

GREAT BRITAIN AND THE REVISION OF THE  
ÅLAND CONVENTION, 1938—39

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The historical significance of the Åland Islands derives almost entirely from their strategic importance. The islands dominate the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia and a hostile force which had gained possession of them would represent a major threat to the Stockholm area and south-western Finland. It was only after Sweden was obliged to cede Finland and the Ålands to Russia in 1809 that such considerations acquired a lasting importance. The demilitarization of the islands, if they could not be regained, became a major objective of Swedish foreign policy. During the Crimean War, Sweden granted Britain and France the use of her naval bases and, in the course of hostilities, an Anglo-French fleet destroyed the Russian fortifications on the Ålands. As a result of Sweden's co-operativeness towards the Western Powers, her aspirations were partially satisfied by a convention signed by Russia, Britain and France, and annexed to the Peace of Paris of 1856, which forbade fortifications on the islands in the future. However, the long term value of the Convention was doubtful since Russia had only accepted it under pressure and hoped for its eventual revocation.

In 1906—8, Russia tried unsuccessfully to secure the abrogation of the 1856 Convention by diplomatic action and during the first phase of the First World War she unilaterally erected fortifications again on the Ålands. This action caused great apprehension in Stockholm but there was little that the Swedish Government could do before the Bolshevik Revolution and the Finnish declaration of independence towards the end of 1917. The Swedes now had an opportunity of re-establishing the unfortified status of the Ålands but the issue was complicated by the expressed desire of the Ålanders (who were Swedish-speaking) to be reincorporated into Sweden rather than to form a part of the new Finnish state. This led to a protracted dispute between Sweden and Finland for possession of the Ålands, which was only settled in 1921 by a decision of the Council of the League of Nations awarding the islands to Finland.<sup>1</sup> But the Swedes were not

<sup>1</sup> For accounts of the early history of the Åland question in English, see Folke Lindberg, *Scandinavia in Great Power Politics 1905—1908* (Stockholm, 1958) and James Barros, *The Åland Islands Question: Its Settlement by the League of Nations* (Yale University Press, 1968).

entirely dissatisfied since at the same time the League Council recommended the conclusion of an international convention to demilitarize and neutralize the archipelago. In accordance with this recommendation, a Convention was signed in October 1921, laying down strict regulations for the demilitarization and neutralization of the Ålands. The Convention also provided a guarantee by the signatories against an assault on the islands. Under Article 7, any signatory could ask the League Council to decide on measures to ensure the maintainance of the Convention or to repel violations of it which had already occurred, and would be authorized to take any measures which the Council had approved by a two-thirds majority. The Åland Convention was signed by Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Britain, France and Italy. Soviet Russia, although it had announced its interest in the matter, was not asked to sign the Convention, since it lacked an internationally recognized government, and indeed never did sign.<sup>2</sup>

The Finns would have preferred full military sovereignty over the islands but had given way to Swedish wishes on this point. The Finnish authorities hoped, however, that the status of the Ålands could eventually be changed but it was only towards the end of the nineteen thirties, when the breakdown of the League's security system and of International Law had clearly reduced the value of the Convention, that they thought it worthwhile to take up the question of a remilitarization of the Ålands in Stockholm. Contact on a governmental level was made in October 1937, when Rudolf Holsti, the Finnish Foreign Minister, tentatively raised the matter with his Swedish opposite number, Rickard Sandler. The latter, however, was discouraging and the question was dropped for several months. Despite indications that the Finns intended to pursue the matter, it was only after the *Anschluss* in March 1938 had underlined the gravity of the growing European crisis that the Swedish Government decided at least to listen to any Finnish proposals for a refortification of the Ålands. When Holsti sounded Sandler again in April, he received a more positive response, and real discussions on the Åland question began at the end of May.<sup>3</sup>

The hesitancy of the Swedish Government about opening negotiations was partly a reflection of its anxieties concerning Finland's international position. While Swedish neutrality was generally acknowledged in Europe, Finland had until recently been regarded as standing with Germany in hostility to the Soviet Union. However, since the middle of the nineteen thirties, the Finnish Government had been trying to align Finland with Scandinavia in a policy of Nordic

<sup>2</sup> For the Åland Convention of 1921, see Torsten Gihl, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia*, volume 4, (Stockholm, 1951), pp. 430—33, and Krister Wahlbäck, *Finlandsfrågan i svensk politik 1937—40* (Stockholm, 1964) (henceforth cited as *Wahlbäck*) pp. 37—39.

<sup>3</sup> *Wahlbäck*, pp. 39—58.

neutrality, and to improve relations with Moscow while reducing Finnish ties with Berlin. Field Marshal Mannerheim, the chairman of the Finnish Defence Council, and the Anglophil and anti-Nazi Holsti had played an important role in this shift of policy. To some extent the new policy had succeeded but Russian suspicions of Fenno-German collusion against the Soviet Union had not been completely allayed. This continued Russian mistrust had some justification since pro-German forces remained strong in Finland, especially among the German-trained officers who dominated the General Staff.<sup>4</sup> The Swedish Government therefore felt that it had to proceed carefully lest Swedish neutrality be compromised. This fear had some foundation since throughout 1938 the Russian press was critical of all suggestions for a remilitarization of the Ålands and regarded them as being German-inspired. The Germans had not encouraged the Finnish initiative in Stockholm, but it was true that they had long sympathised with Finnish aspirations on the Ålands.<sup>5</sup> It was against this international background that the Fenno-Swedish negotiations took place. The negotiations were marked by a certain degree of mutual mistrust, since Sweden doubted the permanence of Finland's Nordic orientation, while some Finns suspected Sweden of still harbouring hopes of eventually annexing the Ålands. The negotiations proved difficult but a preliminary agreement was reached at the end of July and a final plan for the remilitarization of the Ålands was concluded at the beginning of January 1939.<sup>6</sup>

The Åland Plan represented, at least for Sweden, the reversal of a long standing policy and the motives behind it are therefore of interest. One has already been alluded to, namely, the decreased likelihood of the neutrality of the islands being respected in the prevailing international climate. More specifically, the growing antagonism between Germany and the Soviet Union after 1933 presented a potential threat to the Ålands since their possession would confer significant military advantages on either state in the event of war. Above all, the Ålands would be important to Germany and the Soviet Union either to ensure or to prevent the supply of Swedish iron ore to Germany in wartime. It was well known that Germany was deficient in iron ore for the manufacture of armaments and in wartime Swedish supplies were the only ones which her probable enemies would not be able to cut off at once. About half of the iron ore exported to Germany from the minefields in Lappland was shipped from Narvik in northern Norway and had to pass along the Norwegian coast, where it would be vulnerable to British naval attack. The unreliability of the Narvik traffic in wartime increased the importance of the ore exported from Luleå which had to pass down

<sup>4</sup> For Finland's international position, see Max Jakobson, *The Diplomacy of the Winter War* (Harvard University Press, 1961) (henceforth cited as *Jakobson*), pp. 16—30.

