflicted. Germany had not been under any obligation to intervene in Spain although Franco had asked for support, nor had the Fuehrer any feeling for the Spaniards, or any thought of trying out his forces and their weapons; it was rather that the principles at stake had spelled a challenge to his faith. What with one thing and another Anglo-German relations had regretably worsened during Ribbentrop's term of office, but his efforts to win sympathy among distinguished people, including Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and King Edward VIII for National Socialist conceptions had not been altogether unsuccessful.

The Foreign Minister

In 1938 he became Foreign Minister. Von Neurath had resigned on February 4th, and his appointment dated from the same day. On February 5th, he attended his first and the last full meeting of the German Cabinet to listen to a discourse by the Fuehrer on the Blomberg affair. Ribbentrop's broad instructions as Foreign Minister were to settle the problems of Austria, of Memel, Danzig and the Corridor, and of other German minorities, all by peaceful means. As it had turned out, however, all such questions had been handled by Hitler himself as the State-in-person and not through the Foreign Office.

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In March, 1939, he had been ordered out of the blue to warn the Czech Minister that the maltreatment of Germans in Czechoslovakia must cease at once; he had invited Hacha to Berlin. He had endeavoured to reason with the Fuehrer on the subject and had recalled in vain the undertakings of the Munich agreement, but Hitler had been quite convinced that this was none of Britain's business and was blind to everything except the perils of his fellow-countrymen. It is doubtful whether Ribbentrop himself had much conception of the significance of the march on Prague. He was handed a proclamation composed and signed by Hitler to read over the wireless when they got there. If the Fuehrer's feelings towards England had undergone a change it could be dated from his speech at Saarbrucken in October, 1938.

The Outbreak of War

Negotiations with Poland for a settlement of outstanding questions had led to nothing. Britain had ratified the Polish pact. The Fuehrer drafted his last word in the matter, a very fair proposal as it seemed to Ribbentrop--with instructions to inform the British Ambassador as a matter of courtesy (Sir Neville Henderson had somewhat distorted his account of this interview). On the eve of the campaign he unequivocally advised the Fuehrer of the certainty of British intervention. His own representations and Mussolini's threatened denunciation of the Italian alliance had stayed the attack on Poland for some sixteen hours. In the night, however, perhaps because intelligence of more atrocities came in the Fuehrer changed his mind and revoked the call to halt of the previous day. Both men were deeply distressed.

The Auswaertigen Amt in Wartime

Life for the Foreign Minister of the Third Reich had never been all beer and skittles. In wartime it was all he could do to keep the Ministry afloat. The Army and the Party eclipsed his importance and trespassed on his territory while Hitler personified the state in all foreign affairs. He was neither taken into operations nor given intelligence. Military attaches and Party representatives had higher status abroad than diplomatic missions. In so far as he had some say in neutral countries he was in perpetual trouble owing to the ill-advised and unheralded measures of party commissioners in neighboring occupied territory and the excesses of the SS. Five major crisis in Stockholm on Norwegian and Danish questions were a case in point. He had had 48 hours notice of the invasion of Norway and thereafter while he was in negotiations with the King to remain, the Party were deposing him in Oslo and the Army were bounding him out of the country. In Holland

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there was a Reich commissioner, Military commanders had charge in the Balkans. Abetz had little or no authority in France, in Denmark things had been somewhat easier until, on British initiative the resistance movement had grown up. Equally in Poland the status of his attache was no more than that of a liaison officer and the Foreign Office had no more knowledge of the extermination of the Poles than of conditions in German concentration camps. In this latter context he had at one time known Himmler well and judged him to be a man of the highest ideals whom he conceives at a later stage to have been corrupted by power. "Of all the corruption the most malodorous is rotten lilies." He should not however consider that all the SS are criminals--the SS regiments became the German Brigade of Guards (an effective protest was here interjected) his own son fought bravely.

Frank, he thought was a good man who had fought for years with Himmler and the S.D. for normal conditions of law and order in Poland.

