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This paper explores the experience between 1939 and 1945 of two neutral states which on the face of it had in common only one notable achievement: the fact that they each managed to stay out of Britain's war despite sharing land borders with her or her possessions, and despite considerable diplomatic and economic pressure from more than one of the major belligerents – in Ireland's case Britain and the United States, in Afghanistan's Britain and (after June 1941) the Soviet Union.

In recent years the experience of European neutrals has received some comparative attention, in particular through the collection of essays edited by Neville Wylie, *European neutrals and non-belligerents in the Second World War*, and through Christian Leitz's study of relations between European neutrals and belligerents (a book which does not discuss Ireland at all). Such comparative work has complemented national studies of neutral states, such as William Carlgren on Sweden, Robert Fisk on Ireland, and Neville Wylie on Switzerland.¹ There is an obvious geopolitical logic to studying European neutrals as a comparative group, even though the different states faced very different challenges and had very varied experiences depending on location, history, ideology and opportunity. But why pair Ireland and Afghanistan, and then for good measure bring in both Persia and Iraq into the discussion?

The first reason is the straightforward one that contiguity and patterns of migration greatly influenced the two relatively newly recognized states in their relations with their powerful neighbours. Each had highly permeable land borders, Afghanistan with British India, Ireland with the United Kingdom. Afghanistan's frontier with British India was a theoretical legal construct, largely ignored by the people whose customary territories, ways of life and kith and kin spanned the Durand line effectively imposed by the British in 1893.² Ireland's border

¹ William Carlgren, *Swedish Foreign Policy during the Second World War* (London, 1977); Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the price of neutrality 1939-45* (London, 1983); Christian Leitz, *Nazi Germany and neutral Europe during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2000); Neville Wylie, *Britain, Switzerland and the Second World War* (Oxford, 2003) and (ed.), *European Neutrals and Non-Belligerents in the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2003).

² Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan* (Metuchen, N.J., 1991), 66-7.

with Northern Ireland was equally porous. In addition, since independence Ireland and the United Kingdom had shared a common travel area, and Ireland was an important manpower reservoir both for British industry and for the British armed services. Many people and groups in both Ireland and Afghanistan regarded their legal borders as unilateral British impositions which cut them off from territory and people who rightfully belonged with them. Irish nationalists regarded the six counties of Northern Ireland as a lost province which should some day be recovered, while the Durand line divided historic tribal areas and peoples, and ensured that Afghanistan was entirely landlocked whereas Afghans aspired to control Baluchistan and through it access to the Arabian sea.

A second reason which justifies a comparative approach is a political one: independent Ireland and Afghanistan had respectively asserted their independence from British control or successfully maintained it through the use of force. Here there is also a coincidence of dates, as 1919 was both the first year of the Irish War of Independence, and the year of the third Afghan war (which ended with a ceasefire followed by an agreement signed at Rawalpindi which acknowledged Afghan independence beyond the Khyber Pass). Britain finally fully recognized Afghanistan as an independent state in November 1921, just a month before the Anglo-Irish treaty granted Irish independence.

A third reason is that during the war, in respect both of Afghanistan and of Ireland, Germany let it be understood that the certain reward for helping to defeat Britain would be the achievement of historic territorial ambitions (just as, in 1917, she had attempted to lure Mexico into the war with the promise of the restoration to her of lands lost to the United States in the nineteenth century).³

A fourth reason for looking at the experiences of the two neutral states in wartime is that they each had to deal with what appeared a real threat of invasion from one or more of the belligerents in the early years of the war. Both Ireland and Afghanistan had to balance their determination to maintain diplomatic relations with the Axis powers, in their eyes a badge of sovereignty, with the necessity of preventing their territories being used to mount espionage, sabotage and subversive operations respectively against the United Kingdom and British India. Both states found that their most constant difficulties in remaining neutral and maintaining their sovereignty came from Britain. In the case of Afghanistan these pressures

³ Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British naval intelligence, 1914-18* (London, 1982), 216.

were added to after 22 June 1941 by the Soviet Union, which was anxious about the security threat to its southern border posed by émigré groups in Afghanistan, and which rightly feared that the Axis legations in Kabul were up to no good; in the case of Ireland, after Pearl Harbor the United States played a somewhat similar role, adopting a pose of outright hostility to Irish neutrality and to the presence of Axis missions in Dublin which was somewhat at odds with the more nuanced approach developed in London where, for a variety of reasons, officials argued the need to persuade the Irish rather than to confront them. So carefully calibrated did British policy towards Ireland become, particularly in the crucial area of the security of war information, that the British security service (MI5) concluded that on balance Irish neutrality probably served Allied interests better than participation on Britain's side in the war would have done.⁴

A final reason for studying the two countries in parallel are the somewhat unlikely personal links which emerge. The appointments of the German ministers Hempel and Pilger, who were to serve in Dublin and Kabul respectively throughout the Second World War, were announced on the same day in Berlin in 1937: the British ambassador reported that Pilger

does not give the impression of any particular ability and he has a somewhat scrubby and unprepossessing appearance, but he has always shown himself friendly to this Embassy in the transaction of the tiresome business which falls to the lot of a Near Eastern expert. Despite the promotion involved he views his translation to Kabul without enthusiasm.⁵

Pilger's gloomy response to his elevation was well judged. Hempel was to sit out the war in Ireland unharmed, and at its end to be treated with great consideration by the Irish, despite British and American pressure for him and his staff to be quickly handed over to Allied custody. In the same year, the British decided not to oppose Soviet demands that Pilger and his staff be handed over to them for interrogation in Russia. When the Afghan government politely enquired in the spring of 1946 if Pilger had reached Germany, the Foreign Office thought it wisest 'not to provoke' the Russians, who had already refused to answer similar

⁴ Milan Hauner, *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan and Indian nationalists in the Second World War* (Stuttgart, 1981); Eunan O'Halpin (ed.), *MI5 and Ireland, 1939-1945: the official history* (Dublin, 2003), 31.