<sup>5</sup> For the Russian and German attitudes in 1938, see *Wahlbäck*, pp. 138, 144—5.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of the Fenno-Swedish negotiations, see *Wahlbäck*, pp. 64—108.

the Gulf of Bothnia, past the Ålands, to Germany. It was quite conceivable that Germany would seize the Ålands to shield the Luleå route or that the Soviet Union would occupy them to cut off this traffic. A Russo-German race for the islands, each to forestall the other, was also possible. A remilitarization of the Ålands would, it was hoped, remove both the fears and temptations of Germany and the Soviet Union. The Swedish and Finnish Governments also believed that the Åland Plan would bind Finland more closely to Scandinavia and to a policy of neutrality. There were also some elements in both countries which hoped that co-operation on the Ålands would prove the germ of a military alliance between Finland and Sweden, but this aspect of the question was kept very much in the background.<sup>7</sup>

The Åland Plan, as presented to the other interested parties, fell into two parts. First, the demilitarization clauses of the 1921 Convention were to be permanently removed insofar as they related to a number of islands in the southern part of the archipelago, and Finland was to have complete military freedom of action on those islands. It had been previously agreed between the Finnish and Swedish Governments that these islands would be fortified and manned by 300 Finnish troops. Secondly, in the remaining northern part of the Åland zone the demilitarization clauses were to be relaxed for a period of ten years so as to permit Finland to give military training to the Ålanders and to station Swedish-speaking Finnish troops and mobile coastal and anti-aircraft artillery there. The maximum figures for the number of troops and the amount of material permitted in the northern Ålands were to be fixed jointly by the Finnish and Swedish Governments, and they had privately agreed that the permanent force was to consist of 1,200 Ålanders, which Finland could supplement with 1,000 troops from the Finnish mainland at times of international tension.

The procedure proposed for authorizing the Plan was that its first part would represent a change in the Convention, which needed the simple assent of the signatories, but that the second part was to be approved by an application of Article 7 which enabled the League Council to decide, by a two-thirds majority, on measures to ensure the maintainance of the Convention: it was proposed that the Council would be asked to approve the second part of the Plan on the grounds that it was necessary for the preservation of the Convention in other respects. Besides the Åland Plan proper, Finland and Sweden had also worked out, for the defence of the islands in an emergency, the so-called 'Co-ordination Plan' which envisaged direct Swedish participation. Each of the two countries were to send about 6,000 troops to the Ålands while their naval forces would co-operate in the waters around the islands. The Co-ordination Plan was not, however, to be

<sup>7</sup> For the considerations behind the Åland Plan, see *Wahlbäck*, pp. 39—40, 45—6, 49—51, 59—60, and *Jakobson*, pp. 35—39.

carried out automatically since Sweden reserved the right to decide whether she would participate in each particular case.<sup>8</sup>

The Åland Plan presented a complex problem of International Law in that it was not clear whether, besides the consent of the signatories to the 1921 Convention, that of the Soviet Union was also legally required. The question was whether the Soviet Union, as a successor state to a signatory of the 1856 Convention, had a legal right to veto changes in the demilitarized status of the islands, and on this point opposite legal arguments could plausibly be advanced. It was doubtful if the consent of the League Council would have been necessary but the procedure adopted for the authorization of the second part of the Åland Plan obviously entailed its approval being sought. This procedure also permitted Finland and Sweden to avoid expressing an opinion on the necessity of direct Russian consent, since the Soviet Union was a member of the Council. In January 1939, the signatories and the Soviet Union received identical notes from Sweden and Finland, outlining the Åland Plan. It was explained that the proposals would later be submitted to the League Council. The signatories were asked for their consent to the Plan, while the Soviet Union was asked to help in obtaining the approval of the Council.<sup>9</sup>

## 2

Britain had played an important role in the early history of the Åland question. For much of the nineteenth century she had shared the Swedish interest in denying Russia the use of the Ålands, and Russian acceptance of the 1856 Convention had been mainly due to British pressure. Anglo-Russian relations were often strained, and the British Government wanted to restrict Russian power in the Baltic as much as possible. Moreover, Britain needed to import timber from the Swedish ports on the Gulf of Bothnia for the construction and repair of her navy, and fortifications on the Ålands could have enabled Russia to deny her access to these ports in wartime. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, British policy in the Åland question was guided by different considerations. The disappearance of timber-made warships had removed any direct British interest in the fate of the islands, while Germany had replaced Russia as Britain's main rival. During the Russian efforts to abrogate the 1856 Convention in 1906—8 and during the First World War, the British Government showed no objection in principle to Russia refortifying the Ålands. However, it was anxious that Sweden should not be driven into alliance with Germany by such a Russian action, and attempted to create a certain degree of Russo-Swedish understanding in the Åland

<sup>8</sup> For the Åland Plan, see *Jakobson*, pp. 60—61, and *Wahlbäck*, pp. 68—70, 77—79, 107.

<sup>9</sup> For the Fenno-Swedish notes, see *Wahlbäck*, p. 137.

question. In the dispute between Sweden and Finland for possession of the islands in 1918—21, Britain tried to avoid committing herself to either and worked to find a compromise solution. In all the crises surrounding the Ålands, Britain had tried to prevent the islands becoming a source of friction between other states or injuring her own relations with the interested parties.<sup>1</sup> As we shall see similar considerations were present in British deliberations in the years before the Second World War.

