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The Venlo Affair

On 9 November 1939 two British Intelligence officers, who believed that they had established contact with leading members of the German military Opposition, were kidnapped at Venlo on the Dutch frontier and carried off into Germany. A Dutch liaison officer who accompanied them was mortally wounded in the affray. It subsequently became clear that the British had been negotiating, not with dissident German officers, but with agents of Himmler's *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD). The origins of the 'Venlo Affair' have always remained something of a mystery. The extreme secrecy surrounding the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) ensures that the British documents relating to the incident remain closed,[1] while on the German side neither Himmler nor Heydrich appears to have recorded their object in mounting the operation. Despite British censorship of the relevant material it seems reasonably clear that British contacts with the 'German Opposition' were part of a general strategy of encouraging dissension within the Reich. From the German side Himmler's aims in disguising his agents as discontented officers are obscure. It has been argued that he hoped to learn something about British contacts with the genuine Opposition or that he was merely engineering an excuse for the projected invasion of Holland. The essence of the affair, the discussion of British peace terms, has been consistently ignored. Yet it is clear, both from the memoirs of Payne Best and Schellenberg and from the evidence presented to a Dutch Committee of Inquiry, that Himmler's men were chiefly interested in sounding out the British on their attitude towards a compromise peace. Himmler's contacts with Britain during this period paralleled a series of similar German peace feelers from Goering, von Papen and the military Opposition itself. All were designed to avert Hitler's winter offensive in the West, which it was feared would be an act of national suicide, benefiting only Russia. Goering hoped to elicit

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British terms which would persuade Hitler to abandon the offensive and conclude a negotiated peace. That Himmler was involved in similar activities should cause no surprise in the light of his subsequent record. It is the intention of this article to argue, therefore, that the original German interest in the Venlo discussions sprang from a desire to ascertain British peace terms — only events at the beginning of November, in particular Hitler's increasing intolerance of peace sentiment and the Burgerbräu bomb, transformed the operation into a coup at British and Dutch expense.

A bizarre series of events led to the establishment of contact between the British SIS and the German SD. The Venlo operation was originally based upon British hopes that the war could be won without military 'holocausts' by undermining the German home front and encouraging an internal collapse. Chamberlain believed that the Allies should establish a firm defensive position and let the blockade do its work on German morale. A demand for peace and the collapse of the Nazi regime might follow.[2] The Prime Minister was anxious to promote this process by waging war on Hitler's domestic position. His public statements emphasized that Britain's quarrel was with the regime and not with the German people. As early as 1 September 1939 he remarked in a broadcast, 'We have no quarrel with the German people, except that they allow themselves to be governed by a Nazi Government. As long as that Government exists . . . there will be no peace in Europe.'[3] Chamberlain drew a similar distinction between the German people and their regime in a speech to the Commons on 12 October. He informed the House that Britain desired a just peace and did not wish to destroy the German people. The obstacle to a settlement was Hitler, who could not be trusted to keep his word. Unless the German Government could give 'convincing proof of their desire for peace by definite acts' the war must therefore continue.[4] The whole speech was clearly designed to strengthen opposition to the regime. The German people were being informed that if they disposed of Hitler, Britain would be prepared to negotiate a just European settlement.

The British were particularly anxious to encourage a split between Hitler and his Army as part of this offensive against the German home front, since only the Army possessed the physical power to topple the existing regime. It had been known in London since 1938 that a military Opposition existed in Germany.[5] In August and September 1939 there were rumours of continued discontent with Hitler's foreign policy amongst the generals. Goerdeler informed a British diplomat in Stockholm on 28 August 1939 that the Army was

opposed to war and similar information was received by Henderson just before he left Berlin.[6] British Intelligence reports also indicated a certain unease within the General Staff.[7] The Foreign Office noted:

> The independence of the Generals can perhaps be overrated, though they do seem to have been acting as a brake recently. They are very likely the only alternative to Hitler but we have not yet heard that assumption of control by them is imminent.[8]

Rumours persisted after the outbreak of war. It was said, for example, that General Fritsch had been assassinated by the Gestapo because he led an Opposition group within the Army.[9] Halifax informed the cabinet on 11 September that a military Opposition continued to exist. According to a secret source 'very valuable results might be secured' if Britain made 'a direct appeal to the German Army along certain lines'.[10] The Government displayed a continued interest in the position of the German General Staff throughout October 1939. On 23 October Halifax informed his colleagues that 'it was clear that considerable internal conflict was proceeding at the present time in Germany. Discontent was being expressed both by a group of Generals and also by the public.'[11] On 27 October he explained the reasons for the 'acute disagreement' between Hitler and the Army. The generals were anxious about Russian gains in the Baltic as a result of the Nazi-Soviet pact and wished to conclude a compromise peace which would free Germany to defend its interests in the East.[12] Although by no means convinced that a German military junta would ultimately represent any less of a threat to British interests than Hitler, the Government was anxious to widen the disagreement between the Führer and his generals. It was agreed that the primary British war aim must be the removal of Hitler. Even Vansittart, the most extreme anti-German in the Foreign Office, remarked that 'for the present we need to separate the German Army and the Nazi Party . . . and we should at least do nothing to lump or drive them together until we have got them both where we want them'.[13] British policy, therefore, was to encourage the divisions in Germany 'and then see what happens'.[14] It was against this background that the SIS was instructed in September 1939 to investigate rumours of discontent among the generals and to ascertain whether internal dissension in Germany 'might create conditions favourable to a quick end to the war'.[15] This order came directly from the Prime Minister and knowledge of the operation was carefully restricted to a small group consisting of Chamberlain, Halifax and the head of the Intelligence Service, Admiral Sinclair.