⁵ Henderson (Berlin) to Foreign Office, 6 July 1937, British Library, India Office Records and Library (IOR), L/PS/12/1878.

queries from both Britain and the United States.⁶ The minister never got back to Germany, and his fate is unknown but can be guessed: in any case he might not have had much to return to, as his home had been destroyed in 1943.⁷

We may note other bureaucratic coincidences which reflect the intersecting nature of Irish engagement with the British empire. The British minister in Kabul from 1941 to 1943 was Sir Francis Wylie, an Irishman and a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. Like Hempel in the German legation in Dublin, Wylie was very concerned lest any clandestine activities run from the British legation in Kabul might compromise him in the eyes of the Afghan government. He consequently obstructed intelligence gathering by legation staff. This was somewhat to the irritation of Philip Vickery, the head of Indian Political Intelligence (IPI), a small London based organization which acted as a clearing house for all intelligence pertaining to India and to Indians. When he originally accepted the IPI post in 1926 Vickery's acceptance was sent from 'Carraig na Mara, Killiney'. A gifted linguist and Trinity graduate, he succeeded yet another Trinity man, the Calcutta police officer Sir Charles Tegart. Finally, we may note that during the Second World War, one of the two Delhi Intelligence Bureau (IB) officers who ran the crucial double agent *Silver*, the link between the Indian nationalist underground and the German legation in Kabul, was William Magan of Killyon House in County Meath.⁸

The discussion which follows is based mainly on British and Indian government records, including those of the Government Code & Cipher School (GC&CS), the India Office, Indian Political Intelligence (IPI), the security service MI5, and the Special Operations Executive (SOE), together with the diaries of Leo Amery, secretary of state for India from 1940 to 1945, and the papers of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

Long before the Soviet Union was established, Britain had regarded Afghanistan as a necessary buffer between her Indian possessions and Russia. Whatever the reality and extent of Tsarist designs in the late 19th and early 20th century, mutual Anglo-Russian suspicion and

⁶ DIB to London, 22 May, and India Office minute, 27 June 1945, and minute by Baker, Foreign Office, 15 Mar. 1946, IOR, L/PS/12/1878.

⁷ Berlin to Pilger, 29 Nov. 1943, The National Archives (TNA), HW12/295.

⁸ William Magan, *Middle Eastern Approaches: memoirs of an intelligence officer* (London, 2001), 17-18; interviews with Brigadier Magan, 2000 and 2001.

jealousy about Afghanistan was enduring (although the two powers did cooperate in the region during the First World War, jointly occupying parts of neighbouring Persia, and Russia would have had a strong postwar claim to have her interests there properly recognized, had the 1917 revolution not taken her out of her alliance with France and Britain). During the First World War, Germany had sent a military mission to Kabul. It was the first diplomatic contact between the two states. The German aim was to lure the Afghans into a pact to expel the British from India. The Niedermayer mission stayed in Kabul for seven months in 1915/16, leaving in May 1916 when it became clear that while apparently well disposed towards Germany and hostile and resentful towards the British in India, the Afghans would not commit themselves (it appears their main aim was to use the threat posed by the German mission to force Britain to recognize Afghan independence). One of the mission, Otto Walter von Hentig, a specialist in Islamic questions, was to feature once more in the Second World War (early in 1941 SOE was repeatedly told to kill him and his assistants in Syria, where he was en route to Kabul to replace Pilger as minister, an appointment which the Afghans refused to accept: 'the high authorities were most disappointed' at delay in doing so, but in fact he survived the war, publishing a memoir in the 1960s and visiting Afghanistan as a guest of the king in 1970).⁹

The parallel with Ireland is not exact – Afghanistan was already effectively an independent state, although not formally recognized as such by Britain – but the German design derived from broadly the same principle as did their encouragement and support for the Irish rebellion of 1916, i.e. that any trouble that could be caused away from the main fronts distracted British attentions and sucked away military resources. In the Irish case the results were spectacular, particularly in political terms, although Germany seemed barely to notice this; in the case of Afghanistan, while the Niedermayer mission did not succeed in its primary aim, it ensured that Britain had to keep much stronger forces to guard India's northwest frontier than she would otherwise have done.¹⁰

⁹ Francis R. Nicosia, "'Drang nach Osten'" continued? Germany and Afghanistan during the Weimar Republic', *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 32(2), 238-9; SOE war diary, 9, 17, 22, 24, 26 and 29 Jan., 4 and 5 Feb., 19 Mar., 4 Apr. 1941, TNA, HS7/212, 213, 214 and 215; Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 108-9.

¹⁰ Nicosia, "'Drang nach Osten'" continued?', 238.

Both Ireland and Afghanistan experienced an influx of German professionals in the interwar years, such as medical specialists, engineers, teachers, accountants and others with technical qualifications. In neither case should this be seen as evidence of a conscious strategy of penetration for political purposes; rather, it reflected two main factors: a conscious desire in each state to reduce dependence on Britain for necessary technical expertise, and for the Germans a hope that new markets could be developed. Germany put rather more effort into her attempts to use expertise to build up economic and commercial links with Afghanistan than with Ireland, for reasons not of geopolitics but of location and of potential: Afghanistan was but the remotest of a group of Middle Eastern countries including Turkey, Persia and Iraq where Germany sought to revive prewar economic links and to develop new ones. Diplomatic relations were established in 1922, and in 1923 a German minister was accredited to Kabul. The governments of Weimar Germany were at pains not to antagonize the British, repeatedly emphasizing that their interest was solely in developing trade and economic links in the Middle East generally and intended no threat to British interests.¹¹ Britain remained somewhat antagonistic towards such penetration and nervous about German influence generally. This was illustrated in 1924 when Wilhelm Wassmuss, the former German consular official who had earned a reputation as a Middle Eastern irregular fighter during the war second only to T. E. Lawrence, sought British approval for his return to Bushire in Persia to recover his possessions. The India Office was acutely alarmed at the prospect, and even the German minister in Teheran ‘foresaw no good, and possible trouble for himself’, despite Wassmuss’s assurances to the British minister in Teheran: ‘neither by acts nor by words I shall give utterance to anything unfriendly ... the unfortunate war between England and Germany during which I have only done my duty towards my country is a thing of the past’.¹² Britain was also concerned generally that the Soviet-German rapprochement of the mid-1920s might have implications for her colonial interests in the Middle East.

