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## CONDITIONS & POLITICS IN OCCUPIED WESTERN EUROPE, 1940-1945



These historical documents capture the hidden history of war-torn Europe and offer researchers, teachers and students many new perspectives on politics, diplomacy and everyday life in the German-occupied countries. Here is the complete record of political life in Occupied Western Europe available to the British Government during World War II from the original intelligence reports received by the British Foreign Office following the breakdown of normal diplomatic relations during wartime from class "FO 371" at The National Archives. The collection includes detailed information indexed by year and section, from the occupied states of Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and the Vatican, and the neutral countries—Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Some of the topics covered include the German attempts to win over important groups in occupied countries, the reaction to, and effect of, the German occupation, the propaganda struggle, the creation of the first resistance units, the repercussions of events such as the German invasion of Russia and essays on life under occupation in France, the Low Countries and Norway.

**Date Range:** 1940-1945

**Content:** 178,785 images

**Source Library:** The National Archives of the UK

### **Detailed Description:**

Link to [Conditions and Politics in Occupied Western Europe, 1940-1945 Resources](#)

#### *Role and structure of the Foreign Office during World War II*

The Ministry of Economic Warfare, as its name suggests, had, and was entitled to, its own ideas about the ideal form of Britain's relationships with the hostile, occupied and neutral states of Europe. The Ministry of Information had an interest both in publicity about Europe and publicity directed towards Europe, since it exercised a measure of influence over the press and a measure of control over the BBC. The Fighting Services also corresponded with the Foreign Office as did the all-important Chiefs of Staff Committee and its attendant

organisation. Secret intelligence came from SIS (sometimes called 'C's organisation'), from the Special Operations Executive (SOE, called SO2 in 1940-41), from the allied governments exiled in London and from sympathetic individuals throughout the world. Intelligence derived from decoded wireless intercepts is not referred to except in the most guarded and indirect way.

Although there is a good deal of non-British material amongst these documents, most of the material was produced or selectively organised by Whitehall civil servants to help themselves to understand what was happening in continental Europe and what they could do about it. But this was very far from being a continuation of the standard peace-time process of diplomatic observation.

The mood of the times and the facilities of the moment were quite unusual. It was foreign affairs with much of the diplomacy left out and much that was new inserted in its place. Where the Foreign Office had formerly negotiated with governments abroad it learnt to negotiate with governments in exile at its doorstep. More importantly, it had to negotiate with other departments of state in Whitehall and had to concede that although these departments were junior to itself they often possessed enviable powers of initiative. Documentary material that came from the continent often came via the other foreign policy departments, and FO written comments were often comments on what others had found important as well as upon the substance of the reports.

This material was digested by a relatively small number of experienced and knowledgeable officials. The degree of their expertise naturally varied, but it was rarely equal to that of a lifelong student of one particular country. The object of all this study was to prepare advice and drafts for the three most senior officials: Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary, his deputy Sir Orme Sargent, and William Strang, an Assistant Secretary supervising several departments. These overworked men had the duty of presenting the views of the Office to the Secretary of State, and Cadogan often accompanied him to meetings of the War Cabinet. The minutes written by Cadogan ('AC') and Sargent ('OS') are shorter than those of less senior officials, but they are frequently more important. Any document initialled by one or both of these two has been stamped by the nearest thing to a Whitehall nihil obstat.

#### *Source and organisation of material in FO 371*

The outbreak of war made little immediate difference to the way in which the Foreign Office gathered information and did its work. It lost its representation in Berlin and then in Warsaw as it had in Vienna and Prague earlier on, but over most of Europe the British diplomatic team was still intact with their press attachés, military advisers and 'passport officers'. But on 9 April 1940 this began to change very rapidly. The next three months of German conquest led to the closing of British diplomatic posts in Paris, Rome, Oslo, Copenhagen, the Hague and Brussels. The Ambassador in Madrid became virtually a prisoner in his own embassy and the Minister accredited to the Holy See was confined to the Vatican. Throughout most of Western Europe normal diplomacy ceased and the regular channels of information dried up. The newspapers and radio stations were henceforth under German control and censorship.