The SIS assigned the investigation to its continental headquarters in Holland. Its operations there were controlled by Major R.H. Stevens, who co-ordinated British intelligence activities from his post as Passport Control Officer at the embassy in The Hague.[16] Stevens entrusted the task of investigating German domestic conditions to his chief field agent, Captain Payne Best, an officer whose experience of espionage operations across the Dutch border stretched back to the First World War. Even before the war Best had maintained indirect links with the German Opposition through his agents in German émigré circles. In September 1939, as a result of his new orders from London, Best decided that he should make direct contact with an Opposition representative and asked his former intermediary, an émigré named 'Dr Franz', to arrange a meeting.[17] This man, whose real name was Franz Fischer, played a major role in subsequent developments. He was not simply the 'little middle class Bavarian with a liking for intrigue'[18] of Best's postwar recollection but rather a shady adventurer with a dubious record of peculation. Although he claimed to be a political refugee he appears to have been involved in questionable financial operations before fleeing Germany in 1934 and he was later jailed by the German Occupation Authorities in France for embezzling 40,000 RM whilst employed by their Coal Commission in 1940.[19] Fischer strayed into intelligence work soon after leaving Germany and was at various times employed by Gregor Srasser's Black Front, the Czech Deuxième Bureau, and British Intelligence.[20] In 1937 he joined an émigré group in Paris led by Dr Spiecker, a former press secretary at the German Chancellery. Spiecker was anxious to engineer the overthrow of Hitler and Fischer was delegated to contact the German Opposition on his behalf. At the end of 1937 Fischer produced someone who was prepared to act as a liaison officer between Spiecker's group and the Opposition: Johannes Traviglio, a Luftwaffe major attached to the Stuttgart office of the *Abwehr*. Traviglio claimed knowledge of a military conspiracy against Hitler led by Generals Fritsch, von Rundstedt and von Wietersheim. At a meeting with Spiecker in Amsterdam in January 1938, he promised to bring one of these officers to Holland for discussions. A meeting never in fact took place but Traviglio did assist Spiecker's group to smuggle anti-Nazi propaganda material into Germany. He also passed on warnings to the West about Hitler's military plans during the Czech crisis and again in August 1939.[21] It was Traviglio's connection with the 'generals' which interested Best and dictated his request to Fischer to arrange a personal meeting —

like Spiecker he hoped to be put in touch with the leaders of the conspiracy.

Fischer introduced Best to Traviglio in early September 1939. Traviglio, who adopted the cover name 'Major Solms', met the British agent at the Hotel Wilhelmena in Venlo, a town on the German-Dutch border. Their first encounter proved fruitless. Best attempted to pump Traviglio for military information, implying that if he were a genuine anti-Nazi he would be willing to assist the Allies to defeat Germany. Traviglio, however, indignantly refused to commit 'Landesverrat'. Best was unmoved by protests about the honour of a German officer and concluded that his contact was merely blustering and could provide nothing of value. A second rendezvous was, however, arranged. At this meeting the German announced that while he was not prepared to reveal military secrets, he was prepared to reveal information of a political kind. He went on to describe a military plot against Hitler. According to Best's later account, Traviglio offered to bring a prominent officer to Holland to discuss the conspiracy and possible peace negotiations. According to Traviglio he merely suggested that if Best was interested in the conspiracy he should contact some sympathetic general.[22] Von Wietersheim's name was apparently mentioned.[23] Both accounts agree that Best spoke of giving Traviglio a radio set which would allow him to keep in touch with The Hague without frequent border crossings which might attract the unwelcome attention of the Gestapo. Best and Traviglio, however, did not meet again. Perhaps the German was scared off by the idea of becoming too closely involved with British Intelligence in time of war, perhaps he feared detection by the Gestapo. The most likely explanation, however, is that Best's initial conclusion was correct and that Traviglio was merely someone who 'talked big' but could provide little of substance. If the German knew nothing about a concrete conspiracy which went beyond the expression of discontent by some members of the officer corps, he could not produce a general for Best any more than he had been able to produce one for Spiecker. Essentially a peripheral figure, he rapidly disappeared from the scene when called upon to match his words with actions.

At this point accounts of the 'Venlo Affair' become confused. According to Best's version, Traviglio promised to produce a general, but was detected by the Gestapo who allowed the operation to proceed, infiltrating their own men. Fischer remained silent because of threats to his family in Germany if he did not co-operate.[24] This story

seems to be a mere fabrication by Best, designed to conceal the fact that his organization had been infiltrated by a double agent, Fischer. Farago and others have added to the confusion by claiming that Traviglio himself was a double agent, assigned to Himmler by the *Abwehr* as part of a joint operation to smash the SIS in Holland.[25] This account is unsupported by the available evidence. It is plain both from Groscurth's diary and from the postwar testimony of the SD officers concerned, that the *Abwehr* knew nothing of the affair.[26] Traviglio represented nobody but himself. He merely aroused Best's interest with his inflated account of a conspiracy before vanishing from the scene because he would not, or could not, perform the task allotted him by Best. At this point Best asked Fischer to arrange a further contact with some of his friends in Germany.[27] It was a fateful decision for the whole Venlo operation. Unknown to Best, Fischer was a double agent, employed by the SD as well as by the SIS. The Germans had been using him since 1936 to spy on the activities of émigré groups and to provide reports on the political situation in Western Europe. It is uncertain what hold Himmler's organization exercised over Fischer, but blackmail as well as bribes may perhaps have been involved. The Gestapo had not found Fischer a very reliable agent. His control officer complained that he promised much but delivered little and certainly he never seems to have betrayed the propaganda smuggling activities of Spiecker and Traviglio. In August 1939 Fischer was informed that his reports were too vague, an obvious demand by the SD that he provide more names.[28] In September this pressure from the SD coincided with his need to maintain credibility with the SIS. Traviglio had vanished but Best was pressing Fischer to produce more German contacts. His whole position with British Intelligence depended on his fulfilling this task. Fischer solved the dilemma by serving two masters. In the middle of September he arranged an interview at the Dutch border with his SD control officer, Standartenführer Knochen, and informed him that the SIS, with the support of 'powerful' political circles in London, was anxious to discuss peace terms with a prominent German officer.[29] By informing Knochen about the SIS operation Fischer restored his position in Berlin, and if Knochen could provide an 'officer' he would at least temporarily maintain his standing with the SIS. Fischer may even have believed that the SD would be interested in following up a British peace feeler. Much of his political reporting for the Germans since Munich had been concerned with peace sentiment in Europe.[30] Fischer's action ensured that the whole

SIS operation was hopelessly compromised. The question remained whether the SD would make use of its newly acquired knowledge.