Anglo-Afghan relations improved during the 1930s, as Kabul grew more confident that Britain would not seek to interfere in Afghanistan’s affairs. Kabul sought to maintain

¹¹ Nicosia, “‘Drang nach Osten’ continued?’, 235-6.

¹² Lorraine to Foreign Office, 19 Dec. 1923, quoting the German minister; Wassmuss (in Tehran) to Lorraine, 15 Feb. 1924, IOR, L/PS/11/246.

passable relations with the two great and menacing powers on her northern and southern frontiers, whilst at the same time developing as many links as possible with other states which might act as a counterbalance. Afghanistan joined the League of Nations at the same time as the Soviet Union in 1934, and appointed a minister in Rome. This led to some Italian involvement, including the provision of aircraft and trainers for the Afghan air force (which, confusingly, by 1939 also had British trainers and some Hawker Hind aircraft).¹³ Once Hitler came to power, the nature of German engagement with Afghanistan inevitably changed. The ‘resurgence of Germany .. with its imposing industrial potential and its strident militarism, was a particularly attractive factor’ for the Afghans, particularly as Hitler was perceived to be well disposed towards Muslim interests and identity.¹⁴ As in Ireland, the German colony was put under a form of political control. *Luftbansa* established a regular Kabul/Berlin route in 1937, although this was suspended when war broke out, and the Organisation Todt oversaw major roads and public works programmes.¹⁵ But Britain was more concerned at the apparent growth of Soviet influence, and the possibility of a Soviet attack on India through Afghanistan.¹⁶ Afghanistan, herself concerned that the Soviets might attack, sought a British guarantee of her territorial integrity in 1938, but that was not forthcoming. With the outbreak of war, the British general staff speculated that Hitler might encourage the Soviet Union to strike for India. This idea had in fact gained currency in Berlin, where the military pondered a ‘joint Nazi-Soviet strategy against the British Empire in the Middle East and Asia’, using the ex-king Amanullah, a modernizer in exile in Europe since his ouster in 1929 by more conservative elements, as a figurehead leader in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Compared to these complexities, Ireland seemed in very secure circumstances on the eve of war. Britain and France stood between her and the only conceivable military threat, and the likelihood of being drawn into a general European war had greatly decreased in April 1938

¹³ Milan Hauner, ‘Afghanistan between the great powers, 1938-1945’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 14 (1982), 481-2.

¹⁴ Hauner, ‘Afghanistan between the great powers’, 482.

¹⁵ Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan* (Metuchen, N.J., 1991), 29.

¹⁶ Milan Hauner, ‘The Soviet threat to Afghanistan and India 1938-1940’, *Modern Asian Studies* 15, 2 (1981), 288-9.

¹⁷ Hauner, ‘Afghanistan between the great powers’, 485.

when Britain relinquished her defence rights under the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921 as part of a general settlement of economic, financial and political issues. The American minister in Dublin remarked that this ‘was an outstanding triumph and marks de Valera as the greatest Irish leader’, while de Valera was at pains to thank the American president Roosevelt for sending a message ‘at a critical moment in .. the negotiations’.¹⁸ The grievance of partition aside, Ireland’s geostrategic position must have appeared enviable to other neutrals intent on staying out of imminent war.

Ireland did have some concerns, however, as war loomed. After the 1938 settlement, de Valera reiterated his long held view that Ireland could never allow herself to be used by foreign powers as a base from which to attack Britain.¹⁹ Since the early 1920s, Ireland like Afghanistan had experienced a modest influx of Germans. The state’s vast hydroelectric scheme on the River Shannon was built by Siemens, while the drive for industrialization in the 1930s saw German specialists take senior positions in various state enterprises. After 1933 members of the German community in Ireland had come under pressure to demonstrate their loyalty to Hitler through participation in organizations under Nazi party control. The political leader of the German community was an Austrian archeologist, Dr Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum of Ireland. This minor penetration of Germans did not cause London or Dublin any great concern until 1937, when evidence emerged of some espionage involving German residents and the officers of a ship which plied regularly between Dublin and Hamburg. During the Munich crisis in the autumn of 1938 the Irish signaled their concerns to the British government about possible German clandestine activities (although not about German contacts with the IRA, which were only uncovered in 1940). On the advice of MI5, a counterespionage section was established within Irish military intelligence, and from this small start developed what became a very close relationship with MI5, ‘the Dublin link’ as it is described in British records.²⁰

¹⁸ John Cudady, United States minister, Dublin, to J.C. Walsh, 25 May 1938, New York Public Library, J.C. Walsh papers, box 3; de Valera to Roosevelt, 22 Apr. 1938, in Catriona Crowe, Ronan Fanning, Michael Kennedy, Dermot Keogh and Eunan O’Halpin (eds.), *Documents in Irish Foreign Policy* vol. V 1937-1939 (Dublin, 2006), 274.

¹⁹ O’Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 28-9.

²⁰ O’Halpin (ed.), *MI5 and Ireland*, 18-22.

No comparable prewar security link was forged between India and Afghanistan, although it is clear that Delhi did have some sources inside the country: in January 1940 MI5's Guy Liddell noted that 'the War Office are thinking of taking over the Police Intelligence organization which is ready made in Afghanistan. I should feel that this might be unwise'.²¹

Reviewing the situation in Afghanistan since 1939, early in 1943 a British official wrote that from the first, the Afghans had a strong anti-British and anti-Soviet bias, and the Germans were easily able to put this fact to good profit. Many Afghans, such as Governors and police officials in the provinces, and Cabinet Ministers and civil and military officials in government departments at Kabul render the Germans services of one sort and another from time to time; and many more preach the German propaganda gospel in the bazaars and elsewhere. Very few of the above can, however, properly be regarded as part of the regular espionage apparatus itself.²²

The same could not be said of Ireland where, small groups such as the eccentric 'Irish Friends of Germany' aside, public sentiment was firmly pro-neutral and the private sympathies of the majority of people were pro-ally (particularly after the summer of 1940). The imposition of a remarkably strict system of press censorship also had a dampening effect on the dissemination of propaganda by both Germany and Britain.²³

The advent of war immediately brought into focus the problem of German civilians in both Ireland and Afghanistan. The Irish had a lucky break, because about fifty of the most active Nazis, including Dr Mahr, were attending a party function in Germany and had to remain in Europe. Shortly afterwards, Dublin arranged with MI5 for the safe conduct through Britain to the Netherlands of a further one hundred Germans including most of the remaining active Nazis. Both the British and the German governments thanked the Irish for their help. A few Germans also moved from Britain to Ireland just before war was declared, including one man later arrested as a German agent.²⁴ The main security difficulties which the Irish

²¹ Liddell diary, 10 Jan. 1940, TNA, KV4/185.

