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Printed for the Cabinet. August 1936.

SECRET.

Copy No. 42

C.P. 233 (36).

CABINET.

ITALIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR.

Note by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

I CIRCULATE to the Cabinet a memorandum drawn up in the Foreign Office on the question of Italian foreign policy in the Spanish civil war, which was considered by the Committee on Foreign Policy at their meeting held on the 25th August, 1936.

A. E.

Foreign Office, August 31, 1936.

MEMORANDUM.

Italy is the only Great Power lying wholly inside the Mediterranean Basin and it is commonplace in Italian political thought that her future depends upon the relative degree of sea and air power which she can exercise there as compared with other nations. The most important limitation upon her exercise of military force (in the wide sense of the word) is the fact that of the three gates of the Mediterranean one, namely, the Dardanelles, is commanded by Turkey and the other two, namely, Suez and Gibraltar, by ourselves. These circumstances had a relatively small influence upon Italy's policy during the early period of her career as an independent nation, during which she cheerfully acquiesced in a situation which left her in a military sense at our mercy: the Great War and the Treaty of London, however, gave a powerful impulse to her ambitions which the disillusionment of the Peace Settlement did nothing to diminish. In 1922 Mussolini came into power and from this moment onwards the efforts of Italy to assert herself in one way and another rise in a steady crescendo marked, among other things, by the Fiume incident, the Corfu incident, the acquisition and fortification of the Dodecanese and the construction of a first-class military base in the Island of Leros; and terminating in the Abyssinian expedition which, we are now told, had been the subject of Mussolini's dreams for fourteen years. In parallel with these events which are matters of common knowledge an intensely active campaign of intrigue of an anti-British character has been conducted by the Italians in North Africa, Egypt, India, Arabia, Persia, Anatolia, Bulgaria, Albania and elsewhere.

Taking all this into consideration we can hardly avoid the supposition that Italy will regard disturbances in Spain not only as a struggle between Fascism and Communism, but also and primarily as a field in which, by the exercise of activities in line with the policy sketched above, she might find herself at once able to strengthen her own influence and to weaken British sea power in the Western Mediterranean. Several recent Cabinet Papers on the British position in the Mediterranean make it clear that this is a supposition which should give

rise to the deepest misgivings. The question is what steps, if any, can be taken to forestall the inconveniences and dangers which its realisation would open up, and the Chiefs of Staff have been requested to consider to what extent British interests would be affected and what action they advise His Majesty's Government should take in case Italy should by some means or another upset the existing balance in the Western Mediterranean.

It will be recalled that towards the end of the Abyssinian affair, the Government were reproached not only by the Opposition but by the Italian Government for not having made it initially plain how strongly opposed we were to the conquest of Abyssinia by Italy. Though this reproach is unmerited, it may well be that Mussolini did not in fact properly understand the strength of our objections to his policy, and was not, unfortunately, sufficiently convinced that we meant what we said. Is it not possible that Mussolini might be tempted to take certain steps in the Western Mediterranean calculated to "upset the balance" there against which we should be obliged to react even more strongly than we reacted against his Abyssinian policy—steps to which it would be quite impossible for us to reconcile ourselves? And if all this be even possible, is there not now an even stronger case than there was in the spring of 1935 for making it publicly plain that there are certain courses which, taken by Italy in the Western Mediterranean, might prove the source of deep and enduring antagonism with ourselves?

The expedients open to Mussolini for securing an advantage initially political but ultimately strategic in the Western Mediterranean are numerous. If a Communist Government is established intense animosity against Italy may prevail in Spain: Italians may be murdered, and the Italian Government might seize a Spanish island as security for reparation. Even if General Franco is successful his position may temporarily be very weak and he might be tempted to enter into specially intimate political relations with Italy in return for, say, military supplies or technical assistance. If the Communists are successful on the mainland and General Franco's party maintains itself for the moment in Morocco, protracted hostilities must be expected in which the latter will be particularly glad to seize any hand held out to him—at any price. Whichever party is successful, it is to be feared that the quiescence of Spain—as hitherto—in international affairs will cease, and that she will continue to be what she has now become—a focus for foreign propaganda and intrigue. It is obviously impossible as yet to foresee in what manner, at what point, or by what stages the "existing balance in the Western Mediterranean" might be threatened; but if the risk exists and we are to take any overt steps to forestall the implied danger to ourselves, it is clear that it will be better to give soon rather than late some indefinite but authoritative indication of what we consider to be the British interest in this part of the world.

The French interest is clearly the safety of their African communications, which depend in part on British sea power. There should, therefore, be no insuperable difficulty in securing French action in parallel with ours. It is difficult to suggest any useful action of the kind indicated which we could take in the near future other than a public statement by the Prime Minister or myself which, though discreetly worded, would be universally understood to be a warning by this country to others that we could not remain indifferent to any alteration in the balance of sea and air power in the Western Mediterranean, which was due, not to the action of Spain within her own jurisdiction (a matter which it is not open to us to question), but to the action of some other Power which had taken advantage of civil war in Spain to enter into some kind of special relationship with either side. If the idea of making such a statement were entertained, it would be important that we should make it before Italy had committed herself to any arrangement which was objectionable from our point of view. Prevention in a case like this would have much better prospects of being successful than cure.

Whatever form be taken by the agreement for non-intervention which we are trying to achieve, it may presently become desirable that the origin, scope and purpose of such an international agreement should be briefly explained by some member of the Government in a public speech; and, in the course of doing so, an opportunity would be presented of indicating the kind of developments in the Western Mediterranean which would hardly be tolerable for us. If the Italian Government do join in this agreement, and we have reason to think they will act up to their professions, this indication might be made in comparatively gentle terms. If, on the other hand, they decided to stand out or we had grounds

for thinking that their professions were disingenuous, more emphasis could be lent to it. In any case, it seems not too soon to consider formulæ which we might use in either event.

It is, of course, necessary to bear in mind the necessity for not unduly antagonising Italy (or Germany) at this stage, when we are looking forward to a five-Power meeting at which their co-operation will be essential. But it should be possible to make some declaration, the sense of which will be clear enough, while its wording can give no legitimate cause of complaint or offence to any individual Government. For that purpose it might be sufficient to use even so simple and vague a formula as:—

“ Any alteration of the *status quo* in the Western Mediterranean must be a matter of the closest concern to His Majesty's Government.”
