

# THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENTS – 1935/37

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## FIVE-POWER DECLARATION – 11 DECEMBER 1932

“... one of the principles that should guide the Conference on Disarmament should be the grant to Germany ... of equality of rights in a system which would provide security for all nations, and that this principle should find itself embodied in the Convention containing the conclusions of the Disarmament Conference.”

## GERMANY'S ESCAPE FROM THE VERSAILLES RESTRICTIONS

- 17 March 1933: Funding approved for submarine construction
- 24 February 1934: Hitler speech asserting equality of rights
- 10 October 1934: Destroyer *Leberecht Maass* laid down – more than twice the Versailles limit
- 11 February 1935: Assembly of first batch of U-boats commences
- 16 March 1935: Formal denouncement of disarmament provisions by Hitler
- 25 April 1935: Germany officially informs Britain that they are building U-boats.
- 6 May 1935: Battleship *Gneisenau* laid down – over three times the Versailles limit.

# NEGOTIATING THE 1935 ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT

- Negotiated in London over two sessions in June 1935, against the background of the fall of the British Government
- Negotiations began with a German ultimatum for immediate acceptance of a 35% ratio
- Accepted by Britain:
  - Consistent with two-power standard (Japan plus largest European power)
  - Provided a baseline for the calculation of British requirements
  - Would allow monitoring of German naval building
  - Would restrict the German fleet below the limit of their industrial capacity
  - Would shape German fleet to similar types and proportions to RN



## 1935 ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT – KEY TERMS

- 35% ratio – on both aggregate strength and by individual categories of warships
- Ratio permanent and definite – not affected by construction by other powers
- Germany permitted 45% ratio in submarines – with a right to increase this to 100% (but within the aggregate 35% ratio)

# SUBMARINE RATIOS – WHY GERMAN RIGHT TO ESCALATION?

- Germany required a minimum number of submarines for coastal protection
- It was the well-known policy of the British Government not to build large numbers of submarines, and Britain was consistently advocating for reduced submarine quotas.
- 45% of British tonnage may therefore be insufficient to meet Germany's minimum absolute requirements
- Acceptable to Britain because:
  - Development of Asdic was believed to have mastered the submarine threat
  - Did not believe Germany would wage unrestricted submarine warfare again because it would bring US into conflict
  - Germany had agreed to the rules governing submarine warfare established by the 1930 London Naval Treaty



# ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT – QUALITATIVE LIMITATION

- The text of the agreement specifies no qualitative limits for any categories of warships
- But – during subsequent negotiations Germany committed to complying with the limitations specified by the Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties.
- German non-compliance with these limitations was deliberate and significant and was covered by the communication of false information to Britain.

| Vessel       | Displacement |             | Draught |          |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|---------|----------|
|              | Actual       | Notified    | Actual  | Notified |
| Scharnhorst  | 31,300 tons  | 26,000 tons | 8.55m   | 7.50m    |
| F (Bismarck) | 41,700 tons  | 35,000 tons | 8.69m   | 7.90m    |

- German reservation on revelations of deliberate non-compliance, rather than the disclosure of military secrets.

# 1935 ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT – DIPLOMATIC FALLOUT

- Stresa Front was shattered – ending any possibility of Italian assistance with the containment of Germany
- France was deeply shocked by the agreement, and the lack of consultation. Anglo-French relations seriously soured, compromising any efforts to present a coordinated response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and the German re-militarisation of the Rhineland.





# ORIGINS OF THE 1937 ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT

- The 1936 London Naval Treaty provided a framework of naval limits intended to reduce qualitative competition between the major naval powers.
- Originally signed only by the British Empire, France and the US (Italy joined later), it was planned that other powers would be brought into the framework via bilateral agreements with Britain that mirrored the limits of the London Naval Treaty.
- Britain therefore commenced negotiations with Germany in 1936 for such an agreement

# THE HEAVY CRUISER CONUNDRUM

- In 1935-36 Germany had given repeated assurances that she would only build three heavy cruisers
- It was on that basis that Britain had successfully negotiated with France and Italy to renounce further construction of such ships at the 1935 London Naval Conference
- But in May 1936 Germany advised an intention to build two more heavy cruisers to bring herself up to the limit allowed by the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement.
- In June 1936 Germany was pressured to renounce the right to build these two additional cruisers, on the condition that France and Russia did not build any more of these vessels.
- But in July 1936 Russia advised an intention to build seven new heavy cruisers armed.
- Germany insisted that if Russia proceeded with the construction of the seven cruisers, Germany would build the two additional heavy cruisers.
- But Russia stated that if Germany built five heavy cruisers, they would need to build 10, and Germany responded that if Russia built 10, Germany would build more than five.

# THE HEAVY CRUISER COMPROMISE

- Germany would retain an entitlement to build five heavy cruisers, but would voluntarily agree, for the time being, to build the two additional cruisers as light cruisers with 6-inch guns.
- BUT – this was a ruse:



In order to bring the Treaty into being, Germany now states that the two cruisers *K* and *L* under construction will be built as 'B'-class cruisers. In the exchange of Notes a reservation is made with regard to later conversion of armament. The construction of 20.3 cm. armament is continued and, equally that of 15 cm. armament, but only to the extent necessary to avoid detection of the suspension of this construction (espionage). Britain will be informed by January 1, 1939, that the conversion of armament to 20.3 cm. is taking place.

German Navy Memorandum 14 Nov 1936

# THE 1937 ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT

- Agreement finally signed on 17 July 1937 – the same day as the very similar Anglo-Soviet Naval Agreement.





# THE COLLAPSE OF THE AGREEMENTS

- 12 December 1938 – Germany formally informed Britain that they would invoke the provision allowing Germany 100% of British submarine strength, and that the two light cruisers K and L would be converted into heavy cruisers.
- 27 April 1939 – Germany unilaterally terminated both the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement, and Part III of the 1937 Anglo-German Naval Agreement (relating to the exchange of information)



# ASSESSMENTS OF THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENTS

- The agreement amounted to an “abject surrender” that marked the “consummation of a complete German moral ascendancy over the British ... disastrous in its results, but even more fateful for the future.”

Corelli Barnett

- “One of the most inexplicable acts of folly of the thirties”

Raymond Callahan

- A “short-sighted piece of Admiralty opportunism”

Andrew Lambert

# CONCLUSIONS

- Germany was already re-arming, and none of the western powers were willing to act to physically prevent this
- For Britain it was a choice between managed German rearmament, or uncontrolled rearmament.

The Anglo-German naval agreement was not a craven act of 'appeasement', as many have argued, but a diplomatic gambit calculated to commit Nazi Germany to following a long-term pattern of naval development that was the least dangerous from the RN's viewpoint."

Joseph Maiolo
- Germany believed that appeasing Britain by voluntarily limiting the German fleet to preclude any threat to British seapower, would result in Britain not opposing Germany's continental expansion.
- Britain was aware of the German expectations, but had no intention of giving Hitler the free hand that he sought. The failure of the agreements was inevitable once this became obvious to Hitler.

THANK YOU