In the late nineteen thirties the Baltic area was remote to British interests and political relations with the Nordic and Baltic States were largely left to the Northern Department of the Foreign Office. The only exception to this general lack of concern was the attention given to the question of Swedish iron ore. Germany's dependence on Swedish ore occupied a central position in British planning for economic warfare.<sup>2</sup> Although the British were well aware of the importance of the Ålands for the Luleå ore traffic they took little interest in the Åland question throughout 1937. Serious attention was given only after Thomas Snow, the British Minister in Helsinki, on 25 January 1938 reported that both Mannerheim and Lieutenant-General Oesch, the Chief of the Finnish General Staff, had separately mentioned to him the desirability of refortifying the Ålands. Oesch had said that if the islands were left undefended, the Soviet Union would seize them at once in the event of war, and he had claimed that Sweden too wished to see the Ålands fortified. Although he had denied that Germany had encouraged Finland to raise the matter, Snow did not feel convinced that this was true. Snow concluded from these remarks that more would be heard of the Åland question and asked the Foreign Office for some indication of how he should reply if pressed about Britain's attitude.

Snow's report led to the first serious deliberations within the Northern Department regarding the attitude Britain should adopt towards a remilitarization of the Ålands. The Department doubted that the Finnish Government, as opposed to the General Staff, really wanted to raise the Åland question, since such a move would certainly provoke Russian accusations that Finland was acting at the behest of Germany and would therefore cause a deterioration in Russo-Finnish relations. But Laurence Collier, the Head of the Department, still thought Snow ought to be given the guidance he had asked for in case he were approached again. The attitude which Collier outlined became the basis of British policy for some months to come. His view was that while the refortification of the islands might be justifiable in theory, any attempt to raise the question at that time would be interpreted throughout Europe—and rightly according to the Foreign

<sup>1</sup> For Britain's role in the early history of the Åland question see Lindberg and Barros, as cited in reference 1.

<sup>2</sup> W. N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, volume 1, (London, 1950) pp. 12—40.

Office's information—"as a move undertaken at German instigation and in German interests. It would at once ruin Swedish and Finnish relations with the Soviet Union; and it would create general suspicion and unrest in the Baltic". Furthermore, it was not in Britain's interests to do anything to relieve Germany of anxiety concerning her ore supplies if she were to go to war. Snow should therefore be told to discourage the idea if it were again mentioned to him. Gerald Fitzmaurice, the Third Legal Adviser in the Foreign Office, added a minute on the legal position. He maintained that the demilitarization of the Ålands went back to 1856 and that the Convention of 1921 was, in this respect, "in a sense merely declaratory of an already existing situation". Therefore, the Soviet Union, as the successor to a signatory of the 1856 Convention, had a legal right to veto any changes in the demilitarized status of the islands. On 28 February 1938, Collier wrote a letter to Snow, incorporating his own and Fitzmaurice's minutes.<sup>3</sup>

Snow disagreed with the Foreign Office's analysis of the situation and on 23 March he wrote to Collier to present his own point of view. Snow thought that the situation had been changed by the *Anschluss* which would make the refortification of the Ålands appear as much an insurance against Germany as against the Soviet Union. He also believed that a strongly fortified Åland might, in the long run, increase rather than reduce German anxieties about their ore supplies. Snow does not explain the reasoning behind this belief but he probably meant that with the Ålands strongly defended Sweden might summon up the courage to stop ore exports to Germany in wartime. It is noteworthy that this view had no support in London; it was generally believed within the Northern Department that Sweden would be too frightened to stop exporting ore to Germany under any circumstances. Finally, Snow pointed to the unfortunate consequences for Anglo-Finnish relations of Britain being the only power except the Soviet Union to oppose Finnish aspirations on the Ålands.<sup>4</sup> The Northern Department did not take up Snow's arguments since it believed that they related to an eventuality which was still hypothetical. The Department was soon disabused of this belief. On 18 April, Snow reported that Holsti had told him that he and Sandler had agreed to discuss the Åland question at their next meeting, which was to take place shortly. Holsti had added that he was telling him this in the strictest confidence, since he did not want the Swedes to learn that he had spoken to Snow about it. Snow had replied, along the lines of his instructions, that the British Government attached the greatest importance to the maintainance of general tranquility and believed that Russo-Finnish relations would be "ruined"

<sup>3</sup> Despatch from Snow to Eden, 25 Jan. 1938; letter from Collier to Snow, 28 Feb. 1938; and minutes on FO 371/22274 — N 557/247/63.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Snow to Collier, 23 March 1938, FO 371/22274 — N 1574/247/63. For the Northern Department's views on the likelihood of Sweden stopping her ore supplies to Germany, see minutes FO 371/22274 — N 1637, N 1744/247/63.

if the Åland question were raised. Snow concluded his report by claiming that Collier's assumption that refortification would be generally regarded as a move undertaken in the German interest "no longer, perhaps, now covers all the facts", since Holsti would never deliberately further a German interest and was committed to better relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> On 27 April, Snow telegraphed to London that Holsti had told him that he was unable to fix a definite date for the opening of his negotiations with Sweden, since Mannerheim was insisting on a prior undertaking from Sandler that the Soviet Union would be "excluded from the discussions". Holsti had added that he deplored Mannerheim's attitude and thought it unlikely that Sandler would furnish such an undertaking.

These two reports made it clear that the Finnish Government was seeking a remilitarization of the Ålands. The Northern Department believed that this represented a change in official Finnish policy and Collier thought that it had been brought about by the General Staff persuading Holsti that the refortification of the islands would be directed more against a possible German attack than against a Russian one. However, Collier doubted that the Finnish officers believed this themselves or thought the Russians would believe it, hence Mannerheim's insistence on excluding the Soviet Union. Faced with the information that the Åland question was, in fact, actual, the Northern Department decided to ask the Service Ministries for their views on whether the remilitarization of the islands would be in Britain's strategic interests. At the same time, the Department decided, in view of what it believed to be Mannerheim's attitude to the Russians and so as to avoid future misunderstandings about the British position, to make it clear to the Finns that Britain considered them to be legally obliged to consult the Soviet Union on any changes to the demilitarized status of the Ålands.

