

## INTRODUCTION

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The material deposited in The National Archives under the classification FO 371 contains by far the greater part of the papers received and produced in the Foreign Office. Of these the documents relating to the Second World War are but a part. They are, by origin, the working papers of the 'departments' within the Foreign Office specialising in distinct problems and geographical areas. The political departments of the Foreign Office did not administer anything; they existed only to provide commentary upon the evidence with which they were furnished. This evidence came in many forms. First, and theoretically foremost, were the major ambassadorial dispatches which were often printed as soon as they had been received and sometimes circulated to the Cabinet as well as within the Office. Next, in order of formal importance, came the representations of foreign diplomats accredited to the Court of St James. Then there were telegrams and 'personal' letters from British diplomats abroad: shorter and more pithy than the dispatches but no less important. Other British departments of state were in constant touch with the Foreign Office in the unending attempt to discern and define British interests. This was particularly important in wartime and certain departments are worth mentioning.

### **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 and dramatically represented in this online edition by **rare film footage** of reconstructed operations in France), 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*. Nonetheless, Cadogan had to cope, almost literally, with every subject under the sun, and the human limitation on his ability to give fresh consideration to everything that was thrown at him must be borne in mind. (His published diary gives the impression that he found a somewhat unimaginative and bureaucratic briskness the only means of staying sane).

### **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.