

# **The Foreign Office and Finland 1938–1940**

Diplomatic sideshow

Craig Gerrard

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# THE FOREIGN OFFICE AND FINLAND 1938–1940

*The Foreign Office and Finland 1938–1940* looks at the ways in which the Northern Department of the Foreign Office approached matters pertaining to Finland in the years 1938–1940, concentrating on the particular issues of the proposed refortification of the Åland Islands, Finnish rearmament and aid to Finland during the Winter War with the Soviet Union. At the beginning of this period, the Northern Department officials aimed at giving support to Finland while, at the same time, attempting to create an environment where Finland and the Soviet Union could reach agreement, thus keeping Finland out of the German sphere of influence. Their belief that the security interests of the USSR must be considered when dealing with Finland changed after the Soviet invasion of Finland at the end of November 1939. From this point on, the ability of the Northern Department officials to influence policy towards Finland declined, as the Cabinet became more interested in the situation. Nevertheless, Laurence Collier, the head of the department and his associates, continued to recommend particular forms of action, and their ideas were frequently at odds with what was being decided by the government. Their recommendations for military intervention against the USSR went far beyond what the government was prepared to consider.

**Craig Gerrard** is law librarian and legal researcher at Weightmans, a national law firm. He was awarded his PhD by the University of Leeds in 2001.

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FRANK CASS  
LONDON • NEW YORK

First published 2005 by Frank Cass 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Frank Cass 270 Madison Ave, New York,  
NY 10016

*Frank Cass is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of  
thousands of eBooks please go to <http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/>.

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by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including  
photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission  
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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data* A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data* Gerrard, Craig, 1960– The Foreign Office  
and Finland, 1938–1940: diplomatic sideshow/ Craig Gerrard. p. cm.—(Cass contemporary  
security studies series) Includes bibliographical references and index 1. Great Britain—Foreign  
relations—Finland. 2. Great Britain—Foreign relations—1936–1945. 3. Finland—Foreign  
relations—Great Britain. 4. Finland—Foreign relations—1917–1945. I. Title. II. Series.  
DA47.9.F5G47 2005

ISBN 0-203-32276-2 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-35003-4 (Print Edition)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a lot of people I need to thank for the completion of this book and the PhD thesis which preceded it. I spent a lot of time in the Public Record Office and the staff there were always helpful and friendly. I also visited the Ulkoasiainministerio Arkivisto in Helsinki and am particularly grateful to Petriina Chen who worked there at the time.

Being a librarian myself, I am very well disposed towards libraries and the people who work in them. There were many libraries which I used in the course of my research. The staff at the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds should receive special thanks for all the help they gave me. The staff of the Sydney Jones library and the Law Faculty libraries at the University of Liverpool, of the various libraries of Liverpool John Moores University, of the library at Liverpool Hope University College, and of Liverpool City Libraries were also of immeasurable help to me. The work that they do to keep their institutions running smoothly and efficiently is constantly underrated. The staff at the Finnish Institute in Eagle Street, London, have also been very kind and helpful.

I became interested in history at a very young age, thanks to my parents buying me Ladybird books on famous historical figures such as William the Conqueror and Oliver Cromwell, and taking me on visits to castles, museums and other places of historical interest. This interest continued at school and there were two teachers at Bridgefield Comprehensive in Halewood, Merseyside, who helped to develop it, Mr Fisher and Mr Evans. A great deal of what they said has stayed with me and helped me in addressing my work. I was able to develop research skills to pursue historical enquiry thanks to the staff of the Library and Information School at Liverpool John Moores University. What I learned there has helped me in my paid employment as a librarian and researcher at a law firm and in my research which went towards my MA, my PhD and this book. My MA, which I completed as a part-time student at Liverpool Hope University College, was also a necessary step towards the creation of this book, giving me the confidence to go further and enrol for a PhD, which again I undertook on a part-time basis. John Davies and Dr Mike Hopkins were stimulating teachers and vital in encouraging me to continue my research. I completed my PhD at the School of Politics and Information Studies of the University of Leeds and would like to thank Dr Clive Jones for the help he gave me in submitting my PhD and to Ms Caroline Wise, the Administrative Officer for the School. Most of all I would like to thank Professor Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, now of the University of Sheffield, for being the best supervisor I could possibly have hoped for. Other academics that I need to thank for their comments and advice are Dr Paul Doerr of the University of Acadia, Canada, Professor Glyn Stone of the University of the West of England, Professor Jeffrey Richards of the University of Lancaster and Professor Patrick

Salmon of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I am also grateful to Tom Snow for the help he gave me. I would also like to thank everybody at Frank Cass who has helped in the production of this book, and Susan Dunsmore who checked the manuscript and spotted my mistakes.