Accordingly, on 11 May, Snow was instructed to speak to Holsti in this vein.<sup>6</sup> On the following day, Snow told Holsti that the British Government, if approached about the remilitarization of the Ålands, would be compelled to adopt the attitude that both legal and political considerations entitled the Soviet Union to be consulted. Holsti did not regard Russian consent as legally necessary but he said that, in accordance with the wishes of the Swedish Government, the Soviet Union would be kept informed and there would be no discrimination between the Russians and other interested parties if the question were pursued. When Snow expressed his satisfaction that the Soviet Union would be consulted, Holsti replied rather cryptically that "consult" was too strong a word.<sup>7</sup> After this exchange, the British were content not to pursue the matter further. Holsti's explanations were

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Snow to Collier, 18 April 1938, FO 371/22274 — N 2086/247/63.

<sup>6</sup> Telegram from Snow, 27 April 1938; Telegram to Snow, 11 May 1938; and minutes on FO 371/22274 — N 2175/247/63.

<sup>7</sup> Despatch from Snow to Halifax, 12 May 1938, FO 371/22274 — N 2562/247/63.



not unsatisfactory from the British point of view and showed that moderate opinions had prevailed in Helsinki regarding the position of the Soviet Union.

Obtaining a military opinion on the strategic consequences for Britain of a remilitarization of the Ålands proved a lengthy process. The Service Ministries all eventually agreed that this was a question for the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, and this necessitated a further approach by the Foreign Office to the C.I.D.<sup>8</sup> The Chiefs of Staff's report was not ready before 21 October, more than five months after the Foreign Office had first asked the Service Departments for their views. This delay injected a degree of uncertainty into the deliberations of the Northern Department and its opinions were frequently expressed with a reservation regarding the eventual stand of the military leadership on the strategic question.

However, during the late spring and summer of 1938, this uncertainty did not prevent a significant change in the views of the Northern Department in the direction of a more positive attitude to a remilitarization of the Ålands. This shift was caused primarily by concern for Holsti's political position in Finland. On 31 May, Holsti, after giving Snow some information about the course of his negotiations with Sandler, asked him if he thought it wise that he (Holsti) should leave his post for six weeks to visit the United States "in the present state of affairs". Holsti was here referring to the campaign against him in the pro-German press, which was directed at his frequent absences from the country and the fact that he continued to draw his salary as Delegate to the League of Nations while serving as Foreign Minister. Snow tactfully replied that he could only regret Holsti's absence from his post, for whatever reason, since he regarded him as "the best friend we had". When reporting this conversation to London, Snow commented that Holsti's political position in Finland was "somewhat shaky" and that the Germans would certainly be glad to see him out of office. Collier concluded from Snow's report that "the moral seems to be that we should do all that we can both in the Åland question and generally to make things easy for Dr. Holsti, since I agree with Mr. Snow that he is 'the best friend we have' in Finland".<sup>9</sup>

An opportunity for acting on these sentiments soon presented itself, when Holsti passed through London on his way back from the United States. On 12 July, he was due to have an interview with Lord Halifax. In preparation for this meeting, Collier drew up a short memorandum for the Foreign Secretary. Collier pointed out that, since becoming Foreign Minister in 1936, Holsti had done much to improve Finland's relations with Sweden and the Soviet Union. Holsti's

<sup>8</sup> For correspondence with Service Ministries and C.I.D., see FO 371/22274 — N 2175, N 2998, N 3565, N 3236, N 4138, N 4379/247/63.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Snow to Collier, 1 June 1938; and minutes on FO 371/22265 — N 2843/64/56.

continuance in office was in Britain's interest since there was no alternative candidate for the post likely to show himself "so genuinely friendly to this country or so willing to understand the point of view of His Majesty's Government, or to listen to representations from them". In the Åland question, the British view coincided much more closely with Holsti's policy than with that of the Finnish General Staff, and it might strengthen his hand if Halifax emphasized this to him.<sup>10</sup> The record of Halifax's conversation with Holsti appears to be missing from the Foreign Office files but since Halifax generally acted on the advice of his subordinates in the Åland question it seems safe to assume that he spoke in the sense suggested.

On the evening of 12 July, Holsti spoke with Collier at the Finnish Legation. Holsti said that when a scheme for the remilitarization of the Ålands had been agreed on with Stockholm, the Swedish Government (with Finland remaining in the background) would privately put it before the British and French Governments, and would ask them to approach the Soviet Union informally with a view to ensuring that the Russians would raise no objections. When Collier suggested that this was perhaps a rather "difficult and invidious task" for the British Government, Holsti replied that it ought not to be difficult to persuade the Russians that it was in their interests to have the Ålands safe from attack, since the Germans were in a much better position than they to seize the islands. Holsti concluded by saying that the idea was still a private one between himself and Sandler, of which he ought not, perhaps, to have spoken at this stage. Collier noted after this conversation that it would be undesirable for Britain to refuse to play her part in this procedure if it were suggested. Refusal would endanger Holsti's position and if Britain could not prevent the Åland question from being raised, the proposed method of raising it seemed "the one least likely to cause trouble". If it proved impossible to remove Russian suspicion, the Finns and Swedes would have to be told that since they could not legally proceed without Russian consent, Britain hoped "they would leave the matter in obedience".<sup>11</sup> On 14 July, Collier expanded on his views by adding that Holsti was resisting pressure from the General Staff to handle the Åland question in a way which would embroil Finland with the Soviet Union and the proposed procedure might help him to do so. A British refusal to co-operate would not cause the Åland question to be dropped, but rather would lead to it being raised in a manner less in accord with Britain's wishes.<sup>12</sup>

The new British attitude which had emerged was an ambivalent one. The Northern Department would still have preferred to see the Åland question left

<sup>10</sup> Minute by Collier, 12 July 1938, FO 371/22265 — N 3500/64/56.

<sup>11</sup> Minute by Collier, 13 July 1938, FO 371/22274 — N 3531/247/63.