The reasons behind the German decision to provide an 'officer' for Best remain a matter of speculation and debate. According to some accounts, Himmler and Heydrich hoped to exploit the opportunity offered by Fischer to find out if the British knew anything about a genuine conspiracy against Hitler.[31] According to others they wished to penetrate British Intelligence and to provide Hitler with an excuse for the invasion of Holland by uncovering evidence of Anglo-Dutch collusion.[32] The first possibility can be dismissed. There is no evidence that the SD knew anything about the genuine military conspiracy which existed at this time. Besides, opening spurious peace negotiations with the British would have been a strange method of hunting down potential conspirators even if Himmler knew in a general sense about discontent within the Army. As an excuse for the invasion of Holland the whole affair seems unnecessarily elaborate. The Germans themselves argued that the operation was viewed in this light only after the event.[33] By treating Venlo as a pure intelligence operation, previous writers have omitted consideration of a third and perhaps more rewarding approach. If the affair is placed in a political context it can be argued that Himmler wished to exploit an opportunity to ascertain British peace terms. Two of the main protagonists, Schellenberg and Knochen, certainly believed that they were engaged in genuine peace negotiations.[34] Himmler's reputation for 'extremism' in foreign policy has perhaps precluded examination of this third possibility yet it would be a mistake to write him off as a simple 'extremist' except where Russia was concerned. Although he was in the forefront of those urging war during the Munich crisis, the deterioration of relations with Britain after Munich seems to have disturbed Himmler. In the period after November 1938 he began to oppose Ribbentrop and Goebbels and to align himself with Goering on foreign policy issues. This realignment of forces was first precipitated by the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. Himmler, like Goering, resented Goebbels's instigation of an outburst which interfered with the orderly expropriation of the Jews, destroyed property, and threatened to create an international coalition against Germany. He complained that Goebbels had sponsored the pogrom 'at a time when the situation as regards foreign policy was at its worst'. While Ribbentrop supported the Propaganda Minister, Himmler allied with Goering in an attempt to curb Goebbels's influence and to repair the damage caused to the German international position.[35]

The first fruits of this new alignment were evident in an attempt to improve relations with Britain in December 1938. Prince Hohenlohe, a Sudeten aristocrat and a member of 'The Friends of the Reichsführer SS', arrived in Britain with the suggestion that one of Himmler's deputies should visit London. The names of Heydrich and Stückhardt were put forward. According to Hohenlohe, Himmler was anxious to improve Anglo-German relations and there would be great competition among his lieutenants for the honour of an invitation to Britain.[36] Although nothing came of this approach because of the seizure of Prague, it is evidence of a shift by Himmler away from the policy of reckless expansionism urged by Ribbentrop, towards the line of accommodation with Britain advocated by Goering. There is some evidence that Himmler continued to pursue this course in 1939. According to Lipski, the Polish minister in Berlin, Himmler supported Goering's efforts to bring the Polish crisis to a peaceful conclusion.[37] This did not prevent Himmler from lending his full support to the German attack once Hitler had reached a final decision, but he continued to blame Ribbentrop for what he regarded as an unnecessary war with Britain.[38]

Himmler was particularly unhappy about the diplomatic price paid for the successful Polish war, the Nazi-Soviet pact. The pact granted Russia a sphere of influence in the Baltic states and Himmler had to preside over the evacuation of the German communities with whom he sympathized in the area.[39] Hitler and Ribbentrop were unconcerned about this contraction of German influence in the East.[40] Himmler found the new situation less easy to accept. When he visited Rome in December 1939 the Italians found him 'anti-Russian and somewhat discouraged'.[41] According to Kersten, Himmler remarked in January 1940 that the true German mission lay in the East. The war with Britain was a quarrel between brothers which could be settled with 'common sense on both sides'. A united Germanic bloc of Britain and Germany could guarantee world domination by the white races. British peace overtures, therefore, should not be rejected.[42] Interest in a compromise peace on the part of the SS, which would free Germany to deal with Russia, was also in evidence on other occasions. On 16 October 1939 Hassell learned that Stückhardt and Höhne, of the SS High Command, shared the views of the Opposition about the desirability of peace 'and were already considering whether Ribbentrop should be thrown to the wolves. The formation of a new cabinet was under consideration there.' Hassell was sceptical about this information but it was authentic.[43] Höhne

had encouraged Prince Hohenlohe to circulate memoranda in favour of peace to Goering and Hitler, arguing that only Bolshevism would benefit from war between Britain and Germany. Hitler had dismissed these documents as 'defeatist scribblings', but Goering encouraged Hohenlohe to contact British friends and discuss peace terms.[44] These meetings seem to have enjoyed the tacit support of Hohenlohe's friends at SS Headquarters. In talks held with Group Captain Christie, an unofficial British emissary, at Lausanne in October 1939, Hohenlohe was confident that the SS could be won over in favour of a compromise peace. Christie was assured that the Gestapo was 'for peace' and feared Bolshevism.[45] How much Himmler knew about this particular feeler is unclear. It seems plain, however, that he shared the general feeling of unease about the war and the Nazi-Soviet pact expressed at SS Headquarters. The Venlo intrigue must be viewed in this political context. It was not a simple intelligence operation. It was designed to probe the possibility of a compromise peace which would free Germany to face the threat of Bolshevism in the East.