My work at Weightmans Solicitors has also been of benefit in undertaking the research for this book. Working in a legal environment has helped to stimulate me greatly and understand some of the legal issues which were involved in the relations between Great Britain and Finland. Conducting research at the same time as holding down a full-time job is not easy, but working in the environment that I did made it easier. I would like to thank all the partners and all the staff at Weightmans, past and present, particularly my colleagues in the Best Practice team, Laura Wilkin and Andrea Furmedge. I also need to thank Mark Forman, solicitor, for his legal advice.

My family have always been very important to me. I mentioned earlier that my parents first encouraged my interest in history and I could not have completed any of my education, let alone a PhD, without them. My twin brother, Grant, is as interested in history as I am and we talk about various historical topics as much as we do about football or rugby league. My sister, Kirsty, died in 1999, but would have loved to see this book. Finally, my wife Helen has been extremely supportive during all the years of mixing research with work, taking holidays to visit archives, and working on chapters of my thesis and book when we should have been out enjoying ourselves. Helen is an English teacher and knows more than enough to complete a doctorate in educational studies, something which I hope the publication of this book will encourage her to do. Maybe then I will be able to help her as much as she has helped me.

Craig Gerrard  
Liverpool  
September 2004

# INTRODUCTION

The Second World War (1939–45) and the period leading up to it were a time of great characters, responsible for events of incalculable importance. The decisions made by these people, Churchill, Stalin, and Hitler among them, shaped the course which world events took, the effects of which are still being felt today. Moreover, their actions, and indeed, perhaps most importantly, their image, still exert a strong hold on the popular imagination decades after their death. Churchillian literature shows no sign of abating, and his victory in the ‘Great Britons’ contest of 2003 has installed him even more firmly as Great Britain’s leading political hero, as well as being identified as Britain’s most potent historical myth.<sup>1</sup> Stalin, or the adjective derived from his name, is now used derogatively by the public when referring to any severe and repressive measure, from traffic wardens to bleak housing estates. It seems that a whole industry has grown up around television documentaries about Hitler. These leaders, and their immediate associates, played a critical part in the outbreak and outcome of the war. The decisions taken and the formulation of policy below this level will always hold less immediate attraction to the public, or even to historians. A.J.P. Taylor’s remark that a diplomatic history of Britain’s role in the early Cold War period was ‘at best...a competent précis of “what one clerk said to another clerk” during a period when great events were happening a long way from Whitehall’<sup>2</sup> was made with the intention of reducing the ‘clerks’ to the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. If this assessment were true, then there would be little or no value in the hundreds, if not thousands, of works on diplomatic history, including this one. The ‘clerks’, having no effect on or input into the great events happening in the world would be no more than a distraction, possibly an amusing one, but probably an unnecessary one.

This book owes a great deal to those previous works in which clerks engaged in conversations with each other, and naturally places a greater importance on their actions. Rather than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, these clerks can, at the very least, be seen as the girl in Thompson and Heneker’s sublime ‘Thing-ummy-bob’.<sup>3</sup> This is the most basic defence of a study of their roles. In reality, the clerks could be influential in the construction of many policies. This book is concerned with the policy of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office towards Finland; in other words, it is a study of a small section of a single government department towards a very small country at a time when the world’s attention was occupied with other matters. Put another way, it is the story of how a small department conducted policy in an area which was of complete indifference to the rest of government, and how they attempted to influence policy once the rest of government had decided that this area might, after all, have some significance.

Finland forms the main focus for examining the perspectives and actions of Northern Department officials, but clearly the diplomats concerned were conscious of the developing political situation in Europe and the effect that the policies that they advocated would have in Berlin and in Moscow. Viewed in this manner, the first five chapters of the book deal with the approach of the Second World War and the different entanglements that the European nations found themselves in once hostilities had started. Of course, events involving Finland may seem very insignificant when considering the origins of the war itself, but the officials charged with formulating policy towards Finland and the Baltic area had to attempt to further British interests against a background of a war that seemed inevitable. Britain and Finland enjoyed friendly relations but the possible Soviet alliance in the forthcoming war with Germany, which so many in the Northern Department coveted, was the main stumbling block when it came to convincing Finland to resist the temptation of entering into the German orbit of influence. The problems of pursuing incompatible policies with the intention of securing a perfect outcome are illustrated in these opening chapters.