It seems that Britain's small network of spies (SIS) also collapsed at about this time. The Foreign Office had to build up as quickly as possible a picture of the new conditions on the Continent with a somewhat different mix of intelligence materials. This collection covers the files in FO 371 that were a product of this enterprise.

The reports alone make FO 371 an essential source. The reliability of these reports does, of course, vary and it would be vain to expect that London knew everything that it was interested in, but the reports for Western Europe were usually derived from fairly copious flows of data. The diplomatic posts in Barcelona, Lisbon, Geneva and Tangier were excellent observation points for French affairs; Northern Europe was watched from Berne and Stockholm. It was not, or not always, very difficult for messengers or messages to be sent from Norway to Sweden, from France to Switzerland or Spain. Even where it was very difficult—as with Belgium and the Netherlands, which lacked a conveniently adjacent neutral country—lines of communication were eventually established. Many bona fide travellers were only too anxious to tell the British what they thought was happening, and many brought with them lengthy reports drawn up by others who could not themselves leave their countries. This material was either sent directly to London or forwarded in the form of reasoned compilations.

On arrival in the Foreign Office, the reports were allocated to the respective departments and made the subject of the commentaries and minutes which comprise the other half of FO 371's value to historians. The commentators were Foreign Office civil servants who were invited to make their remarks in order of ascending seniority. Although the minutes cast only an indirect light on what was happening on the continent, they are of first-class importance for the elucidation of British policy. Even the indirect light is of value in that the minutes suggest critical juxtapositions and evaluations which the historian cannot afford to ignore. Of particular interest in this respect is the criticism of reports emanating from other Ministries and secret departments.

#### *Scope of Conditions and Politics in Occupied Western Europe collection*

It is because the neutral countries were so important to Britain's ability to see into Europe, that we have decided to include in this collection what might be termed the 'normal' diplomatic reports covering them. Our principle of selection here has been to provide the British version of the political atmosphere in countries which, while not directly subject to German control, were subject to a greater or lesser degree to German intimidation. Britain's own estimate of its opportunities for counter-play through economic leverage also shows up in these documents. What could be learnt via Stockholm was in part dependent upon the scope of the activities that the Swedes felt obliged, or could be persuaded to feel obliged, to permit. What could be gathered across the Franco-Swiss border depended upon friendly border guards and even friendlier postal censors. If the neutral countries were a channel of communication, they were also a filter of sensitive facts whose anxiety not to give offence to Germany and whose dislike of Nazism must be understood. Even in Spain, where the ideological contest between fascism and democracy had been gravely prejudiced by the defeat of the Republicans in the Civil War, this dislike of Nazism was a factor which the British tried to trace in the politics of the victorious factions and which could be used on

occasion to modify the country's pro-German benevolent neutrality. Italy was, of course, neither occupied nor neutral from June 1940 to September 1943; it was Germany's ally, and yet it started the War as a neutral and ended it as a co-belligerent of the United Nations. More importantly, Northern Italy was the centre of a major resistance movement from 1943-45.

#### *Reaction to German invasion*

The moment of invasion, defeat and conquest for most of the nations concerned occurred during 1940. The British documents trace the willingness, or otherwise, of the existing governments to continue the struggle. We find a Belgian Government wandering about France, hesitating between an inglorious return to a German-ruled Belgium and an unappetising exile in London; a Danish Government trapped in Copenhagen trying to find out just how far it was to be permitted to retain authority; a body of Norwegian politicians negotiating with the Germans in Oslo about the deposition of the exiled government; and a Dutch Prime Minister in London who wanted to give up and go home. Of course, attention focussed, above all other things, upon the French Governments of Reynaud and Petain. It was because the French Government would not go into exile or even cross the sea to French Algeria, that the Foreign Office adopted from the very beginning so low a view of the Petain regime as to permit British support for Charles de Gaulle and the rebellion of La France Libre. Nevertheless, the message of the 1940 documents appears to be that in several countries public feeling was very strongly on the rebound. If the immediate response to conquest was despair and a moment of revulsion from pre-war social and political norms, large sections of the subdued populations had shaken off these nervous crises by the autumn. Once it was seen that the war was unfinished, the thread of normality was re-established. The Battle of Britain went a long way towards curing the anti-British resentments that evacuation had left behind in Norway and France. The Oslo negotiations broke down once King Haakon announced on the BBC his refusal to abdicate.