<sup>12</sup> Minute by Collier, 14 July 1938, FO 371/22265 — N 3497/64/56.

alone, but was prepared to accept a refortification of the islands, provided the Chiefs of Staff agreed, and was even willing to assist in obtaining Russian approval. This shift is explained first by a desire to help Holsti to remain in office, and secondly by a belief that, so long as he was Foreign Minister, Finland's Åland policy had some chance of not antagonizing Moscow and of not being pro-German in intent. As it turned out, a request for British aid in obtaining Russian approval for the Åland Plan was never made, and the matter was not even mentioned again by the Finns or Swedes. It is probable that Holsti had merely been sounding Collier on one of many possible procedures, and that he and Sandler decided later to drop the idea. Holsti continued to keep the British *au fait* about developments in the Åland question and after September the Swedes too began to pass on information to London.<sup>13</sup> Between the summer and the formulation of the Chiefs of Staff's report there was little change in the attitude of the Northern Department. In the middle of August support for a positive British outlook came from Duff Cooper, the First Lord of the Admiralty, who was cruising the Baltic in the Admiralty Yacht on a good-will tour. In Helsinki, Cooper must have been strongly influenced by his hosts, since he wrote to Halifax on 15 August, expressing great sympathy for Finnish aspirations on the Ålands and for Holsti personally. Cooper wrote that he saw no reason why Britain should oppose a refortification of the islands. It was in her interests that the Ålands could be defended against German aggression, since the islands would be of great value to Germany as a means of protecting her ore supplies. He appears to have seen no risk of the islands being seized by the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

On 21 October, the Chiefs of Staff's report was finally presented. Their main conclusions were that "in certain circumstances, fortification of the Åland Islands might have a favourable though distant repercussion on British strategic interests", and could not "react unfavourably on them, in any circumstances". The reasoning behind these conclusions was as follows. In the event of war with Germany, Britain would do "all that was possible" to interrupt those supplies of Swedish iron ore which Germany received from Narvik. Should these British efforts prove successful, Germany would become increasingly dependent on "her Baltic communications" for her iron ore supplies. If it seemed possible that the Soviet Union would intervene on the British side, Germany might seize the Ålands to forestall a Russian occupation, so as to protect the Luleå traffic. Fortification of the islands would prevent such a German occupation, and would thus facilitate Russian operations in the Gulf of Bothnia aimed at severing the Luleå traffic. There were two unexpressed assumptions behind this reasoning, namely, that the Soviet Union had no chance of seizing the Ålands first, and that

<sup>13</sup> For the first information passed on by Sweden, see FO 371/22275 — N 4482, N 4483/247/63.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Cooper to Halifax, 15 August 1938, FO 371/22275 — N 4215/247/63.

Russian attacks from Kronstadt (for example, by submarine) on the Luleå traffic could be reasonably effective so long as the Ålands were kept out of German hands.

The Northern Department concluded from the Chiefs of Staff's report that any request for good offices with the Russians could now be agreed to, and this view was accepted by Halifax. However, on 1 November, Fitzmaurice, straying from the legal field, took issue with the reasoning of the Chiefs of Staff. He argued that all Germany needed to do to protect the Luleå traffic was to deny the use of the Ålands to the Russians and he could not see why it should matter to Berlin if this were done by German or Finnish forces. On the other hand, if the islands were left unfortified, there was "just a chance" that the Soviet Union would seize them first. He therefore reached an opposite conclusion to the Chiefs of Staff, namely, that fortification of the Ålands could in no circumstances be in Britain's interests, whereas a lack of fortifications might be. On the whole, the chief Foreign Office figures involved felt that there was some force in Fitzmaurice's arguments, and, on Halifax's instructions, his criticisms were submitted to the Chiefs of Staff for their comments.<sup>15</sup>

Fitzmaurice's views created, during the last two months of 1938, a certain ambivalence in the Foreign Office's attitude to a refortification of the Ålands. Although no final stand could be taken until the reply of the Chiefs of Staff had been received his criticisms clearly reawoke earlier misgivings which had been dormant since the summer. One could expect that these misgivings would have been fortified by the fall of Holsti in the middle of November but in the event the argument that pro-British forces in Finland would be strengthened by a helpful British attitude in the Åland question did not lose its validity. It appeared at first that Holsti's resignation had been due to German pressure but later reports convinced the Northern Department that his fall had been due to internal political manoeuvres, not his policies.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the new Foreign Minister, Eljas Erkkö, held views similar to those of Holsti. The latter's resignation therefore did not need to entail any change in Britain's attitude in the Åland question. In the middle of December, the Chiefs of Staff replied to Fitzmaurice's criticisms with the terse comment that "they see no reason to depart from the views expressed in their earlier report". This was hardly a satisfactory reply to Fitzmaurice's points, but the Foreign Office felt that it had to accept the military opinion.<sup>17</sup> The question of whether the refortification of the Ålands was in

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum by Chiefs of Staff, 21 Oct. 1938; letter from Collier to Ismay, 16 Nov. 1938; and minutes on FO 371/22275 — N 5243/247/63.

<sup>16</sup> For British information on Holsti's replacement by Erkkö, see FO 371/22265 — N 5586, N 5864, N 6164, N 6092/64/56.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Ismay to Cadogan, 16 Dec. 1938; and minutes on FO 371/22275 — N 6213/247/53.

Britain's interest was thus settled, but in a manner which left the Foreign Office doubtful.

It was then in a rather unclear frame of mind that the Foreign Office learnt in the first weeks of January 1939 that British consent to the Åland Plan would be officially sought in the near future. This information led to a discussion within the Foreign Office concerning the answer Britain should give, from which the following standpoint emerged. First, the Chiefs of Staff's report had established that "strategic considerations" (that is to say, Britain's own interests) would not justify a British refusal to assent to the Åland Plan. Secondly, British approval was to depend on the Soviet Union being "consulted" and the approval of the League Council then being "sought". This second point resulted from a discussion on whether British assent ought to be conditional on the Soviet Union's. The legal experts pointed out that if Britain herself expressed no objection to the Åland Plan it would be difficult, in view of the legal precedents, to make her consent dependent on that of some other country. On the other hand, Collier thought it would be "politically undesirable" if the British Government could be represented as agreeing "regardless of the rights of the Russians". But he thought that by using the word "consulted" Britain could avoid committing herself on this point for the time being. The Foreign Office had also learnt that the Åland Plan would be submitted to the League Council, and, although Fitzmaurice could not see why the Council's consent should be necessary, Collier believed that this presented a possible solution to the problem. His reasoning was that the Council's assent had to include the Soviet Union's, since the latter was a member of the Council and its decisions had to be unanimous.<sup>18</sup> This belief was mistaken as far as the Åland Plan was concerned, since, as we have seen, under the procedure contemplated by Sweden and Finland, only a two-thirds majority would be required. But even if Collier had been correct, the problem would not necessarily have been solved, since the formula adopted merely specified that the Council's consent should be sought not that it had to be obtained. The upshot of these deliberations was to leave the question of whether Russian assent was a precondition of Britain's an open one.