The Germans at first moved cautiously in exploring the opportunity offered by their agent. Fischer was instructed to keep Best talking for a while[46] and he had to prove that his information was genuine by having Best broadcast a coded message over the BBC on 11 October.[47] This seems to have convinced Berlin that Fischer was not exaggerating and that the British were serious. By 15 October a decision had been taken to make direct contact with the SIS in Holland. Walther Schellenberg, head of the SD Counter-Espionage Section, was called in to conduct the operation and Fischer was instructed to arrange a rendezvous with Best.[48] Schellenberg later became Himmler's chief agent in clandestine negotiations with the Allies and Venlo provided his first experience of such intrigue. He was himself in favour of a return to the Munich policy of compromise with Britain since he believed that only Stalin could benefit from a European war.[49] Indeed he later pursued the Venlo negotiations with a zeal which Himmler found embarrassing. At this stage, however, he acted with caution since there was no guarantee that Fischer was not leading the SD into some subtle British trap. Schellenberg did not himself attend the first meeting with the British in Dinxperlo in Holland on 20 October.[50] Instead he despatched two junior SD officers, Salisch and Christensen, to the rendezvous.[51] Their task was to sound out the ground before Schellenberg himself took a direct hand in the affair. Either at this stage or shortly afterwards, Hitler

agreed to the operation. His probable motive was to lull the British into a false sense of security before the November offensive, a tactic which lay behind his toleration of other peace feelers in October 1939. He had himself made a 'peace offer' to Britain on 6 October shortly after he had first ordered plans for an offensive in the West.[52] Although he later became uneasy about the Venlo discussions, his initial approval proved invaluable in protecting the operation from Ribbentrop, who objected to the talks and Himmler's meddling in foreign affairs.[53]

Fischer's success in arranging the Dinxperlo meeting convinced the SIS that it was on the track of a genuine conspiracy. Best and Stevens expected von Wietersheim himself to appear in Holland and made arrangements to expedite talks. On 19 October they visited General van Oorschoot, head of Dutch Intelligence, and requested the assistance of one of his officers.[54] Without Dutch collusion, von Wietersheim might experience difficulties crossing the border and Best and Stevens might be prevented from entering a sensitive military zone. The Dutch, anxious about their prospects of survival if fighting broke out in the West, were eager to promote peace talks and van Oorschoot readily agreed to facilitate the operation. A liaison officer, Lieutenant Klop, was assigned to the British agents. In order to conceal official Dutch involvement, Klop adopted the cover name 'Coppens' and always spoke English at his meetings with the German 'conspirators'.[55] The Dutch later excused their involvement by playing down the attempt to stimulate a coup against Hitler and emphasized that their support had been based solely on a desire to promote peace talks.[56] On 20 October 1939 Salisch and Christensen, masquerading as 'Captain Von Zeidlitz' and 'Lieutenant Grosch', crossed the Dutch border and were met by Klop and Fischer. At this stage Best and Stevens were cautious enough to stay away from the border themselves, a precaution that they later unwisely abandoned. The Germans were then driven into Dinxperlo where the SIS men were waiting in a café. Best had hoped to hold discussions at The Hague but the Germans refused to be taken there on the grounds that they had to return across the border that evening. The whole group, therefore, drove off to another café in the country but since the furtive manner of the Germans began to attract the attention of some Dutch soldiers, Best arranged to transfer the discussions to a house in the vicinity owned by a friend. The party had only just arrived when the house was surrounded by Dutch police, summoned by the soldiers at the café. The Dutch believed

that they had uncovered a German spy ring and it was only the presence of Klop which prevented the arrest of the whole group. The German 'officers' were extremely upset by the raid, no doubt believing that they had fallen into a British trap and Fischer almost fainted, fearing that his double role had been uncovered. The Germans had little to say once calm had been restored by Klop's intervention. Best attributed this to nervousness caused by the raid. The real reason was that Schellenberg had not empowered them to say anything and they were merely there to take soundings. They shied off when the question of removing Hitler was raised, emphasizing that it would be difficult to replace the Führer because of his great popularity. They were less reluctant, however, to discuss the removal of Ribbentrop. Best and Stevens finally demanded to meet a more prominent officer for further discussions. On this inconclusive note the exchanges ended and the Germans returned across the border.[57]

As a result of the Dinxperlo meeting, Schellenberg was convinced that the British approach was genuine. When the results of the initial reconnaissance were reported to Berlin, he was empowered to pursue further negotiations as he thought fit. By pursuing this tactic Himmler safeguarded his own position since he remained free to disown his agent at any stage. As Schellenberg remarked in his memoirs, this was typical of his chief.

> It really went against his nature to express an opinion, it was safer for someone else to be in the position of having been at fault. If time proved that some criticism had been wrong or blame misplaced, a subordinate could always be found to have erred.

At a later stage both Himmler and Heydrich found it politic to disown Schellenberg's views on a compromise peace.[58] Exploiting the freedom granted by Berlin, Schellenberg arranged a second meeting with the British agents for 30 October. This time he intended to visit Holland personally in the guise of 'Major Schaemmel' of the OKW Transport Section. To accompany him Schellenberg selected his friend Professor Max de Crinis of Berlin University, who was to take the role of 'Colonel Martini', one of the leading conspirators. Schellenberg himself, however, was determined to do most of the talking. He seems to have fancied himself as a new Talleyrand, stealthily working for peace behind the scenes. 'Schaemmel' and 'Martini' duly crossed the Dutch border at Arnheim on 30 October in a car driven by 'Grosch'. Best and Stevens, however, were not at

the rendezvous. Instead the three Germans were detained by the Dutch police as suspicious characters, interrogated and searched. At this point Klop arrived and persuaded the authorities to release 'Schaemmel' and his two companions. Schellenberg had no doubt that the whole affair had been stage managed by British Intelligence.[59] In fact the incident was not as deliberate as he imagined. The police had not been instructed to detain the Germans but Klop took advantage of their action to arrange the search. He then drove Schellenberg and his companions to intelligence headquarters at The Hague, where Best and Stevens were waiting.[60] A long discussion about the 'military conspiracy' and possible peace terms followed. According to Schellenberg, a firm agreement emerged in the course of the afternoon. Germany would restore Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. In return for a British pledge to conclude peace on this basis, the Opposition would agree to remove Hitler within a specific time limit. Halifax approved these terms that evening after Stevens had referred them to the Foreign Office and there was some talk of a further meeting in London to finalize the agreement.[61]