Ribbentrop had on one occasion heard of bad conditions in the Maidenek camp in the East and he referred the matter both to Hitler and to Himmler. He had proposed the repatriation of Hungarian Jews with Swiss or Swedish passports. This, he thinks, was carried out. In so far as they were negotiated by the International Red Cross the questions concerning prisoners of war were left within his competence and he was finally able to influence the Fuehrer to revoke the shackling order. In the last months of war the Party men around Hitler had urged the murder of Allied prisoners in reprisal for civilian casualties in bombed cities; the raid on Dresden had pretty well determined Hitler to proceed with this. In his last argument with his chief Ribbentrop could not be certain whether he had been successful in dissuading him or not.

Another unsatisfactory aspect of the Foreign Minister's post in Germany was Goebbels who, with the full support unfortunately of the Fuehrer, would brook no influence in his propaganda and Ribbentrop could get no say in it whether at home or abroad. Some press attaches were under his control but quite unable to work except within the directives of the Propaganda Ministry and its representatives.

The persecution of Jews and of the churches had greatly complicated the maintenance of good foreign relations, and missions abroad had been sabotaged by the Auslandsorganization--he does not think that any survivors of the latter body have any influence or status now.

Ribbentrop

Ribbentrop and his Ministry had been in fact under constant fire from the Party; the appointment of Stoengracht as under-secretary, a former Stahlhelm and an SA man but safe au fond, had been a sop to this antagonism.

Relations with Russia

Relations with Russia were dominated from the beginning to the end by a mystical and instinctive belief of the Fuehrer in his predestined mission to extirpate Bolshevism. The suggestion that he bore this banner only as a cloak for marauding designs on productive Russian soil for the material aggrandizement of Germany was rejected. That Ribbentrop had been allowed to conclude a non-aggression pact with Russia in 1939, he attributed to the influence he had at that time been able to exert over the Fuehrer, coupled with Hitler's own intense desire to regulate the Polish question without war, and the belief or hope of both of them, that the pact in question would act as a deterrent to British intervention.

He, Ribbentrop, had always hoped to build a bridge between the national socialist conception of the world and that of Bolshevism which he had never thought able to survive in the long run, but his negotiations in Moscow had not been easy; it was to be expected that zones of interest in Poland had to be agreed upon in case of war, but Russia's claims on Finland were less palatable.

Although it seriously shook some party circles Ribbentrop had been warmly congratulated on the conclusion of the pact. But whether under the influence of those circles, or of his own volition, the Fuehrer was never really reconciled to Russia; and in any case, M. Molotov's visit to Berlin in November, 1940, was not an outstanding success. Again the Russians had opened their mouths very wide -- their claims had, in fact, been exorbitant, but he must not discuss one ally with another under present circumstances. The Russians had indeed struck a hard bargain, but commercially the trade agreement had been beneficial. Throughout the ensuing months, however, the Fuehrer became more and more disgruntled as one piece of disconcerting news followed another.

After the fall of Greece they learned by telegram from Moscow that Russian troops had entered Bukovina. Bessarabia had been an understood thing, but there were important German colonies in Bukovina, Saxons and Swabians of Pure German blood established there for 6 or 700 years. Meanwhile the Gestapo reported that the Russian trade delegation in Berlin numbered no less than 960 officials whose emissaries were disseminating communistic doctrine in the German factories they had been

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allowed to inspect. Russian orders of war material in Germany showed a distinct preference for offensive weapons, heavy artillery and naval guns over the defensive armament that Germany proposed to deliver. A German emissary to Russia had visited Dnieperpetrovsk and other manufacturing centers and had returned with most alarming tales of Russia's growing war potential. On the military side, Russian concentrations had been reported on the East Prussian border; Hitler had recalled too that Mr. Churchill in a recent public statement had hinted darkly at impending developments in the East. He was not going to wait, he said, for the Russians to attack him. For his part, Ribbentrop was convinced that war with Russia would prove fatal, and equally concerned perhaps to see his diplomatic masterpiece lightly discarded. He seems to have taken quite a strong stand on this issue, but when he resigned or tried to, Hitler was so angry and upset that he became ill and Ribbentrop had then to promise not to oppose him again. However disastrous, Hitler would always have said that war with Russia was inevitable. Ministerial resignations, says Ribbentrop, were not possible in practice under the totalitarian set-up of the Third Reich. He was most anxious that this should be appreciated. It was considered essential to present to the public a picture of a united ministerial front.