In France, the Petain Government was massively popular at the moment of its inception, but when Petain met Hitler in October (the Montoire meeting) and announced the policy of 'collaboration' there were some who turned to opposition, others who began to doubt, and even more who still accepted the authority of the Vichy regime but could only trust its judgment through a suspension of disbelief.

If the 1940 records establish the interests of the Foreign Office and its favourite questions, the documentation for the years 1941-45 set out the story of Occupied Europe and such answers as were obtained. Almost monthly the flow of evidence became richer. In using this extraordinarily well-organised archive, the reader may sometimes forget that he is consulting primary material rather than an extended interpretive essay. Of course, FO 371 contains a mass of continental as well as British points of view, and much of the commentary is a set of first responses to a river of data flowing into London from the outside world.

#### *Battle between resistance and collaboration*

There was no certainty in London that Occupied Europe would continue to see itself as being on the 'side' of liberal democracy. And though there was on the part of SOE and of the propaganda organisations a degree of confidence that resistance would one day become active and important, the Foreign Office was less certain, and there was sometimes a tendency for the diplomats to believe that a crypto-Anglophile in even a German-controlled office was worth several would-be rebels in the field. The resistance of the clandestine organisations had to be very effective indeed before it could provide benefits to match those provided by secretly obstructive administrative figures who were, in all appearances, willing collaborators. The problem here was that no one knew whether a significant number of such people existed. The documents are full of attempts to assess exactly what collaboration meant, just how far minor demonstrations of our political independence were signs of things to come or fairly cheap gestures, designed to provide a little momentary popularity in a sequence of unpopular concessions. Even from 1940-42 enthusiastic collaboration was the exception rather than the rule. Analysis of the vast grey area between loyal cooperation with the Nazis and a reluctant conformity to their instructions lacked consistency. It was subject to shifts of emphasis and expectation on the part of officials as the nature of the war and the needs of the moment changed. The long argument about the real meaning of the Danish Government's policy of co-operation with the occupation forces is a classic case of the British dilemma: should one hope to encourage people caught in an impossible position by showing patience, understanding and reticence in the inevitable public criticisms which followed particularly objectionable retreats and concessions to German pressure, or should one cover those who might be trying to do their best with ill-deserved scorn in the belief that it would either strengthen their hands for resistance or weaken the value of their compliance?

The Foreign Office paid much attention as to the Nazi propaganda war. On the British side there were two views. The point of broadcasting to Europe was either to stimulate resistance and guide feeling in a positive way or it was to gain attention that would otherwise find no other object than the collaborationist media. What foreigners said about the BBC when they reached London from Occupied Europe was that its virtue did not lie in any particular message but in the quality of spiritual difference that it conveyed. To listen to the BBC was to escape for a few minutes into an anti-Nazi thought-world. Some of the Foreign Office correspondence on propaganda has been included in this collection to help indicate how this debate evolved.