Schellenberg, however, is an untrustworthy source on the Hague meeting. He both distorts his own position regarding the removal of Hitler and exaggerates British commitment to definite peace terms. According to Best, the Germans wished to retain Hitler as a figurehead in a reconstituted government. Under interrogation he informed the Gestapo that as far as he knew 'Adolf Hitler was to remain in power'.[62] According to Knochen the German object throughout the negotiations was to convince the British that Hitler must stay.[63] This is confirmed by a statement of the German terms in the Chamberlain Papers. According to this document Hitler was to remain 'constitutional head of the German Government' and Goering at least was to have a role in the new regime. The object of the reconstituted government would be peace and co-operation with 'all civilized countries' on the basis of a 'pan European policy'.[64] Schellenberg, therefore, was aiming at a peace settlement which would involve the removal of Ribbentrop and the creation of a European alliance against Russia. The references to co-operation with 'civilized countries' and a 'pan European' policy clearly imply the exclusion of Russia from the new concert of Europe and the construction of a united anti-Bolshevik front. As for the British response to this German offer, Best recalled that he was not authorized to make a firm statement and gave only 'a carefully worded and rather non-

commital reply' to Schellenberg.[65] This is confirmed by a note in the Chamberlain Papers written by Cadogan. According to Cadogan, Best was instructed to emphasize that the 'first requisite' for peace 'was the restoration of confidence which had been destroyed by Hitler and the Nazi regime. . . . The prime necessity, therefore, was to change the regime and the spirit behind it . . . . Any new Government in Germany must be able to inspire confidence if discussions were to be possible.'[66] Schellenberg, therefore, received the same reply as Goering's emissary Dahlerus in October 1939 — Hitler must be removed in advance of peace negotiations. By insisting on a change of regime in advance of discussing terms the British hoped to stimulate dissension in Germany without committing themselves too far. If the SIS had only secured authority to pursue the affair on this rather vague basis, Best was nonetheless jubilant and considered peace a definite possibility. Ironically, at a party for the Germans in his house after the discussions, he informed Fischer that he could take much of the credit for this happy development.[67] Before Schellenberg returned to Germany next morning, he was given a radio transmitter which would allow him to maintain close contact with The Hague. He was also given a telephone number which he could call in the event of further difficulties with the Dutch police.[68]

Chamberlain was persuaded by the Hague discussions that the SIS had uncovered a genuine military conspiracy which might take action against the regime. On 5 November, in a letter to his sister, he remarked

> I have a 'hunch' that the war will be over before the spring. It won't be by defeat in the field but by the German realisation that they *can't* win and that it isn't worth their while to go on getting thinner and poorer when they might have instant relief and perhaps not have to give up anything they really care about.[69]

The Prime Minister clearly imagined that his strategy of economic blockade and attrition of the German home front was about to produce dramatic results. Cadogan and Halifax were also optimistic about the prospects of the Venlo operation although more cautious than Chamberlain about predicting the sudden collapse of the Nazi regime. Cadogan noted in his diary on 31 October that 'something' was 'going on in Germany' and felt that Britain must keep the generals 'on the hook'.[70] Halifax informed the French ambassador on 7 November that Britain was in contact with 'German military elements. . . . anxious to get rid of the Nazi regime'. It was 'just possible' that the German approach 'might stand for something sub-

stantial'. Halifax underlined the importance he attached to the affair by asking Corbin to maintain total secrecy. He should 'neither write of it or speak of it at present to M. Daladier'. Chamberlain would provide the French leader with full details on his next visit to Paris.[71] By this point the SIS operation was yielding such important results that knowledge of its existence could no longer be confined to Chamberlain, Halifax, Cadogan, and the head of the Intelligence Service. On 1 November the war cabinet was informed about the affair for the first time. It did not take the news as calmly as Corbin and was unsympathetic to Chamberlain's desire to keep the generals 'on the hook'. Churchill in particular argued strongly against further contacts with the Germans. A leading advocate of fighting the war by military rather than political means, he opposed any hint of a settlement which might leave German military power intact and perhaps suspected that Chamberlain was again flirting with appeasement. In the light of this reaction Halifax was inclined to have second thoughts about further exchanges with the 'generals' and the Prime Minister was 'frightened' by the opposition of his colleagues. Cadogan, however, encouraged them to persevere, arguing that first reaction in the cabinet 'was bound to be unfavourable. . . [Halifax] must not listen too much to Winston on the subject of "beating Germany". We must try every means of helping G[ermany] to beat herself.'[72]

The SIS operation, therefore, continued. Over the new radio link with Germany the British pressed for a meeting with the leading 'general'. They also seem to have asked for some definite commitment to remove Hitler on the part of the 'conspirators'.[73] Chamberlain and Halifax hoped to secure themselves from further opposition in the cabinet by telling their colleagues the 'minimum' about these exchanges.[74] The Burgerbräu bomb of 8 November 1939 confirmed the impression that matters were coming to a head in Germany. Harvey, Halifax's private secretary, noted on 9 November:

> Fresh feelers are being put out to us all the time from Germany — This time from some generals who say they are prepared to take over the regime. Bomb outrages in Munich last night. Hitler narrowly escaped. Is this the work of the generals?[75]