²² Connor-Green to ? [probably Vickery of IPI], 4 Jan. 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1933.

²³ Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (Oxford, 1999), 210-13, 222-3.

²⁴ O'Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 51.

faced during the war came not from German residents but from three interrelated problems. These were the activities of German agents sent to Ireland in 1940, 1941 and 1943 on various clandestine missions directed primarily against Britain. With one exception, these agents were detected and detained very quickly. The second problem was the IRA, which developed its prewar contacts with Germany and which appeared a potential fifth column should Germany decide to invade. Although the organization seemed a major threat in the summer of 1940 – London received wildly exaggerated accounts of its size and capacity – by June 1941 the Irish government had it firmly under control and it was clearly incapable of any sustained pro-German activity.²⁵ The third problem was the presence of Axis diplomatic missions. Of these, the Italian did little, and until 1943, when they attempted to set up links with the IRA which the Irish police soon uncovered, the two man Japanese consulate did even less.²⁶ The great worry was the German legation. Here the Irish had both difficulties and advantages. The legation, its personnel and their associates were watched, but its communications with Berlin could not be read. Furthermore, while Germany was in the ascendant in 1940-1 the Irish had to tread very carefully: it was only in 1943 that the British learned through decoding hitherto unbreakable German messages that Dublin had adroitly resisted a German plan to fly in three additional staff from France in December 1940, supposedly civilians but in fact army personnel tasked to collect intelligence on bomb damage in Britain, despite very menacing pressure from Berlin.²⁷ Yet it was in this period that the Irish and the British separately determined that the German legation had a clandestine transmitter. This was to prove a problem second only to Irish neutrality itself in Anglo-Irish relations.

The position in Afghanistan was very different. Central government was extremely weak and power was divided amongst ministers with their own followings and tribal allegiances.

²⁵ Mark Hull, *Irish Secrets: German Espionage in Wartime Ireland 1939-1945* (Dublin, 2003), is the best study of this question.

²⁶ Walshe (External Affairs) to taoiseach, 27 May and 1 June 1944, National Archives of Ireland (NAI), DFA A2.

²⁷ Reports by Walshe (External Affairs, Dublin) of discussions with Hempel, 19 Dec. 1940 and 6 Jan. 1941, NAI, DFA A21; undated extract from decode of Berlin to Hempel, and extract from decode of Berlin to Hempel, 18 Dec. 1940, given under 'Researches into earlier material' in 'Summary of most secret information from Dublin 8th-22nd January 1944', TNA, DO121/87.

Whereas in Ireland there were only two groups on the margins which might attempt to act in the Axis interest – the IRA, and the vestiges of General O’Duffy’s crypto-Fascist Blueshirt movement – Afghanistan was home not only to a range of diverse ethnic groups and tribes but to large numbers of Muslim exiles from Turkestan, Uzbekistan and other Soviet territories. Amongst these might be found people who, for reasons of kinship, or religion, or ideology, or money, would be prepared to make trouble along Afghanistan’s Soviet and Indian borders (German propaganda played on Muslim sentiment, and was probably responsible for an outbreak of anti-Jewish feeling in Kabul in 1941, although Pilger later reported that the only Jews in Afghanistan were impoverished hucksters in the bazaars).²⁸ With the Soviet Union neutral but in a benign relationship with Germany, the Afghans could not afford to antagonize either the Germans or the Russians by imposing special restrictions on their respective citizens and Afghan supporters. Early in 1940, nevertheless, the British minister was instructed to urge the Afghans to reduce the number of German residents because of ‘dangers of German-cum-Soviet intrigue’. He was to remind them ‘of the methods of treachery and intrigue, now commonly associated with the name of Quisling’: Two months earlier London had received intelligence that ‘a plot is being hatched in Berlin for a rising in favour of Amanullah in Afghanistan’.²⁹ There are clear parallels with the British warning to Ireland of 1 June 1940 that ‘an invasion is not only seriously planned and prepared with the help of the IRA, but is *imminent*’.³⁰ The Afghans did take some steps to hamper Axis contacts with tribes along the Indian frontier, as it was a fairly open secret by 1940 that the Italians were paying a subsidy to the Fakir of Ipi in Waziristan to mount operations against British interests: in December 1940, in a cable decoded by the British, the Italian minister said the Fakir was carrying out ‘the usual attacks upon military posts and traffic .. The Fakir talks of 900 British soldiers killed, but this is certainly an exaggeration’. Even though the Fakir never delivered the widespread tribal revolt of which the Axis powers dreamed, he certainly tied down a lot of British forces: at one point 40,000 troops were said

²⁸ Military attaché’s diary, 22 Feb. 1941, IOR, L/PS/12/1844; Pilger to Berlin, 18 May 1943, TNA, HW12/288.

²⁹ Liddell diary, 18 Feb. 1940, TNA, KV4/185; draft India Office message for Kabul, 24 Apr. 1940, IOR, L/PS/12/1774.