The second half of the book details the changes in Northern Department thinking once the Soviet Union had invaded Finland with a view to installing a pro-Soviet government there. It was at this point that Northern Department influence in formulating policy towards Finland decreased because the invasion turned Finland from a country of only very peripheral interest to one of salient importance in the eyes of the British Cabinet. From 30 November 1939 onwards, British policy towards Finland was governed by the Cabinet and the influence of the Northern Department decreased commensurately. This did not mean that the Department ceased to have any importance and it certainly did not mean that radical alternatives to government policy were not advocated. The closing chapters demonstrate clearly how Laurence Collier and Fitzroy Maclean, the two leading members of the Northern Department, diverged in outlook from their superiors. The narrator in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Less Travelled*, concluded that once a path is taken and 'way leads on to way', then no return is possible, yet the choice of paths was nevertheless there initially. Collier and Maclean advocated a different path to the one which ultimately 'made all the difference', and their perspectives, especially given the respect with which Collier is regarded by historians for his pre-war disdain for appeasement and Maclean's post-war fame, are surely worthy of attention.

Every historical narrative must have a starting point. There were, of course, many antecedents to the events with which this particular story begins. However, the remilitarisation of the Åland Islands has been chosen because it represented an attempt to interfere with the strategic balance in the Baltic region and was of vital interest to both Germany and the Soviet Union at a time when international relations appeared to be deteriorating so fast that war, at some point in the near future, was a distinct likelihood. The impact that the plans could have on these states was something that the diplomats at the Northern Department felt unable to ignore. Furthermore, as the initiator of the archipelago's demilitarised status in 1856, and as a guarantor of the reaffirmed status following the League of Nations' decision in 1921, Britain had an obligation to monitor matters in the area. The decision by the Finns and the Swedes to begin military preparations on the islands was taken because of the fear of war and the need to protect their own integrity should it come to that. War did break out, and Finland, at least, was unable to avoid becoming a victim of the momentum that all wars bring with them. The

book ends with the termination of the Finno-Soviet ‘Winter War’, and the acknowledgement within the Northern Department and the Foreign Office that, whatever policies Britain pursued towards Finland, they could never be an important element in the future conduct of Britain’s war with Germany or in Britain’s foreign policy towards the USSR.

British and French policy towards Finland at the time of the Winter War has not been the most investigated aspect of the Second World War period, but major work on the topic has been produced and comprehensively documented by Max Jakobson<sup>4</sup> and Jukka Nevakivi.<sup>5</sup> Jakobson’s work is still essential reading, despite its publication before the opening of the British archives, while Nevakivi has benefited from access to documentary materials. Nevakivi’s work is mainly concerned with the decisions made at the highest political levels; and while he acknowledges the contribution of Laurence Collier and his associates in the early part of the book, their presence is not felt in his later chapters. Nevakivi deals expertly with the policies pursued by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and his leading adviser, Alexander Cadogan. In contrast, this present study is more concerned with the arguments which were taking place, and, indeed, the policy which was being formulated, further down the line. The PhD theses by Patrick Salmon<sup>6</sup> and Paul Doerr<sup>7</sup> both influenced the writing of this present work but, again, the focus of the present work differs from that of Salmon and Doerr. Salmon’s concern is with British policy towards the Nordic countries as a whole, not just Finland, while Doerr’s examination of the Northern Department is concerned with its relationship with and attitude to the Soviet Union—a subject of some concern to the present book but certainly not identical.

Policies pursued and policies recommended or suggested are all a part of this book. It is hoped that it can convey both the influence of a section of the Foreign Office at a time when the attention of the government was diverted elsewhere, and the limits of that influence when the government eventually did become involved, towards a small country, at a time of deep international crisis.

## 1938: BRITISH POLICY, THE ÅLAND ISLANDS AND FINNISH REARMAMENT

This chapter examines the British response to plans by the Finnish Government and military to fortify the Åland Islands, which lay in the Gulf of Bothnia between Finland and Sweden, and also looks at the British attempts at involvement in the Finnish rearmament programme. On both issues, diplomats working at the Northern Department of the Foreign Office in London aimed to hold or contain German influence and penetration into the northern Baltic area. As will be shown, in the case of the Åland Islands, the means of achieving this goal changed from opposition to refortification to qualified support for the Finnish proposals. At the same time that the British diplomats were pursuing this aim by attempting to convince the Finns that Britain was a better friend than Germany, the British were aware of the problems posed by what might be termed the Soviet dimension and the mutual suspicions which divided Finland and the Soviet Union. This chapter underlines the importance which the Northern Department attached to allaying Soviet fears, and preventing the expansion of German interests in the Baltic. Due to the competing interests of Finland and the USSR, this was not an easy matter, and this chapter illuminates the problems which the Northern Department had to deal with in pursuing this idea.