While the British desired to pursue the discussions initiated at The Hague, however, the Germans began to draw back. Early in November there was a sudden change of policy in Berlin which curbed Schellenberg's independence and undermined his ambitious plans for European peace. Himmler decided to abandon the talks and

close down the entire Venlo operation. There were several reasons for this sudden reversal of policy. The most important was probably the new political situation in Berlin. While Hitler had tolerated peace feelers in October, his attitude changed at the beginning of November. He expressed a sudden distaste for Himmler's contacts with SIS and was unhappy with the British insistence on his own removal.[76] He also moved to curb Goering's peace activities. His emissary, Dahlerus, was informed that the German government was 'no longer interested in his sounding out England'.[77] With the intended offensive imminent Hitler no longer needed such contacts as a smokescreen behind which to prepare military operations. Moreover he may have felt that peace feelers were becoming counterproductive and encouraging defeatism by posing an alternative to his own military plans. While curbing the peace activities of his entourage, Hitler also crushed all opposition to the offensive amongst the generals at a stormy interview with Brauchitsch on 5 November. The assault was to be launched on 12 November, a date subsequently subject to continued postponements because of unfavourable weather.[78] In addition to Hitler's increasing intolerance of peace feelers and forcefully expressed preference for a military solution, Himmler had also to face the fact that his operation had produced little of value. A compromise peace would involve more than the mere removal of Ribbentrop. The British were insisting that Hitler and his entire regime should disappear as a precondition of peace talks. There was nothing in the Hague discussions, therefore, which could be sold to the Führer as an alternative to the Nazi-Soviet pact and the Western offensive. In these circumstances, Himmler decided to liquidate an increasingly embarrassing operation. At some stage between 5 and 7 November, Heydrich issued orders for the kidnapping of Best and Stevens.[79] Himmler obviously hoped to salvage something from the affair by transforming it into a coup against the SIS. He required some dramatic triumph of this nature to justify his activities and protect himself against the criticism of Ribbentrop who had always opposed the Venlo operation. Schellenberg's independence was curbed with the introduction of this new plan. His activities were circumscribed by the arrival at the frontier of SS Sturmbahnführer Naujocks and the special squad which was to seize the British agents.[80] The presence of this group symbolized the change in the whole operation. The initiative had passed from the diplomat Schellenberg to the gunman Naujocks. Schellenberg was no longer a confidential agent but merely the bait in the trap being

set for Stevens and Best. Although surprised that Berlin should break off the peace talks in this abrupt manner, Schellenberg obeyed his new orders.[81]

The decision to terminate the operation by kidnapping the SIS agents explains Schellenberg's demand to hold further discussions at a Venlo café only a few yards from the German border. On both 7 and 8 November he lured Best and Stevens there with the promise that the 'general' in charge of the 'conspiracy' would appear.[82] The presence of large numbers of Dutch police on both occasions, however, prevented the SS squad from acting and Schellenberg had to invent excuses for the non-appearance of his 'leader'.[83] He arranged a third meeting for 9 November promising that the officer would definitely appear on that date. It is probable that the whole affair would have ended undramatically because of German reluctance to risk a battle at the frontier. The British agents could not be lured to Venlo indefinitely. Although convinced that Schellenberg was genuine, Best and Stevens were unhappy about his choice of rendezvous and they had decided that the 9 November meeting must be the last at the café.[84] The Burgerbräu bomb of 8 November, however, finally precipitated German action. Hitler was convinced that British Intelligence was behind the assassination attempt and personally ordered the arrest of Best and Stevens. An agitated Himmler rang Schellenberg in the middle of the night and insisted that the British agents must be seized the next day. Having flirted with London for a month, he was now determined to prove the loyalty and efficiency of the SS. This order posed difficulties for Schellenberg, who was worried about the prospect of a pitched battle at the border which the Dutch might win.[85] It was evidently decided to delay the meeting on 9 November until late afternoon when the kidnapping could be carried out under cover of dusk. In order to prevent the arrival of Best and Stevens until this point a long radio message was dispatched to The Hague on the morning of 9 November which took some time to decode. As a result Best, Stevens and Klop did not reach Venlo until 4 p.m. As usual Klop arranged for protection by the local police, but with his companions pushed on to the café without waiting for the men to take up position. The three agents obviously believed they were at last to meet the 'general' and did not wish to let the opportunity slip by needless delay. The SD operation, therefore, met with little resistance. Best and Stevens were too surprised to draw their revolvers when Naujock's men crashed through the border. Only Klop opened fire and he was mortally wounded. All three, along

with their Dutch driver, were bundled into Germany and driven to Dusseldorf where Klop died of his wounds. Best and Stevens were subsequently taken to Gestapo headquarters in Berlin for interrogation.[86]

The British were at first puzzled by the kidnapping and reluctant to concede that Best and Stevens were the victims of a Gestapo plot. Wishful thinking about a German military conspiracy continued in London. On 12 November, Cadogan noted that the predicted invasion of the Netherlands had not taken place and speculated that the 'generals' were exercising a 'restraining influence'. British refusal to admit defeat in the Venlo affair was encouraged by Schellenberg, who remained in radio contact with London. Cadogan remarked on 15 November that the 'generals' were 'still alive' and as late as 18 November Halifax and Chamberlain were discussing their reply to some question asked by the 'conspirators'. The truth about the Venlo operation was only revealed on 22 November when Schellenberg radioed an abusive message from Berlin, informing the British that they had been duped by the SD.[87] Cadogan noted, 'About 7 got radio from Berlin showing that Gestapo have taken over (if they did not always have) our communications with the "Generals". So that's over.'[88] Schellenberg's reasons for maintaining contact until this late stage were never made clear. He had, however, been unhappy about the collapse of talks and remained interested in a compromise peace. Perhaps he hoped to keep a line open to the 'powerful' political figures behind Stevens and Best. Since he no longer possessed his former freedom of manoeuvre, the radio link could not be maintained indefinitely and he eventually chose to break it with a typically impudent gesture. Schellenberg was not to be involved in clandestine peace negotiations again until 1942. After the Venlo incident, however, he tried to protect Best and Stevens from a political show trial and in 1944 went so far as to propose repatriating them in an exchange of prisoners, which suggests that Schellenberg always wished to retain the possibility of reopening negotiations with London through the two agents.[89]