³⁰ Antrobus (British Representative’s Office, Dublin) to External Affairs, 1 June 1940, NAI, DFA, A3.

to be involved trying to catch him.³¹ Events took a dramatic turn in July 1940, when two recently arrived German armed civilians disguised in Afghan dress had a confused encounter with an Afghan patrol, resulting in one of the men being shot dead, and the other wounded.³² It was an important demonstration of resolve by the Afghans, whether or not, as one writer suggests, Britain had played a secret hand in arranging it.³³

In the first years of the war Britain could decode Italian and Japanese diplomatic traffic to and from both Afghanistan and Ireland, but not German. The latter proved impenetrable until the start of 1943, when it was broken and given the cover name Pandora. In the case of Afghanistan, Pandora confirmed other intelligence showing that from early 1941 the German legation had taken over from the Italians as the mainspring of large scale espionage and subversion directed against India, the Soviet Union, and Persia; in the Irish case, it showed that Hempel, while not collecting war intelligence systematically, was increasingly willing to risk his mission if he obtained vital information relating to Allied plans to invade Europe. Britain's inability to read German traffic until 1943 was partly compensated in respect of both Ireland and Afghanistan by material in Italian messages. In both neutral states the Germans had clandestine transmitters; in neither did the Italians, who had to rely entirely on the security of their codes as their messages traveled by cable. Decodes of cables between Rome and Dublin showed clearly that, other than passing on vague gossip gleaned from Irish people sympathetic to the Italian cause, the Italian mission in Dublin was not engaged in orchestrating espionage or subversion against British interests (whereas Italian diplomats were so involved in the Middle East and in parts of Asia), and that Dublin was not a significant listening post for Rome. The most significant Italian message which the British decoded was a cable from the Italian embassy in Washington to the Italian legation in Dublin of 28 December 1940. Although somewhat garbled, enough of this was decoded to

³¹ Japanese minister, Kabul, to Tokyo, 11 July 1940, TNA, HW12/54; Italian minister, Kabul, to Rome, 2 Jan. 1941, TNA, HW12/260; Milan Hauner, 'One man against the empire: the Faqir of Ipi and the British in Central Asia on the eve of and during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 16 (1981), 183; Charles Chenevix Trench, *The Frontier Scouts* (Oxford, 1985), 221-60.

³² Military attaché's diary, 4 and 25 July 1941, IOR, L/PS/12/1844.

³³ Richard Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America and the politics of secret service* (Cambridge, 2000), 165.

make out its meaning. It began: ‘- has obtained facilities for a connection by wireless telegraph with Dublin via Berlin’, and instructed the Italian minister to ask his German colleague if he could use this link for important communications.³⁴ This was the first clear evidence Britain obtained that the German mission in Dublin had a clandestine transmitter, a discovery which dominated Anglo-Irish security relations until the set was finally handed over to the Irish in December 1943.³⁵

Exchanges between Rome and Kabul yielded a great deal of material on the extensive intrigues of both the Italians and the Germans in Afghanistan and along the Indian frontier. They also threw light on Axis efforts to use Afghanistan as a base from which to collect intelligence and to promote subversion in the southern Soviet Union. After June 1941, the latter problem acquired new significance in London and Delhi, since the Soviet Union had become an ally where it had previously been seen as a major threat: in the immediate aftermath of the attack, the India secretary Leo Amery feared that the Germans might soon be in a position to ‘attack us via Persia and Iraq as well as to stir up the Afghans’.³⁶

Two months after Barbarossa, it was decided to send a SOE representative to Kabul. This was W.R. Connor-Green, who ‘has made a long study of Russia and the language’.³⁷ Britain already had an intelligence officer in Afghanistan, Major Fletcher, an old Kabul hand who had returned to the Afghan capital as military attaché in July 1940 to establish an intelligence organization directed against Axis intrigue. After some debate, the British minister prevailed in his argument that it was better not to advise the Afghan government of ‘real reasons for this appointment. I do not think that they would object to us organizing counter [measures?] to German and Italian influence here but would be afraid of such measures exciting Russian suspicions’. Fletcher only lasted a year, attracting complaints from the Afghans about both his ‘personal foibles’ and his clandestine activities. The British refused to accede to Afghan requests to withdraw him, but privately acknowledged that he had some ‘disreputable friends’ and was believed to let young men drink alcohol in his home. The British minister complained that he had also made an indiscreet approach to the Soviet embassy shortly after

³⁴ Italian embassy, Washington, to Italian legation, Dublin, 28 Dec. 1940, TNA, HW12/260.

³⁵ O’Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, pp. 68-70 and 78-82.

³⁶ Amery diary, 22 June 1941, Churchill College Cambridge Archives (CCCA), AMEL7/35.

³⁷ Mallet (Foreign Office) to Clauson (India Office), 12 Aug. 1941, IOR, L/PS/12/699.

Barbarossa, although he had received permission and the Russians were receptive – ‘they have a good deal of information about Germans employed by the Afghan Government, [but] they know little of German activities generally as there is very little contact between Germans and Russians’. A face saving solution emerged when the British army in Persia issued an urgent call for a Persian speaking officer, which provided ‘a very useful opportunity of settling this unfortunate incident to the satisfaction of all parties’.³⁸

Intelligence work was left thereafter solely to SOE’s Connor-Greene, who was assisted by a Pole and two Afghans employed by the legation. However, their activities were initially greatly hampered by the British minister’s disapproval of intelligence activities. Within a year SOE asked for Connor-Green’s withdrawal as he was unable to discharge his allotted duties because ‘he did not appear to hold the confidence’ of the minister. Wylie’s unsympathetic attitude arose from his fear that any intelligence activities might antagonize the Afghans – so cautious was he that, shortly after arriving in Kabul early in 1941, he had put an end to contact with the Italian commercial attaché who had ‘had secret dealings with us’.³⁹ Various plans of Connor-Green, including a ‘Northern Informant Scheme’ aimed at obtaining information on Soviet Turkestan, had to ‘be shelved in deference to the Minister’s view that even the smallest risk of being caught out by our [Soviet] allies would not be justified by the potential results’. In Afghanistan, SOE’s man outlasted his diplomatic critic. Wylie retired in the summer of 1943, though not before he had embarrassed Soviet intelligence by mentioning their cooperation with SOE in Kabul to the Soviet ambassador, who was unaware of it.⁴⁰ His successor H.C. Squire, like Connor-Green a Russian speaker, was less inclined to fret about intelligence activities. Connor-Green departed, to the plaudits even of the Delhi authorities, towards the end of 1944.⁴¹

There is some parallel here with circumstances in Ireland, where SOE’s agent Roddy Keith was withdrawn in June 1941 after only three months following bitter complaints from the secret intelligence service (SIS) and MI5 about the damage which he might do to Anglo-Irish

³⁸ Military attaché’s diary, 27 June 1941, IOR, L/PS/12/1844; British minister, Kabul, to Foreign Office, 7 July, Delhi to London, 11 July, and India Office minute, 9 Sept. 1941, IOR, L/PS/12/1932.