By the beginning of 1938, it was clear to British policy-makers that Europe was in the middle of a period of extreme tension and danger, with the distinct possibility that war would be the result. Of greatest concern was the fact that Germany had expanded its military influence into the Rhineland and Austria. These were regions which were of natural interest to Germany on ethnic, linguistic and historical grounds. Yet Hitler's actions left open the possibility that territorial demands could be made elsewhere in Europe. The diplomats in the Northern Department were aware that the Baltic was not immune to German penetration and hoped to prevent Britain's political influence and strategic position in the region from deteriorating.

The German *Anschluss* with Austria, continuing Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the widening theatre of Japanese aggression in the Far East, provided sufficient material for more than a few sleepless nights among members of the British Government and policy-making elite during 1938. The disturbing scenario of encroachment by foreign powers into territory which Britain regarded as within its legitimate sphere of influence in Europe, the Mediterranean and the China Sea was enough to contemplate without assigning the status of immediate and pressing concern to

areas outside the limits where Britain could expect to influence events directly. However, lack of proximity to the vital areas of British interest did not mean that states falling into the latter category were dismissed from consideration without comment or consultation, and low priority did not mean no priority. This notion forms the basis for this chapter: how was British policy towards Finland formulated at a time when major events were being decided around the world? To what extent were British and Finnish interests deemed to coincide? Where did Britain perceive Finland's sympathies to lie and how was the prospect of Nordic co-operation viewed? In what ways did London expect to influence Finnish matters? These are questions which matter for four reasons: first, their answers provide some kind of forerunner to the Winter War months of November 1939–March 1940 when Finland and the Nordic area as a whole did attain a position of prominence in British decision-making circles. Second, they introduce and illustrate the problems which arose in the attempt to upgrade a low priority area into an area of high priority (a status which Finland acquired during the Winter War). Third, they demonstrate the desire of the Northern Department to prevent Finland falling into Germany's sphere of influence. Finally, any major revisions of policy which Finland attempted to undertake would inevitably lead to a reaction from the Soviet Union, whom the Northern Department did not wish to offend.

### **British perception of Finland's relations with the Soviet Union**

The two issues in Finnish politics which most interested the British in the late 1930s were those of rearmament and the status of the Åland Islands. These two areas overlapped. Both areas were tied into domains of more general concern in central and northern Europe as a whole. Discussion in policy-making circles (and quite often it got no further than discussion) and decisions implemented, were made against the twin spectres of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia as both these states had an interest in Finland. Until 1918 Finland had been a Grand Duchy of the Tsar's Empire, while Germany had intervened in the Finnish Civil War in March 1918, helping to crush communist insurgents and drive the remnants of the Russian armed forces back to their homeland. The Treaty of Tartu (Dorpat) in 1920 ended hostilities between Finland and their former masters, in which British torpedo boats operating from Finnish waters had attacked Kronstadt. The Treaty gave Finland control of the far northern Petsamo area and thus access to the Arctic but the confirmation of Karelia's status as part of the USSR provided a source of potential conflict which was only eased in summer 1922 when a frontier peace agreement was signed. Karelia was viewed by many Finns as belonging to Finland, and the first Finnish Government had even attempted military action to bring the territory under its jurisdiction. The Treaty defused some of the tension surrounding Karelia. On the surface, relations between Finland and the Soviet Union were relatively calm for the next 17 years.<sup>1</sup> However, despite a non-aggression pact signed between Finland and the USSR in 1932, suspicions remained on both sides of the border. Finland feared that Moscow entertained revanchist claims to its territory, while the Soviet Government, even at this stage, worried about the proximity of Leningrad to the Finnish border and the danger that Peter the Great's capital city would face if Finland were allied to any hostile power. This assessment was not unduly unjustified. The British Minister in Helsinki, Thomas Snow,

observed ‘a hatred and distrust’ of the Soviet Union to be a characteristic of ‘Finnish national sentiment’ and expressed concern that this feeling could lead Finland to side with Germany in a war in which Britain was allied with the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In addition, many ethnic Finns were to be found in the Soviet Republic of Karelia, and the Kremlin was aware of the desire of some in Finland to have them brought under their own sovereignty.

The uneasy relationship between Finland and Moscow posed problems as the international situation deteriorated during the 1930s. By 1938, the threat of a new war in Europe was no longer the figment of a disturbed imagination. The Third German Reich, under Hitler’s guidance, was dismantling the onerous terms of the Treaty of Versailles bit by bit, to the detriment of the geopolitical stability which had existed since 1919. The Soviet Union, encouraged by the success of the first five-year economic plan and concerned by German expansion which threatened to end on the borders of the Ukraine, had begun moves which aimed to bring Finland within its security sphere. In addition, Spain’s civil war, with its unsettling influence in the Mediterranean, dragged on. Europe was in its most unstable position for two decades. This was the daunting background in which the British diplomats and politicians concerned with Finland worked.