On 24 January, the Swedish and Finnish Ministers in London called on Halifax and handed him identical notes formally setting out the Åland Plan and asking for the consent of the British Government to it. They explained that their Governments realised that the Soviet Union had a right to be consulted and that, although it was arguable whether the consent of the League Council was strictly necessary, consulting it afforded a convenient means of consulting the Russians. Their remarks and the notes which they presented were along the lines that the Foreign Office had expected. Collier accordingly drafted a reply on the basis

<sup>18</sup> Minutes on FO 371/23650 — N 164, N 356/26/63.

which had been worked out in January, and it was approved by Halifax without comment. The reply was sent to the Swedish and Finnish Ministers on 3 February and simply stated that the British Government saw “no objection in principle to these proposals, on the understanding that, as you have informed me, the other parties to the Convention, and also the Soviet Union, will be consulted thereon, and that they will then be submitted to the Council of the League of Nations”.<sup>19</sup> At around this time an episode occurred indicative of the uncertainty surrounding the British attitude to Russian consent. On 27 January, Ivan Maisky, the Russian Ambassador in London, called on Halifax to enquire about the British attitude to the Åland Plan. This was the first occasion on which the Soviet Union raised the Åland question with the British Government. In the ensuing discussion, Maisky said that his Government was “disposed to be very doubtful of the proposal”, while Halifax implied that British consent would depend on that of the other parties concerned. Halifax’s remark is curious, since the reply to Sweden and Finland (which he approved a few days later) was designed to leave this question open. It is possible that he was merely trying to tell everyone what they wanted to hear, but the probable explanation is that Halifax, who had not read the minutes relating to the terms of the reply, had misunderstood the attitude formulated by the Foreign Office.<sup>20</sup>

In the three and a half months which elapsed between the British reply and the meeting of the League Council in May, British interest and also that of Finland and Sweden focused on the reaction to the Åland Plan of the two Great Powers most closely concerned, Germany and the Soviet Union. The Foreign Office had assumed until then that Germany would support while the Soviet Union would be highly suspicious of a remilitarization of the Ålands, but in both cases attitudes were more complex. Germany did indeed favour the idea, since she had no designs on the Ålands herself and wanted them safe from Russian attack, but in January 1939, the German authorities decided to try and bargain their consent to the Plan in return for a Swedish undertaking to maintain iron ore supplies at a normal level in wartime. However, they agreed at the same time that such a promise would not be a precondition for Germany’s assent to the Plan, since the latter was in her interests. The Swedish Government refused to give any undertaking about its trading policies in wartime and Germany, her bluff called, formally gave her approval on 2 May. The Italian reply followed shortly afterwards, and the assent of all the signatories had been received.

The Russian press had been very critical of a refortification of the Ålands, but since the autumn of 1938, the Russian Government had showed a more understanding attitude in its contacts with Sweden and Finland. In the first months of

<sup>19</sup> Minute by Collier, 24 Jan. 1939; and letters from Collier to Prytz and Gripenberg, 3 Feb. 1939, FO 371/23650 — N 412/26/63.

<sup>20</sup> Despatch from Halifax to Seeds (Moscow), 27 Jan. 1939, FO 371/23650 — N 510/26/63.

1939, the Soviet Union appeared willing to give its consent on conditions. The price it demanded was an undertaking from the Finns that the proposed fortifications would never be willfully surrendered to Germany, and also (though it is not certain whether this was a precondition for Russian assent to the Plan, since at times Moscow presented it as a separate and unrelated demand) the handing over of a group of Finnish islands at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland on the approaches to Leningrad. The first condition presented no great problem, but the Finns refused to give up the islands, even though Moscow only wished to lease them for 30 years, or to exchange them for territory in Soviet Karelia. The contacts between Moscow and Helsinki ended at the beginning of April, and a Russian reply to the Åland Plan was never received. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the Russian attitude, the Swedish and Finnish Governments decided at the beginning of May to submit the Plan to the League Council as planned.<sup>21</sup>

The British knew something about the reactions of both Germany and the Soviet Union. During the first months of 1939, the Foreign Office learnt of rumours, which seem to have been put out by the Germans themselves as a means of putting pressure on the Swedes, to the effect that Berlin objected to the special position on the Ålands given to Sweden by the Plan. However, the Foreign Office never learnt of the German attempt to bargain their consent and interpreted their objections as being genuine and their final acquiescence as being due to a fear of alienating Finland (though it did suspect that Germany might have extracted something in return).<sup>22</sup> This information naturally tended to remove any lingering British suspicions that the Plan was in some way German-inspired. The British were better informed of the Russo-Finnish contacts, but they seem to have regarded the Åland and Finnish Gulf Islands questions as separate and to have been uncertain whether the former depended on the latter. Curiously enough the British first learnt of these extremely secret contacts through some vague remarks made to Snow by the Soviet Minister in Helsinki, although the Russian motives for involving the British are unknown. As a result, Snow questioned Erkko about these remarks and was told most of the details of the contacts. The Foreign Office entirely shared the Finnish view that the surrender of the Gulf Islands was out of the question, and was worried by Snow's reports that Erkko believed the Soviet Union might simply seize the islands.<sup>23</sup>

In the middle of May, as the date of the League Council meeting approached,

<sup>21</sup> For the German and Russian reactions, see *Wahlbäck*, pp. 138—153.

<sup>22</sup> For British information about the German reaction, see FO 371/23650 — N 1088, N 1848, N 1838, N 2003, N 2065, N2107/26/63.