³⁹ Wylie to Foreign Office, 13 Feb. [1943], and 19 Nov. 1942, IOR, L/PS/12/699 and 1882.

⁴⁰ Hill (SOE, Moscow) to SOE London, and reply, 1 and 7 June 1943, TNA, HS1/191.

⁴¹ Pilditch (head of IB, Delhi) to Mackenzie (head of SOE in India), 13 Dec. 1944, TNA, HS1/191.

security relations.⁴² The two agencies which forced SOE's departure, however, did themselves operate in Ireland with the blessing of the British representative Sir John Maffey, who was kept informed of their activities generally and who, in May 1943, was even admitted to the ultra sensitive secret of Pandora.⁴³ Although the Irish penetrated SIS's clandestine Irish operations, they did not close them down because these were directed primarily at investigating pro-Axis activities and were not a threat to the Irish state, and also because the British would certainly have started up again and the Irish might not have succeeded in penetrating such new networks as effectively as they had the existing ones.⁴⁴

In Kabul Connor-Green secured an early success, enlisting the secret help of one Vichy French diplomat in the summer of 1942. This man won over the French minister to the Allied cause, and, 'acting in concert with the Minister, [contrived] to gain the confidence of one or more of the enemy Legations'. The result was that the British received 'about a hundred items of information from the enemy' over the following year.⁴⁵ This was very much in contrast to Dublin, where relations between the Vichy minister and the Axis legations were minimal, and where most French officials appear from British and Irish intelligence records to have done little beyond feuding.⁴⁶ Even the naval attaché Albertas, a diehard *Pétainiste* in whose household SIS briefly managed to plant a French speaking maid in 1941, lived a disappointingly prosaic life until his reluctant and much delayed return to France in the autumn of 1944.⁴⁷

⁴² Foreign Office to India Office, 2 June 1942, IOR, L/PS/12/699; SOE war diary, undated [late May 1942], TNA, HS7/233; Eunan O'Halpin, "Toys" and "whispers" in 16-land: SOE and Ireland, 1940-1942', *Intelligence and National Security*, 15, 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 1-16.

⁴³ O'Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 77.

⁴⁴ O'Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 7.

⁴⁵ Kabul to Delhi, 11 June 1942, and Connor-Green to ?[probably Vickery of IPI], 21 Jan. 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1933.

⁴⁶ See Irish intelligence reports on the Vichy legation in NAI, DFA A8 and 8/1 and P70.

⁴⁷ Unsigned m.s. reports [by Moore, an Irish intelligence informer within an MI6 network], 5 Oct. 1941, and undated, Military Archives of Ireland, G2/X/1091; the saga of Albertas's eventual departure is dealt with in decodes of the French minister, Dublin, to Paris, 22 Oct, 4 and 8 Dec. 1944, TNA, HW12/305 and 307.

The higher up the chain of command the question of the Axis presence in neutral states was considered, the more drastic were the remedies proposed. The first two years of the war had provided plenty of evidence of Hitler's contempt for the neutrality of small European states; in 1941, Britain took her turn to show disdain for the niceties of international law and the principles of national sovereignty amongst the newly emerging states of the Middle East. Under the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930 in which Britain recognized Iraqi independence, she had retained defence rights; in 1941 this enabled her to move Indian and other troops into the Basra region after decades of Italian diplomatic traffic and other intelligence confirmed that a pro-Axis coup was planned. These forces were then employed to expel the nationalist leader Rashid Ali El Gailiani shortly after he seized power with Italian and German encouragement. As the Italian minister in Baghdad put it, after staging the coup Rashid Ali was 'very much vexed by the fact that at this delicate moment .. we have as yet given him no reply about support by Axis air forces', which in fact the Axis attempted only to a very limited extent (the imminent attack on the Soviet Union being of more significance to Hitler). Like the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who had settled in Baghdad after fleeing from Palestine and who was closely involved in Axis plans for Middle East subversion, Rashid Ali fled Iraq and sat out the rest of the war in Rome and Berlin. In exile he still impressed the Italian foreign minister as 'a vivacious and resolute man, who has great influence upon his people', but he was no longer in a position to influence affairs in the Middle East.⁴⁸ The British installed a compliant Iraqi administration which did exactly as it was told until the war ended.

The British success in Iraq appeared to vindicate a robust approach to awkward neutral powers. It was shortly followed by the attack on Vichy controlled Syria, where the German air force had been allowed to operate from a number of airfields. The next neutral for attention was Persia, which the British and their new Soviet allies jointly occupied on the largely specious grounds that Teheran had been dilatory in taking action to round up and expel Axis civilians who were regarded as a threat to British and Soviet interests. Whereas

⁴⁸ Italian minister, Baghdad, to Rome, 22 and 30 Jan., 5, 14 Feb., 5 and 12 Mar., 3, 4, 8, 14, 17 and 23 Apr. 1941, TNA, HW12/260, 261, 262 and 263. Rashid Ali is referred to in these messages as 'Gailiani', an Italianised version of the suffix; Amery diary, 8 and 18 Apr. 1941, CCA, AMEL7/35; Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's Diaries, 1939-1943* (London, 1947), 432, entry for 10 Feb. 1942.

the Iraq intervention was reasonably justified in that the main aim was to oust an Axis-sponsored coup – the details of which had been known in advance to the British from decoded Italian cables in which Rome offered reassurance and promises of support – the stated reason for occupying Persia was little more than a pretext for an exercise in *force majeure*.⁴⁹ Within a year the Persian police were reported to be doing well in tracking down Axis agents, and the British minister indicated some sympathy for the prime minister's argument that to hand over such prisoners directly to the British 'would be damaging to prestige of Persian Government', and various ploys were worked out to avoid any embarrassment. The British and Russians also made unilateral searches and arrests in their respective areas of occupation.⁵⁰ For the rest of the war both Persia and Iraq operated under the sufferance of the occupying powers, and the Soviets took their time in leaving Persia after the conflict had ended.