In general, diplomatic work can be eased by having a sympathetic partner to work with. It is not unreasonable to expect two nations with favourable views of each other to enjoy good relations and for the work of a great power to be made easier when a small state expresses a welcoming attitude. The presence of conciliatory and compatible perspectives ought to facilitate policies of common interest, or at least of benefit to the stronger power, being undertaken. It would, therefore, be short-sighted to consider British policy carried out in respect to developments in Finland, particularly regarding rearmament and the Ålands, without taking the general view which each nation entertained of the other into consideration.

### **Britain and the new Finnish Government**

The 1937 election had produced a satisfactory result so far as Britain was concerned. The suspected German sympathies of Pehr Evind Svinhufvud, Finland’s first head of state, had been replaced in the presidential office by the more moderate tendencies of Kyosti Kallio. The new President installed the Liberal A.K.Cajander as Prime Minister, who in turn brought fellow Liberal Rudolf Holsti, a noted Anglophile, into his Cabinet as Foreign Minister. Cajander also gave Cabinet representation to Social Democrats, ending the ‘political quarantine’ which had been imposed on them since the end of the civil war.<sup>3</sup> The incorporation of Social Democrats into the government was intended to heal divisions which had existed since the end of the civil war, and also send a message to Moscow that the new government was not dogmatically anti-socialist. Indeed, Holsti, the Foreign Minister, had lost no time in attempting to improve relations with Moscow. All this provided grounds for satisfaction in the Northern Department.

This seemed to present some cause for optimism in Britain regarding future Anglo-Finnish relations as a similarly positive outlook could be applied to the commercial area. By the mid-to-late 1930s trade between Finland and the United Kingdom was in a healthy state. Some 44 per cent of Finnish exports went to Britain, making the UK Finland’s

biggest market by far. At the same time Germany accounted for 12 per cent of Finnish exports and the Soviet Union only 1 per cent. It was particularly gratifying that Britain stood so far ahead of Germany. Furthermore, Finnish goods (principally mechanical and chemical pulp, timber and other wood-based products) maintained high export levels and good profit margins throughout the Depression decade. Transactions in the other direction were not quite so spectacular, but Finland's table of imports was headed by Britain with 19 per cent of the market, just ahead of Germany's 17 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

The conduct of Britain's regular business relations with Finland was handled by the Northern Department of the Foreign Office, with matters only rarely reaching Cabinet level, or even the Foreign Secretary. Laurence Collier headed the department; he was an opponent of appeasement and critical of some of the less democratic tendencies in Finland, notably the semi-fascist Lapua movement of the early 1930s,<sup>5</sup> and he suspected that the Finnish armed forces were inclined to lean towards Germany. Nonetheless, he had great sympathy for the Finns, an emotion which was to be evident in the difficult years which lay ahead.<sup>6</sup> His fears concerning Germany had led him to conclude, as early as 1936, that Finland should be encouraged to establish closer ties with the Scandinavian nations, as a means of safeguarding its territorial integrity against any encroachment by its powerful neighbours, both Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

### The beginning of the Åland Islands debate

It was a question of sovereignty, or rather the rights of a sovereign nation to alter the status of territory under its control, which arose at the beginning of 1938 and tested British wisdom until the eve of war. The Åland Islands, lying in the Gulf of Bothnia between Finland and Sweden, had been awarded to Finland by a decision of the Council of the League of Nations in 1921, despite the fact that the islands were populated by Swedish speakers. At the same time, the League Council recommended 'the conclusion of an international convention to demilitarise and neutralise the archipelago'.<sup>8</sup> When the Convention was signed in October 1921, the signatory powers—Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Great Britain, France and Italy—reaffirmed an 1856 agreement on the demilitarisation of the Ålands, signed by Britain, France and Russia. The successor state to the latter, the USSR, lacking a government which was internationally recognised, was not asked to sign at the time, and indeed refused to do so when given the opportunity in subsequent years.<sup>9</sup> The question of how to respond to proposals to change the status of the islands regarding fortification was one which never interested the British Cabinet and the issue was never discussed at Cabinet level.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, it was regarded as an issue of only peripheral interest, which the Cabinet did not need to waste its time on. This was despite it being an issue which involved the interests of the two greatest powers on the Continent, Germany and the USSR. The Cabinet's indifference meant that the Foreign Office, specifically its Northern Department, was entirely responsible for a matter regarded as being of considerable importance to the security interests of the Soviet Union.