In the end the 'Venlo Incident' embarrassed almost everyone directly involved. The Dutch government could not afford to protest too strongly about the affair since it revealed a high degree of Anglo-Dutch collusion at a period of grave tension with Germany. Indeed Holland was more concerned with propitiation than protest. On 10 November 1939 the Dutch minister in Berlin requested the return of Klop and the driver but declared repeatedly 'that he did not wish in

any way to exaggerate the incident'. His government had authorized Klop's presence at Venlo because it was anxious to promote peace. It disclaimed any responsibility for the actions of Best and Stevens and any interest in their fate. 'To the extent that the incident concerned the two Englishmen, it was no concern of the Netherlands Government.'[90] When Goebbels launched a propaganda campaign linking Best and Stevens with the Burgerbräu bomb, this became the standard Dutch reply to charges of complicity in the assassination attempt. Unable to obtain any satisfaction from Berlin over the 'Venlo Incident', the government vented its wrath on the Intelligence Service. General van Oorschoot was removed in the wake of the affair and replaced by Lieutenant-General Fabius.[91] The British, unlike the Dutch, could not protest directly to Berlin but asked the Americans, who were looking after British interests in Germany, to intervene on behalf of their agents and if possible to interview them.[92] It was only in December 1939, however, as the result of a message from Goering, that London learned its men were still alive.[93] The government held the Intelligence Service to blame for the whole débâcle, perhaps unfairly since wishful thinking about a German internal collapse was not restricted to Best, Stevens and their immediate superiors. Chamberlain himself had initiated and encouraged the entire operation. Nevertheless, as Farago remarks, the affair had 'exposed the inadequacy' of the SIS and the 'incompetence of key personnel', and a government enquiry into the operations of the Intelligence branch was set up under the chairmanship of Hankey.[94] The 'Venlo Incident' had repercussions on British foreign policy since it affected the British response to all subsequent approaches from Germany. The talks with Schellenberg marked the peak of British enthusiasm for clandestine contacts with the German Opposition. Indeed the Venlo operation was the only British attempt actively to seek out German dissidents rather then passively awaiting an approach from the Opposition. The peace feelers from genuine conspirators which followed Venlo were treated with extreme caution by London lest they prove to be further Gestapo fabrications. Deutsch has argued that this hesitancy significantly damaged the prospects of a successful German military coup during the Phoney War.[95] Although on the surface the 'Venlo Incident' represented a triumph for Himmler, even he was 'most dissatisfied' with the final results. He was never able to prove a connection, as Hitler demanded, between the British agents and the Burgerbräu bomb. For this reason Best and Stevens were never brought to trial but were instead consigned to a concen-

tration camp where they would not provide evidence of Himmler's failure. As late as 1944 Himmler vetoed the release of the British agents on the grounds that Hitler had never been satisfied with the results of the Burgerbräu investigation and he preferred not to remind the Führer of the embarrassing affair.[96] Even as a Gestapo coup, therefore, the final outcome of Venlo was unsatisfactory. As for the original peace negotiations with the British, Himmler preferred to forget them as quickly as possible. Although he remained unhappy about the international situation, his response to the Burgerbräu bomb was to display an exaggerated loyalty towards Hitler and an unquestioning acceptance of his plans. Schellenberg was made to understand that his views on peace were no longer welcome to his chief and that it would be imprudent to express them in public.[97] Only when the crusade in Russia began to fail in 1942 did Himmler again consider the idea of a compromise peace with the Western powers.[98]

Notes

1. Despite the Thirty Year Rule the file on the Venlo Affair in the Public Record Office remains closed for one hundred years. Certain documents in both the Halifax Papers (FO800) and in the Chamberlain Papers held by Birmingham University Library have, however, escaped this irrational censorship.
2. Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London 1947), 426, 418.
3. Ibid, 415.
4. *House of Commons Debates,* Vol. 352, cols. 563-8.
5. J.W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (New York, 1967), 406-24.
6. Minister in Stockholm to Halifax, 28 August 1939, C1278/15/18 FO371/22981. Henderson to Halifax, 2 September 1939, C1279/15/18 FO371/22981, Public Record Office, London.
7. Captain S. Payne Best, *The Venlo Incident* (London 1950), 7.
8. Foreign Office minute, 28 August 1939, C1278/15/18 FO371/22981.
9. Clive to Halifax, 25 September 1939, C15013/13/18 FO371/22960.
10. War Cabinet, 11 September 1939, CAB65/1/12(39), Public Record Office, London.
11. War Cabinet, 23 October 1939, CAB65/3/57(39).
12. War Cabinet, 27 October 1939, CAB65/3/62(39).
13. Minute by Vansittart, 12 October 1939, C16104/15/18 FO371/22985.
14. Minute by Kirkpatrick, 15 November 1939, C19636/15/18 FO371/22987.