The success of these Middle Eastern interventions may well have influenced the British prime minister Winston Churchill in his increasingly robust approach to other neutrals. In September 1941 he directed that pressure be applied in Kabul to obtain the expulsion of Axis civilians. Such an approach was possible because the Soviet Union was now an ally. He personally overruled the reservations of Wylie about the wisdom of seeming to bully the Afghans in concert with the Russians, and although resented in Kabul the initiative produced results within weeks.⁵¹ It is reasonable to wonder whether this precedent came into Churchill's mind in 1943, when he began again to press the Dominions Office for strong action to force the hand of the Irish government on the issue of the Axis legations in Dublin.⁵²

⁴⁹ Joan Beaumont, 'Great Britain and the rights of neutral countries: the case of Persia, 1941', *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 6 (1981), 217.

⁵⁰ Bullard (Teheran) to Foreign Office, 22 Apr., 4 May and 9 June 1942, British Library India Office Library and Records (IOR), L/PS/12/656. Magan, *Middle Eastern Approaches*, 66-8.

⁵¹ Churchill to Eden, 11 Sept., and to Wylie (British minister in Kabul), 19 Oct. 1941, in Martin Gilbert (ed.), *The Churchill war papers iii: the ever-widening war* (London, 2000), pp. 1173 and 1350; Llewellyn Woodwar, *British foreign policy in the second world war* (5 vols., London, 1970-76), ii (1971), p. 58.

⁵² O'Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 78.

After the Italian surrender Quaroni, the Italian minister in Kabul, gave Connor-Green a lengthy though self-serving account of his activities. He particularly criticized the attitude taken by the British and the Soviets at the time of the discovery of the Tirazi plot. This scheme was eerily reminiscent of the centerpiece of John Buchan's First World War adventure *Greenmantle*. Devised with Axis encouragement by Bokharan and Uzbek exiles in India and northern Afghanistan, the plan was that 10,000 horseman would sweep across the Soviet border to coincide with a German breakthrough in the Caucasus, and make for Bokhara and Tashkent. Discovery of the scheme left the German legation in a 'peculiarly delicate' situation which might have led to its closure.⁵³ Quaroni, who claimed to have warned his German colleagues that the scheme was 'not only dangerous but futile', said that in this crisis both he and the German minister Pilger found that

our greatest ally in this matter was Sir Francis Wylie. The terms and method of the Joint Demarche with the Soviets so angered the Afghan Government as almost to neutralize their fury against the Germans. You will forgive me if I say that in this affair you made a great mistake in not taking into account the touchiness of the Afghans on the question of their independence.⁵⁴

Wylie's report of his meeting with the Afghan prime minister Zahir Shah bears out the impression of Afghan resentment: 'Tone of conversation was unfriendly but Prime Minister controlled his temper – sometimes apparently with difficulty – and attempted no fireworks ... After this interview I am strongly reinforced in my previous view viz that it was high time that Government here was pulled up short. Whether it is (? their) hatred of Russians – and indeed of ourselves – or whatever cause may be, their present relations with Axis seem to me to constitute real danger to Allied cause in this part of the world'.⁵⁵ Extraordinarily, this confrontation in Kabul caused an Anglo-American row: on 7 June an American diplomat in London told the Foreign Office that 'any show of compulsion by the British and the Russians throughout Afghanistan that any benefits which might otherwise accrue would be outweighed'. If the Afghan authorities took all the action demanded, 'the very stability of the present regime might be endangered by the resultant resentment amongst the tribes'.

⁵³ Vickery (IPI) to Silver (India Office), 16 Nov. 1943, British Library, IOR, L/PS/12/1805.

⁵⁴ Connor-Green's note of talk with Quaroni, 2 Oct. 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1805.

⁵⁵ British minister, Kabul, to Delhi, 27 May 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1798.

Coming from an ally with little experience of and no strategic interest in Afghanistan, this produced near apoplexy in the Foreign Office. The foreign secretary sent Washington a stiff aide memoire on the issue emphasizing that the United States had no right of prior consultation on matters relating to Afghanistan. In Kabul Wylie taxed his American opposite number with furnishing an 'exquisitely wrong' picture of affairs.⁵⁶

In July further Anglo-Soviet pressure for a general round up of Afghan conspirators and émigrés was applied. The Soviet government, 'while acknowledging the efforts taken .. for suppressing the harmful activities of white-émigrés, considers such measures inadequate', and the ambassador provided a list of alleged subversives for detention. Wylie made similar representations a few days later.⁵⁷ Such concerted pressure might have backfired, but in fact it achieved its main objects. The Afghans asked for the withdrawal of two German officials mainly involved in espionage, and one Italian. To avoid loss of face, the Germans and Italians treated these as recalls. The Afghans secured safe passage for the Germans from the British, who were delighted to facilitate their departure, and they reached Germany safely.⁵⁸

The parallel between the Kabul representations and the 'American note' delivered in Dublin in February 1944 is obvious, although the roles of the Allied states involved were reversed. The American note was a clumsy attempt by the United States government to force de Valera to close the Axis legations or to risk having Ireland portrayed as indifferent to the security of Overlord, the imminent Allied invasion of Europe.⁵⁹ The Americans were egged on by Churchill, despite the 'great misgivings' of MI5 officers who feared the demarche

⁵⁶ Gillman (United States embassy, London) to Foreign Office, 7 June, and British minister, Kabul, to Foreign Office, 26 July 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1798.

⁵⁷ Text of Soviet foreign minister to British ambassador, Moscow, 10 July 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1798.