The closing days of 1937 saw press stories in both Finland and Sweden calling for the refortification of the Åland Islands. *Ajan Sunta*, the organ of the Patriotic People's Party,<sup>11</sup> Finland's semi-fascist party, led the way, referring to an article by a Dr Grussner

in a German periodical claiming that such a step would represent the best guarantee of peace in the region. *Aftonbladet*, a Swedish newspaper with suspected Nazi affiliations, went further and reported that a group of Finnish and German officers had landed on the islands and inspected the dismantled forts. Within a fortnight this paper began to agitate for the Swedish Government to bring pressure on Finland to take steps towards establishing a military presence on the Ålands. More seriously, the Swedish newspaper *Stockholms-Tidningen*, believed to have strong contacts with the Swedish Foreign Ministry, began to cautiously advocate refortification.<sup>12</sup> This newspaper interest lacked any official confirmation. In fact, General Oesch, the Chief of the Finnish General Staff, claimed that no plans were under consideration and that while a visit to the islands had taken place, it had only been made with the intention of increasing topographical knowledge and the party had included Captain Moore, the British Naval Adviser to Finland.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of a British representative undermined suggestions that the Finnish armed forces were acting with the connivance of the German authorities. Yet, despite this disclaimer from the military and the silence of the two Nordic governments on the matter, covert talks had indeed been instigated at foreign minister level in October 1937, when Finland's Rudolf Holsti had discussed the subject with his Swedish opposite number, Rickard Sandler. The correspondence which the rumours stirred up within the Northern Department was therefore not based on a hypothetical thesis.

### *British diplomatic response to the refortification news*

However, in ignorance of such collusion, the Northern Department and the British Minister in Helsinki could only discuss their options in terms of possibilities. Thomas Snow believed that, in the event of heightened tensions in the Baltic region, and without a Nordic military presence, the Ålands would be occupied by the Soviet Union, an act which could lead to interference with Germany's iron ore shipments from Sweden ('a question which...seems to be something like an obsession with the German military authorities').<sup>14</sup> He did not make clear whether he thought such Soviet expansion desirable. The alternative was, however, occupation of the islands by the Germans. Collier expressed the view that the overriding political consideration regarding Finnish moves to fortify the Åland Islands was that throughout Europe it would be seen as a move undertaken at German instigation. This alone was an argument for Britain to oppose refortification but he also felt that 'it is not desirable to release the German Government of anxiety regarding their supplies of vital raw material—such as Swedish iron—if they went to war'. As a signatory to the 1921 Convention, Britain was in a position to veto any proposed change to the status quo.<sup>15</sup> The only explanation for his comment that the islands would pose a greater threat to German interests without the presence of Finnish troops is that he believed that the chances of collaboration between Germans and Finns were reasonably high. This was an attitude which he would shortly reconsider.

For the next few weeks, the Finnish and Swedish authorities maintained their silence on the issue of refortification, but rumours of the possible change in the military status of the Åland Islands, far from being a talking shop confined to diplomats and Nordic newspapers, managed to find its way into the British Parliament. The Liberal MP, Sir

Geoffrey Mander, raised the matter in the House of Commons on 15 March. He advised talks with the other signatories to the 1921 Convention with a view to the rigid application of the non-fortification terms. This ought to have been done, he reasoned, in consequence of the pressure that the German Government was applying in favour of fortification. When he was assured by Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, R.A. ('Rab') Butler that the Finnish Government would scrupulously respect the Convention terms, Mander told the House that he had 'reason to believe that this is another attempt at power politics on the part of Germany'.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of this statement, Georg Gripenberg, the Finnish Minister in London, called at the Foreign Office to enquire if 'there was anything behind' Mander's question, with its inference that Finland was at the beck and call of Germany. R.H. Hadow, First Secretary at the Northern Department, assured the Finnish Minister that Mander had been given no official briefing. Gripenberg, satisfied with this, told Hadow that his country considered itself bound by the Convention and did not wish to 'stir up a hornet's nest' by taking any precipitate actions.<sup>17</sup>

### *Thomas Snow and support for refortification*

On 23 March, Snow wrote to Collier, begging to disagree with the Head of the Northern Department's assessment that fortification would ease German worries in the Baltic. On the contrary, Snow believed that the *Anschluss* had changed the situation; a move to restore military capability to the Ålands would give the appearance of reinsurance against Germany as much as against the Soviet Union. He also conjectured that remilitarisation would have the effect of increasing rather than lessening German worries in the Baltic, presumably because it might give the Swedes sufficient feeling of security to sever the iron ore supplies to Germany in time of war. As a parting shot, he pointed to Britain's status as 'the only power other than the Soviet Union to oppose Finnish aspirations on the Ålands'.<sup>18</sup> The inference was that such identification with Moscow was not something which would be viewed with equanimity in Helsinki.