15. Payne Best, op. cit., 7.
16. Richard Deacon, *A History of the British Secret Service* (London, 1969), 297.
17. Payne Best, op. cit., 15, 7.
18. Broadcast by Captain Payne Best. Text in *Enquêtecommissie Regeringsbeled 1940-1945,* Vol. 2-B (The Hague, 1949), 87-8.
19. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, ibid, 81. Testimony of Franz Fischer, ibid, 69.
20. A. Brissaud, *The Nazi Secret Service* (London, 1974), 240.
21. Testimony of Franz Fischer, op. cit., 66-9. Testimony of Johannes Traviglio, op. cit., 72-3.
22. Payne Best, op. cit., 8. Testimony of Johannes Traviglio, op. cit.
23. Testimony of General van Oorschoot, ibid, 84-5.
24. Broadcast by Payne Best, op. cit.
25. L. Farago, *The Game of Foxes* (London, 1974).
26. Harold C. Deutsch (ed.), *Tagebücher eines Abwehroffiziers 1938-1940* (Munich, 1970). Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.
27. Testimony of Franz Fischer, op. cit.
28. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit. Testimony of Franz Fischer, op. cit.
29. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.
30. Testimony of Franz Fischer, op. cit., 70.
31. W.L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (London, 1967). L. Farago, *Burn after Reading* (New York, 1961). Brissaud, op. cit.
32. Wheeler-Bennett, op. cit.
33. This seems to be supported by the fact that the evidence of Anglo-Dutch collusion, the fact that Klop was a Dutch officer, was uncovered only as a result of the Venlo operation and surprised the German participants. See Payne Best, op. cit., 19. Hitler first mentioned the possibility of using Klop's involvement as an excuse for invading Holland at a military conference on 23 November 1939. See *Documents on German Foreign Policy,* Series D, Vol. VIII, 445.
34. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.
35. H. Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head* (New York, 1971), 388-9.
36. Minute by Ashton-Gwatkin, 19 November 1938, C14535/42/18 FO371/21659. Mallet to Ogilvie-Forbes, 22 December 1938, C15086/42/18 FO371/21659.
37. C.J. Burckhardt, *Meine Danziger Mission 1937-1939* (Munich, 1969), 287, 297.
38. Höhne, op. cit., 555.
39. See Weizäcker to Schulenberg, 28 September 1939, *Documents on German Foreign Policy,* Series D (London, 1949-64), Vol. VIII, 162-3.
40. G. Hilger, *The Incompatible Allies* (New York, 1971), 308-15.
41. M. Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's Diary 1939-1945* (London, 1947), 187.
42. F. Kersten, *The Kersten Memoirs* (London, 1956), 234-6.
43. U. Von Hassell, *The Von Hassell Diaries* (London, 1948), 78.
44. Höhne, op. cit., 587.
45. Memorandum by Group Captain Christie, Christie Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, CHRS 1/27-8.
46. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.
47. Payne Best broadcast, op. cit.
48. Testimony of Heinz Joost, *Enquêtecommissie,* op. cit., Vol. 2-B, 70.
49. W. Schellenberg, *The Schellenberg Memoirs* (London, 1956), 106.
50. In his memoirs, Schellenberg mentions a meeting with Best and Stevens at

Zutphen on 21 October 1939, see 84-6. This trip is not mentioned in any other available source and Schellenberg is obviously confusing his own activities with those of Salisch and Christensen at this point.

51. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

52. H.C. Deutsch, *The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War* (Minneapolis, 1970), 69-71.

53. Höhne, op. cit.

54. Testimony of General van Oorschoot, op. cit.

55. Payne Best, op. cit., 8-10.

56. Even after the Venlo affair the Dutch continued to urge Britain to seek peace through negotiations with the German Army. See Bland to Halifax, 28 November 1939, C19589/13005/18 FO371/23100. Van Oorschoot was not acting completely independently in expediting the Venlo intrigue. He was merely used as a convenient scapegoat by his government after the kidnapping.

57. Payne Best, op. cit., 10-11. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

58. Schellenberg, op. cit., 86, 73, 106-8.

59. Ibid, 86-9.

60. Payne Best, op. cit., 11-12.

61. Schellenberg, op. cit., 89-90.

62 Payne Best, op. cit., 12, 29.

63. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

64. Memorandum dated 30 October 1939, Neville Chamberlain Papers, University of Birmingham Library, NC8/29/1.

65. Payne Best, op. cit., 12.

66. Memorandum by Cadogan, undated, Chamberlain Papers, NC8/29/1.

67. Testimony of Franz Fischer, op. cit.

68. Schellenberg, op. cit., 91.

69. I. Macleod, *Neville Chamberlain* (New York, 1962), 281.

70. D. Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945* (London, 1971), 226.

71. Minute by Halifax, 7 November 1939, FO800/317.

72. Dilks, op. cit., 228-9.

73. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

74. Dilks, op. cit., 320.

75. J. Harvey (ed.), *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey* (London, 1970), 327-8.

76. Schellenberg, op. cit., 92.

77. Ribbentrop to Wied, 11 November 1939, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. VIII, 397-8.

78. Deutsch, op. cit., 228-30.

79. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

80. Schellenberg, op. cit., 93-4.

81. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

82. Schellenberg, op. cit., 91-3.

83. Testimony of Helmut Knochen, op. cit.

84. Payne Best, op. cit., 15-16.

85. Schellenberg, op. cit., 95.

86. Payne Best, op. cit., 16-25.

87. According to Farago it was an extremely sarcastic message and was signed

'The Gestapo'. See *The Game of Foxes,* 128. Farago gives no source for this information.

88. Dilks, op. cit., 231-2.

89. A. Hoch, 'Das Attentat auf Hitler im Burgerbräukeller', *Vierteljahrshefte Für Zeitgeschichte,* 17 (1969), 413.

90. Memorandum by Bismarck, 10 November 1939, *Documents on German Foreign Policy,* Series D, Vol. VIII, 395-6.

91. Gordon (The Hague) to Hull, 5 December 1939, 740.00 EW 1939-1329, National Archives, Washington D.C.

92. Kennedy to Hull, 23 November 1939, 862.00 Hitler Adolf/249, National Archives, Washington D.C.

93. Minute by Cadogan, 28 December 1939, C21022/13005/18 FO371/23100.

94. Farago, *Burn after Reading,* op. cit., 48. S. Roskill, *Hankey* (London, 1974), Vol. III, 447.

95. Deutsch, op. cit., 247-9.

96. Schellenberg, op. cit., 110. Hoch, op. cit. Höhne, op. cit., 326-7.

97. Schellenberg, op. cit., 106-8.

98. Höhne, op. cit., 584-6.

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