⁵⁸ Chargé d'affaires, Kabul, to Foreign Office, 25 July 1943, IOR, L/PS/12/1798; German minister, Kabul, to Berlin, 6 Apr. and 5 Aug., and Italian minister, Kabul, to Rome, 8 Aug.; Berlin to German minister, Kabul, 4 Dec. 1943, TNA, HW12/287, 290 and 294. In 1971 Professor Milan Hauner met one of the Germans concerned, Witzel, at a conference in Calcutta commemorating Subhas Chandra Bose. Witzel was disconcerted to learn that his wartime reports from Kabul were open to research and that his cover had been blown. Information from Milan Hauner, April 2006.

⁵⁹ Eunan O'Halpin, 'Irish-Allied security relations and the "American Note" crisis: new evidence from British records', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* vol. 11 (2000), pp. 71-83.

would jeopardize Anglo-Irish security cooperation just as preparations for Overlord came to fruition, and despite the war cabinet's conclusions that Allied security interests were best met by leaving the legations in place, because their communications were completely controlled. The American note met with a furious reaction from Dublin, who saw it as a threat to sovereignty and which feared that it might be the preamble to armed occupation, as had happened in somewhat similar circumstances in Persia in 1941. British officials privately conveyed to the Irish the point that the impetus for the demarche had come from the American minister in Dublin, an indiscreet alarmist who had been told almost nothing of the workings of Anglo-Irish security cooperation since 1940. Controls on communications and movement between Ireland and the outside world were tightened up further by agreement, and security cooperation was not jeopardized. But Ireland maintained its diplomatic links with the remaining Axis powers until the end of the war.⁶⁰

The issue of the Axis missions in Dublin and Kabul threw up another commonality. Even when the pressure on the Irish and the Afghans to close them was at its most intense in 1943 and 1944, intelligence officials in London and Delhi dealing with the question took a rather different view. This was for three main reasons. Firstly, all cable traffic to and from Kabul, and to and from Dublin, was routinely delayed by a number of days as a standard security measure. Furthermore, from 1943 all the communications of these missions could be decoded. In Dublin, the problem of the uncontrolled radio link with Berlin was solved in December 1943 when the German minister handed over his set to the Irish. In Kabul the German legation retained its clandestine set, but the enforced departures of the staff most involved in espionage and the exposure of German intrigues meant that Pilger and his remaining staff were in no position to continue subversive activities or to send intelligence. Pilger instead handed over the German networks in Afghanistan and India to his Japanese colleague. When in May 1944 the Soviets brought up the question of forcing the closure of the Japanese legation, Delhi told London that 'Security and Intelligence officials here .. regard continued presence of Japanese Legation in Kabul as most desirable'.⁶¹ This was because the Japanese were running the mercurial double agent 'RK', Bhaghat Ram Talwar, whose British codename was *Silver*. *Silver* was a committed communist, who at Soviet behest

⁶⁰ O'Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 82-4.

⁶¹ Delhi to London, 16 May 1944, IOR, L/PS/12/1798.

had been working for the British since November 1942. He was the main link between the exiled Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose and the nationalist underground in India, which also gathered intelligence for the Axis. Working under British control, from 1942 to 1945 he systematically deceived both Bose and the Axis about the nature and extent of Indian resistance to British rule, and about Allied military dispositions and intentions.⁶² Since the British were providing *Silver* with his material, and since they could read the relevant Japanese traffic, they had every incentive to let the Japanese mission in Kabul remain, and it did. Guy Liddell of MI5, who also dealt extensively with Ireland, remarked that ‘if there are no Jap embassies there will be no channels through which to pass deception .. we might therefore .. leave the one in Afghanistan which from the deception point of view was the most important since it controlled the Silver case’.⁶³

Dublin was never so significant a base for Axis espionage or for Allied deception as was Kabul, but officials in London argued on similar lines for keeping the enemy missions open. Their key arguments were firstly that the legations’ communications were under British control, thanks to codebreakers and to the cable system (all cables to and from Ireland were routed through London for the duration of the war); and secondly, that to bring about the expulsion of Axis diplomats might cause the enemy to send more agents ‘with means of communication which it would take some time to discover’, and who might obtain and radio back crucial war information.⁶⁴

There are clear parallels in British diplomacy towards these two small and irritating neutral states with which she shared land borders during the Second World War. This is so particularly in terms of an initial tendency to underestimate the strength of national feeling and amour propre, and an unwillingness to comprehend the historical and political factors underpinning the reluctance of these neutrals to be forced to take sides in a conflict from which neither state could expect anything save certain pain and probable civil war. British

⁶² F. H. Hinsley and C.A.G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* volume 4 *Security and Counter-Intelligence* (London, 1990), pp. 232-4.

⁶³ Guy Liddell diary, 26 Sept. 1944, TNA, KV4/195.

⁶⁴ O’Halpin, *MI5 and Ireland*, 83.

actions in the Middle East in 1941 demonstrated that she would openly violate other states' neutrality where it suited her. The Anglo-Soviet occupation of Persia, in particular, must have sent a chill down Afghan spines. As well as the threat of a German attack in 1940-1, as preamble to or an element of an invasion of Britain, Ireland also faced the threat of such unilateral action by the British, particularly in the summer of 1940, and by American troops in Northern Ireland in the spring of 1944.

British management of relations with the two neutrals was characterized at the official level by a growing degree of appreciation of the factors influencing the responses of the respective governments to the diplomatic and security demands made of them. Calculations about the threats posed by the Axis diplomatic missions became increasingly complex as the war progressed, codebreaking improved, and opportunities were recognized for feeding the enemy disinformation through their diplomats. Such nuances were largely lost at the political level in London, where time and again Churchill attempted to short-circuit his officials and to bring matters to a head by threat, and if necessary by action.

Both of these very different neutral neighbours of Britain managed to stay out of the war despite the temptations of lost lands restored dangled by the Axis, and the pressures exerted by Britain and her allies. The Axis made an unconscious contribution to this outcome through the inadequacy of their codes, which revealed to the British both the extent and the limits of their clandestine activities in and intentions towards both Afghanistan and Ireland. But the major credit for the success of Irish and Afghan neutrality plainly lies with the two states themselves. Despite the geographic, cultural, political and historical differences which separated them, they had very similar dealings with the belligerents, and they successfully coped with the crisis confronting them in very similar ways.

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