<sup>23</sup> Telegram from Snow, 22 March 1939; and minutes on FO 371/23650 — N 1580/26/63. For more general information about the Russo-Finnish contacts, see FO 371/23650 — N 1581, N 1758, N 1794, N 1838, N 1854, N 1993, N 2154, N 2055/26/63, and FO 371/23647 — N 1753/429/56.

the British attitude to the Åland Plan became more positive. It is only possible to give the probable motives behind this change, since there is no record of any detailed discussion within the Foreign Office which may have preceded it. The main reason behind this shift of policy seems to have been the profound change in Anglo-Soviet relations which followed the destruction of Czechoslovakia in March and the consequent negotiations between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union with a view to forming a joint front against further German expansion. In these negotiations the Russians insisted that Finland and the other border states should have a Russian guarantee forced upon them. To the Finns this seemed an attempt to secure a possible excuse for future military intervention in Finland, and they made repeated representations to the British Government not to accede to the Russian demand.<sup>24</sup> Clearly the Moscow negotiations were placing a deep strain on Anglo-Finnish relations and risked driving Finland into the arms of Germany, a danger which could only have been increased by the Russian demand for the Finnish Gulf Islands. It would seem that the British regarded a more helpful attitude to the Finns over the Åland Plan as a means of counteracting the unfortunate effects of Britain's new association with the Soviet Union. The facts of the change in the British outlook certainly tend to confirm such an interpretation of the motives behind it. At the beginning of May, the Foreign Office intended to press for a postponement of the League Council's consideration of the Åland Plan unless the Russian reply to it had been received;<sup>25</sup> but on 19 May, Collier told the Finnish Minister in London that he could see no reason why Britain should support a proposal in Geneva to postpone the Åland question.<sup>26</sup> In the interval, the Finns and Swedes had asked for British support in Geneva and Erkko had hinted that the nature of Finland's relations with Germany depended not only on her not receiving a Russian guarantee but also on the Russian attitude to the Åland Plan in Geneva.<sup>27</sup> Another factor which may help to explain the shift is that London felt no countervailing Russian pressure in the Åland question. However, as we shall see, the new outlook envisaged discreet support for Finland and Sweden so as to avoid an open disagreement with the Soviet Union.

This policy is well illustrated by British behaviour during the proceedings in Geneva. On 22 May, the Åland Plan was submitted to the League Council, which, in accordance with its usual practice, appointed a Rapporteur to examine the

<sup>24</sup> For Finland's place in the Moscow negotiations, see *Jakobson*, pp. 66—72, 78—92.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum by Gage, 8(?) May 1939, FO 371/23650 — N 2429/26/63.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Collier to Randall (Delegation in Geneva), 20 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2588/26/63.

<sup>27</sup> Telegram from Snow, 10 May 1939, FO 371/23654 — N2391/64/63; minute by Collier, 12 May 1939, FO 371/23654 — N 2404/64/63; minute by Butler, 12 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2458/26/63.



question. During the preceding days, Maisky, who led the Russian Delegation on this occasion, had made it clear to the Swedish and Finnish representatives in Geneva that his Government had not yet been able to come to a decision on the Plan and therefore wanted a postponement of the Council's consideration of the question until the autumn. This was completely unacceptable to Sweden and Finland and an open clash in Geneva appeared likely.<sup>28</sup> On 21 May, Sandler had seen Halifax in Geneva, clearly hoping to obtain an assurance of public British support against postponement. Halifax had been sympathetic on the main issue but evasive about public support.<sup>29</sup> On 24 May, Maisky called on R. A. Butler, who led the British Delegation after Halifax had returned to London, to ask for his help in getting the matter adjourned or at any rate so arranged that no decision was taken by the Council. Maisky explained that he had now received further instructions to the effect that if it proved impossible to postpone the question and if the Council's approval to the Åland Plan were sought, he should vote against it. If it were carried against Russian opposition "the impression could be none other than painful, and a future agreement by way of diplomatic exchanges rendered much less likely". Maisky's request was embarrassing since the British had already been asked for their support by the Swedes and Finns and Butler returned a friendly though noncommittal answer to Maisky.

Butler consulted his French colleague, Emile Charvériat, and they agreed to work out with the Rapporteur some resolution which effectively shelved the issue and thus met Russian wishes. This was desirable "in view of the negotiations which were proceeding on greater international questions". On the other hand, Britain and France would make no objections if, after the Council meeting, Finland simply carried out the Åland Plan. It is not clear from the record of this discussion whether Helsinki was to be told that this was the Anglo-French standpoint, nor what Butler and Charvériat proposed to do if the Finns and Swedes refused to accept a resolution which, in effect, postponed the issue.<sup>30</sup> In London, the Foreign Office was less inclined to be so conciliatory to the Russians. Snow was warning against the dire consequences for Anglo-Finnish relations of supporting the Soviet Union at Geneva,<sup>31</sup> and on 25 May, Halifax instructed Butler to vote against postponement if no compromise could be arranged.<sup>32</sup> Fortunately for the British, the Swedes and Finns were prepared to accept the compromise which the Rapporteur proposed, namely, that while the question would not be postponed, his report would make no recommendation and would merely state that all the signatories had approved the Plan, while the Soviet

<sup>28</sup> *Wahlbäck*, p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> Minute by Randall, 21 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2608/26/63.

<sup>30</sup> Minute by Butler, 24 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2641/26/63.

<sup>31</sup> Telegram from Snow, 24 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2643/26/63.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes on FO 371/23651 — N 2633/26/63.

Union had wanted an adjournment. Sweden and Finland wished to avoid an open clash at Geneva, since they were still hopeful of eventually being able to obtain Russian consent through negotiation. Their acceptance of the compromise entailed giving up their earlier idea of securing international consent to the second part of the Plan through a vote of the League Council. However, as was revealed in Sandler's statement to the Council after the report was submitted on 27 May, they intended to escape the effects of this failure by claiming that the conclusion to be drawn from the report was that the signatories were competent to approve the Plan without a Council decision. This stance left them free to try and obtain Russian agreement after the Council meeting and, if that failed, to proceed with the remilitarization of the Ålands regardless.<sup>33</sup>

The British were well satisfied after the proceedings in Geneva, since they had been able to have it both ways. On 30 May, Collier noted that "the British Delegation seem to have done all they could to make things easy for the Russians, while standing by the Swedes and Finns on the fundamental issue; and it appears that their attitude has been appreciated by both sides".<sup>34</sup> This sums up British policy in Geneva pretty well, though it should be added that it proved successful only because Swedish and Finnish moderation had enabled the British to avoid openly disagreeing with the Russians by voting against postponement and for the Åland Plan.