The documentation provides close accounts of changes of 'government' and administration as the Quislings, Musserts, Deats and Doriots struggled for the fruits of collaborationism, as the Darlans and Scaveniuses tacked this way and that in the German wind, and as policies based upon a degree of native tolerance were replaced by open police terror and the purge of the previously useful compromisers. It describes the economic strategies of the occupier: the exchange-rate manipulations, the confiscation of industrial equipment, and the conscription of labour from 1942 onwards. It reflects the recovery of the neutral countries and the political debate inside them as Germany went into decline and the Anglo-Americans began to insist on advantages for themselves to compensate for those that had previously been granted to the enemy. It records the arrival of the resistance movements on the political

stage and makes clear the sheer difficulty of arming them on a large scale in areas where mountain guerrilla warfare was impossible. It shows the Foreign Office trying to peer into the future by guessing which tendency within the resistance movements would organise the others and take the lead in setting up a post-war regime. It reveals the anxieties of the London observers—the free continentals even more than the British—about the damage that the Germans might inflict on social and political relationships before they left. Above all, it provides details: names, dates and places; useful references to second and third order politicians, to factories where the manager worked with the resistance and to those where management collaborated with gusto, to specific areas where the Maquis was active and to areas in which some of the population was close to starvation. It sometimes appears that resistance was not so much a response to Nazi occupation as to Gauleiter Sauckel's labour conscription policies. These were slightly different, and differently phased, in each country Sauckel visited. But the effect was broadly the same: the transformation of the resistance of secret societies into a resistance of mass movements. Surprisingly, the Foreign Office—at least in the French Department—spotted what was happening well before the end of 1942, and enquired anxiously of SOE whether enough was being done to assist the young men who fled their homes to live, and if possible to fight, in the Maquis. The priority given to reports about this process is clear.

#### *Allied actions 1943-45*

But the most precise political reporting included in these documents concerns Italy because the Allies were fighting their way up the peninsula for a longer period than they fought inside any other European country. The re-emergence of political parties in the South and the political unity of the resistance in the North created an unexpectedly complicated, if promising, situation in which the Foreign Office often had to follow when the military leadership (Eisenhower's, then Alexander's, AFHQ) and the Minister Resident (Harold Macmillan) made the running. The balance of rivalry and co-operation within the Anglo-American relationship also shows up quite clearly in the Italian case. But it must not be expected that FO 371 should give a detailed account of the work of Allied Forces Headquarters or of SHAEF. Western Europe was recovered between 1943-45 by an alliance so large and a war machine so complicated that no single archive can hope to comprehend the way in which it was done. And yet all the larger themes had to be stated to the Foreign Office, which was always able to use its seniority to ensure that it remained reasonably well-informed even when the speed of events eroded its normal authority. It was, in any case, the practice in these later years for senior Foreign Office officials to be attached to the headquarters staffs of Generals Eisenhower, Alexander and Wilson, and these officials carried on both an official and a 'demi-official' correspondence with London. This correspondence is not preserved as a series of messages in their own right, but was distributed to the departments according to the subjects dealt with in the messages. As the tempo of the fighting died down, one senses the Foreign Office recovering its grip on affairs, quite determined that, whatever the forms of military control and government, the ultimate control of civilian affairs should revert to civilian hands. In most cases, even the form of military government was removed after the briefest of delays: the Foreign Office has, after

all, a vested interest in diplomacy, and diplomacy requires independent and authoritative governments installed in their own capital cities.

*Departments and Sections of the Foreign Office during World War II*

**Department**

**Section Dates**

CENTRAL

Belgium 1940-1942

Belgium & Luxemburg 1943-1944

France 1940

General 1942-1944

Netherlands 1941-1944

Portugal 1942-1944

Spain 1940-1944

Switzerland 1942-1944

ECONOMIC AND RECONSTRUCTION

Economic and Reconstruction 1944

FRENCH

France 1941-1944

GENERAL

Allied Administration 1942

Co-ordination 1941-1943

Dominions Intelligence 1942

General 1944

Miscellaneous 1942-1943

Refugees 1943

NORTHERN

Denmark 1941-1945

General 1941-1943

Norway 1940-1945

Sweden 1940-1944

Switzerland 1945

Vatican 1945

#### SOUTHERN

Italy 1941-1944

Vatican 1942-1944

#### WESTERN

Belgium 1945

European General 1945

France 1945

Italy 1945

Netherlands 1945

Portugal 1945

Spain 1945

Sweden 1945

[taken from the introduction by Dr Michael Stenton in *Resources* (see link at the start of this text)]