A few days later, Collier wrote back, explaining to Snow that the information which Gripenberg had supplied to Hadow had suggested no inclination to arm the islands and that, therefore, the Minister should leave the matter alone unless he were to receive serious reports of activity, or intended activity, in connection with the Ålands.<sup>19</sup>

No such instructions were communicated to the British Legation at Stockholm, where the Minister, Sir Edmund Monson, was still interested in the treatment accorded to the islands by the Swedish press. Mainstream newspapers were now calling for a revision to the Convention and one, *Dagens-Nyheter*, had published a summary of a pamphlet written by L.J. Sansamo, a member of the Finnish General Staff, advocating fortification by Finland alone. The paper's editorial commented that Sansamo and his supporters were hoping that the Swedish Government would sound out the British Government on the subject. In response, the Northern Department wondered why the Swedish Government was doing nothing to dispel the assumptions of the press, which had no basis in the policy of either the Swedish or Finnish governments.<sup>20</sup>

Snow had taken note of his instructions to ignore speculation unless he came across anything tangible, so it must be presumed that he felt some satisfaction when informing London of a conversation between Wing Commander Frederick West, air attaché at the British Legation, and Colonel Melander, Chief of the Military Intelligence Department of

the Finnish General Staff. Melander told West that refortification would be aimed at Germany and their iron ore supply route and not the ‘hereditary enemy’, the USSR. When West asked whether it would be natural to expect some sort of protest from Germany if this were the case, Melander had abruptly dropped the subject.<sup>21</sup> This would suggest that Melander had neither the conviction nor authority to back up his claim and had done it in order to persuade the British to back refortification in principle.

However interesting the above despatch may have seemed, it provided no official confirmation of formal planning regarding the Åland Islands, and any actions remained purely hypothetical. Snow’s next correspondence changed this. On 18 April, Snow contacted the Northern Department with the news that Finland’s Foreign Minister, Rudolf Holsti, had told him that he would be discussing changes to the 1921 Convention with his Swedish counterpart, Rickard Sandler, at their next meeting. Snow had replied, according to his instructions, that the British Government did not wish to see Russo-Finnish relations ruined by the Åland question. To Collier he said that the assumption that refortification would be in the German interest was no longer applicable since Holsti was committed to better relations with the Soviet Union and would never deliberately further German interests. Collier remained to be convinced. He referred to Gripenberg’s denials and also raised the fears of the Estonian Government, who were worried that any change to the status of the Ålands could bring an ‘unpredictable’ response from Moscow.<sup>22</sup> Collier’s scepticism was apparent in a Northern Department memo on the possible attitude of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Scandinavia and Finland to an attack by Germany on Czechoslovakia, which made the assessment that Finland (along with Latvia and Estonia) harboured no illusions regarding German ambitions but were sufficiently anti-Russian to gravitate towards the German camp. It was predicted that if the Åland Islands were to be fortified, the defences would be aimed against the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

On 27 April, Snow telegraphed London with the news that Holsti’s meeting with Sandler was being delayed on the insistence of C.G.Mannerheim, the hero of Finland’s civil war, the country’s first regent, and a very influential figure, that Moscow must not be consulted on the matter. Holsti deplored Mannerheim’s views, especially as the Soviet Minister in Stockholm, Alexandra Kollontai, had told the Swedish Government that Moscow was interested in the Åland question. Snow hoped that the Finns would not put any barriers in the way of consulting Moscow, and wished to represent to the parties to the 1921 Convention that changing circumstances demanded that their original guarantee should be substituted for individual undertakings to respect neutrality, leaving Finland and Sweden free to construct the necessary military works. Rather optimistically, he believed that the Soviet Union would have no objection to a scheme which would, in his view, most seriously affect Germany. As non-signatories in 1921, the Russians stood to be excluded from Holsti’s plan as well as that of Mannerheim, but the third legal adviser at the Foreign Office, G.M. Fitzmaurice, in a long minute, argued forcefully that the 1921 Convention merely reaffirmed the terms of Treaty of 1856, which Russia had signed, thus giving the present Soviet state grounds for participation in any discussions.

### *Collier's position on refortification*

Armed with the legalities and the knowledge of Finnish desire to reinstall fortifications in the Ålands, Collier set out tentative recommendations for British policy: first, it might be advisable to oppose fortification 'but not on our own account'; second, if the Finns were to consult Britain, they would have to consult the USSR as well; third, nobody other than signatories need be consulted. Having laid this out, he proceeded to address a letter to the Service Ministries, asking for their views on whether remilitarisation would, or would not, be to the strategic advantage of the United Kingdom. Snow was notified accordingly.<sup>24</sup> When Snow approached Holsti on 12 May, the Finnish Foreign Minister expressed doubt as to whether Russian consent was legally necessary but agreed that they would be informed of developments, in line with the wishes of the Swedish Government. Asked if the Soviet Government would be formally consulted, Holsti replied that 'consult' was too strong a word.<sup>25</sup> Although Holsti had committed himself to an extent less than the Northern Department might have hoped, it was certainly more than they feared, and satisfaction could be garnered from the moderate position from which Finnish policy appeared to be being steered.