Hitler and Ribbentrop had always thought it possible that Britain, if not supporting an attack on Russia, would at least be quite content to see the Russians beaten, and after their defeat would be ready to come to terms on a "spheres of influence" basis.

The Far East

Good relations with Japan had been laid down as a policy by the Fuehrer in 1935 or 1936 as a preventive measure against the menace of Bolshevism and had led to the Anti-Comintern pact. In 1937 a defensive alliance on the same lines had been concluded with Italy and finally the three power pact had materialised under the direction of Ribbentrop in 1940. The immediate purpose of this had been to neutralise America, and, incidentally, to make England more amenable to reason. The attack on Pearl Harbor had come as a great surprise to both Hitler and him -- certainly the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin had known nothing of it. Germany had not been obliged to associate herself with the Japanese in war against the United States as the pact was a defensive alliance, and the Japanese were themselves the aggressors and Germany had not, he felt sure, formally declared war on America; he had limited himself to breaking off relations on Hitler's instructions, which he was prepared to admit was in any case a distinction without a difference.

Hitler.

Hitler had considered the matter carefully and he felt that unless he made a gesture of friendship to the Japanese the pact would have become politically dead. He anticipated moreover that the United States would sooner or later declare war on Germany and the Americans were already sinking German submarines. Ribbentrop himself had not underestimated the American war potential, but his influence was not what it had been, the army moreover seemed at that time invincible, and he always suspected that the Fuehrer had too much confidence in the submarine weapon.

Peacefeelers

Shortly after Dunkirk Hitler had discussed with Ribbentrop peace proposals to Great Britain: his first consideration had been to conserve the prestige of Britain at all costs, the return to Germany of one or two colonies would have been required but against that a military alliance would have been concluded which would have had as its object the preservation of the Empire intact. Outspoken rejection of his advances at that time had greatly disappointed Hitler and himself, and the Fuehrer had never raised the question again. The prisoner seemed pained at the suggestion that England could not come to terms with crooks.

A few days after the Allied landing in North Africa, Ribbentrop had suggested to Hitler an offer of peace to Stalin with far reaching concessions and the return of most, if not all, of German occupied Russia. Had these advances been favorably received he would then have approached the western powers. He did not at that time know of the difficulties that the German forces were encountering in Stalingrad, and it seemed to him that although Germany was in a favorable position the situation was potentially most dangerous and this was the psychological moment to make a generous peace offer. Hitler, however, rejected the proposal out of hand without even hearing him out. After the defection of Italy Ribbentrop again broached unsuccessfully the subject of negotiations for peace, and later without Hitler's knowledge, he had sent a man called Mulhausen to Spain to try to contact Mr. Murphy; towards the end of the war he had sent also one Kleist to Stockholm to sound the Russians but without success. At this stage the Fuehrer would not have sanctioned a peace offer, obsessed as he then was with the inexorability of fate. These were all the peace feelers that Ribbentrop knew about.

The Japanese had urged him often to patch it up with Russia at all cost, and had offered their services as intermediaries, but nothing concrete had ever come of it, although he had a suspicion that they tried to do something off their own bat.

Ribbentrop's

Ribbentrop's successive failures to bring about peace are evidently preying on his mind today whether with a view to presenting himself in the character of a pinnioned angel of peace or because Germany might thus have been saved from this present catastrophe.

The End

The full extent of the catastrophe had been appreciated by Hitler when they last walked together in the Chancellory garden late in April. He wrote, he says, an account of their last conversation when he was taken into custody by 21st Army Group. The Fuehrer had made a stormy plea for the preservation of the sovereign states intact, he was inclined to regard the impending disaster as confirmation of all he had ever said about the menace of Bolshevism and there was a lot about fate.