The question after the Geneva meeting was whether the Åland Plan would be carried out without further reference to the Soviet Union. On 2 June, the Swedish Government decided to withdraw temporarily the bill authorizing the Åland Plan from the *Riksdag* and to make another attempt to secure Russian consent. The consequent negotiations proved fruitless since the Russian attitude became increasingly negative. Therefore throughout the summer of 1939 the fortification of the Ålands without Russian consent remained a possibility.<sup>35</sup> It is clear that the Foreign Office did not intend to protest if this were done. On 17 June, Fitzmaurice noted that if the Finns and Swedes now proceeded to fortify the Ålands "they would be committing a technical illegality" but Britain, for her part, was not obliged to object.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Northern Department was quite prepared to allow British firms to profit from an immediate refortification of the Ålands, by supplying armaments.<sup>37</sup> When Snow, in a conversation with Erkko on 3 June, let slip a remark that Britain's consent to the Åland Plan depended on the Soviet Union's the Northern Department hastened to instruct him to correct this statement by telling Erkko that British consent depended not on the Russian

<sup>33</sup> *Wahlbäck*, pp. 153—4.

<sup>34</sup> Minute by Collier, 30 May 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2665/26/63.

<sup>35</sup> *Wahlbäck*, pp. 154—166.

<sup>36</sup> Minute by Fitzmaurice, 17 June 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2955/26/63.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes on FO 371/23651 — N 2765/26/63.

attitude but merely on the Soviet Union being consulted.<sup>38</sup> The ambiguity which the word "consulted" had originally been intended to convey had now been removed. But the Foreign Office was still cautious of publicly airing its difference of opinion with Moscow over the Ålands. On 6 June, Snow reported German-inspired rumours in the Finnish press that Britain had secretly supported the Russians at Geneva. Collier noted that the Finnish Government knew what the British attitude had really been and that Snow was doubtlessly letting it be known in responsible circles in Finland. He therefore thought it would be a mistake to issue any public *démenti* "at a time when our negotiations with the Russians are approaching a critical stage".<sup>39</sup>

During July and August, the Åland question lay dormant. It seemed clear that Russian consent would not be forthcoming, but the Finns were content to leave the matter alone until the relationship between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union was clarified and the Swedes were content to await an approach from Helsinki.<sup>40</sup> The conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on the night of 23—24 August therefore found the future of the Åland Plan unclear. The premise on which it had been based was now removed but in the coming months it continued to play an important role in Fenno-Swedish relations. However, that is another story, in which British policy was guided by different considerations.

## 3

In conclusion, it is desirable to examine some of the more general characteristics of British policy in the Åland question and also the manner of its formulation. It will be clear from the text that the British attitude was largely shaped by the Northern Department with the assistance of the Foreign Office's legal advisers. Halifax and the more senior Foreign Office officials were only fitfully involved and rarely expressed an opinion or took a decision. The Åland question never came before the Cabinet and Duff Cooper appears the only Minister outside the Foreign Office even fleetingly involved. The Chiefs of Staff's report was decisive in establishing that Britain for her own part would approve the Åland Plan, but they had no influence over the degree of support accorded to it and they were not consulted again during 1939. It is also noteworthy that in the Åland question there was virtually no co-operation with France. In February 1939, after Britain had already replied to the Swedish and Finnish notes, the French Government enquired about the British attitude to the Åland Plan. The Foreign Office merely sent the French Embassy in London a copy of the British reply, and there were

<sup>38</sup> Telegram from Snow, 3 June 1939; and telegram to Snow, 7 June 1939, FO 371/23651 — N 2804/26/63.

<sup>39</sup> Telegram from Snow, 6 June 1939; and minutes on FO 371/23651 — N 2870/26/63.

<sup>40</sup> *Wahlbäck*, pp. 163—4.

no further exchanges.<sup>1</sup> Butler and Charvériat acted together at Geneva, but this was the only time Britain and France co-operated in the Åland question. In Baltic affairs at least the *Entente* was not operative.

The British attitude to a remilitarization of the Ålands was governed by three basic factors. First, there was the effect of the problem on inter-state relations. A constant anxiety in London was that the revival of the Åland question might lead to a serious deterioration in Anglo-Finnish and Russo-Finnish relations, with the consequent risk that Helsinki's ties with Berlin might be strengthened. The Foreign Office was also concerned not to offend Moscow, but since the Russians made hardly any attempt to influence the British attitude, there was little risk of this happening. Secondly, and this point is closely allied with the first, there was the fear that the proposals to refortify the Ålands were German-inspired or pro-German in intent. This factor was the least important of the three, since such suspicions were progressively allayed and eventually were dispelled altogether.

Thirdly, there was the effect of a remilitarization of the Ålands on Germany's ore supplies in the event of war. Clearly, in terms of *Realpolitik* this consideration was the most essential to British interests, and it was not at all certain whether the latter would be served by the Åland Plan. However, the Foreign Office never really thrashed out whether the remilitarization of the islands was in British interests. It accepted the Chiefs of Staff's views with misgivings and thereafter did not discuss the relationship of the Åland and iron ore questions again. In this connexion, it is interesting to note that while in 1938 all three factors were present in British deliberations, in 1939 only the first was of any importance. It is clear that the Foreign Office was disinclined to pursue the iron ore question, when the latter would only become important in the event of war. Far more pressing and immediate was the need to preserve the diplomatic status quo in the Baltic. The predominant British consideration therefore was the first factor. Throughout the actual was given more weight than the hypothetical, even though the latter concerned more fundamental British interests.

<sup>1</sup> Note by Corbin, 10 Feb. 1939; and letter from Collier to Corbin, 18 Feb. 1939, FO 371/23650 — N 789/26/63.