### *Moscow's position on refortification*

One indication of how the Soviet Government felt on the matter, and proof that Collier was correct in believing that Russian agreement was a *sine qua non* for a smooth ride in changing the military status of the Ålands, came in articles published in *Pravda* and *Moscow News* in mid-June. The latter was particularly vitriolic in its condemnation of what it assumed were Finland's plans. It warned that fortification would make Germany 'mistress of the Baltic' and that Berlin was being assisted in this process by 'Finnish militarists' who were acting on orders from the German Government.<sup>26</sup> This was, no doubt, overstating the case, but Chilston, the British Ambassador in Moscow, informed the Northern Department that the Soviet Government were 'a good deal perturbed at the [Finnish] proposal'. Hadow's comments on this message revealed his predictable belief that Mannerheim and his advisers wished to fortify the islands against the USSR. He also contended that Soviet strength, and the threat of its being used, were driving the nations bordering it towards Germany. Collier did not contest the fact that German influence seemed to be on the increase but, contrary to Hadow, he identified Soviet weakness, rather than strength, of being the cause. In any case, he saw no reason to 'doubt that the Germans want the islands fortified'.<sup>27</sup>

At that moment, the future of the Åland Islands remained unclear. So, for that matter, did British policy. The Northern Department favoured a balancing act. Collier's recommendations provided some guidelines but his query to the War Office (see p. 13), the Admiralty and the Air Ministry had been referred to the Chiefs of Staff Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence. In the period before their considered reply (which took five months), the Northern Department could act with no certainty for fear of contradicting Britain's strategic requirements.<sup>28</sup> This did not prevent comment or reaction, as will be discussed below. In the meantime, another matter, important to both

Britain and Finland, and not unrelated to Finland's Åland question, began to attract attention, that of Finnish rearmament.

### **Britain and the issue of Finnish rearmament**

The policy of the Northern Department relating to Finnish rearmament, like the policy concerning the Ålands, was formulated with other countries in mind, namely, Germany and the USSR. Despite some internal debate, it was important from the British perspective that Finland remained as well disposed as possible towards Britain in order that it would be responsive to London's wishes. This meant attempting to manoeuvre Finnish policy-makers away from German influence, and creating an atmosphere in which the Soviet Union would not feel threatened by, or suspicious of, Finnish defence policy. The aims were remarkably similar to the British policy over the Åland Islands.

The notion of rearmament inevitably led to a number of competing concerns for the Northern Department: what was necessary over what was important; what was desirable over what was affordable; what was efficient over what was realistic; and this was not a uniquely Finnish problem in the late 1930s. The two great Western democracies, Britain and France, faced their own dilemmas. The Treasury and Prime Minister insisted on fiscal stability in Britain, while allowing for a rearmament programme which recognised the limits to which British defence spending could be extended,<sup>29</sup> and economic and industrial troubles hindered the rearmament programme in France. Germany had decided to build up its military capability significantly. The Soviet Union's capacity for producing hardware had increased, but the purges of the military in the mid and late 1930s had eliminated many of those most proficient at using it.

The Finnish Government, in recognition of an increasingly threatening and dangerous world, began to face its own problems following an investigation by the Department of War Economy at the end of 1937, when an appropriation to the value of 2911 million marks was proposed for the purchase of armaments, equipment and related products such as raw material, industrial products and buildings. This amount was not, however, commensurate with Finland's budgetary capabilities. It was unlikely that the country could afford to put so much money into this particular channel at a time of economic troubles with Finland trying to cope with the effects of the global depression. The public of a democratic country were unlikely to be happy at the prospect of a drop in availability of consumer goods, owing to the transfer of industrial plant to arms manufacture. Nevertheless, the sum of 2710 million marks for a programme to be carried out over seven years was accepted by the Eduskunta, Finland's parliament, in February 1938.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of the major events which were happening in Europe, and indeed around the world at this time, the Finnish question made only a very tiny splash. Nevertheless, the questions relating to the Åland Islands and Finnish rearmament were of significance in the wider context of European relations as far as the Northern Department was concerned. The question of providing the materials for Finnish rearmament was treated largely as a political matter by the Northern Department. Whether Finnish needs could or could not be met was something which had to be agreed by the War Department, the Air Ministry, and the Admiralty. The different perspectives of the diplomats at the Northern Department, on the one hand, and the practical concerns of the military representatives,