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THE ‘GHOST’ OF THE ANGLO-JAPANESE ALLIANCE: AN EXAMINATION INTO HISTORICAL MYTH-MAKING*

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ABSTRACT. *Even though the argument runs counter to much of the detailed scholarship on the subject, Britain’s decision in 1921 to terminate its alliance with Japan is sometimes held in general historical surveys to be a major blunder that helped to pave the way to the Pacific War. The lingering sympathy for the combination with Japan is largely due to an historical myth which has presented the alliance as a particularly close partnership. The roots of the myth lie in the inter-war period when, in order to attack the trend towards internationalism, the political right in Britain manipulated memory of the alliance so that it became an exemplar of ‘old diplomacy’. It was then reinforced after 1945 by post-war memoirs and the ‘declinist’ literature of the 1960s and 1970s. By analysing the origins of this benevolent interpretation of the alliance, this article reveals how quickly and pervasively political discourse can turn history into myth and how the development of myths tells us much about the time in which they were created.*

I

The role of myths in international history is a topic that has generated growing attention over the last decade. The stimulus for this development has come from two directions. First, the rise of cultural history has led to increasing interest in the degree to which our knowledge of the past is shaped by collective memory. This perspective characterizes history as an inherently political process in which events are open to manipulation by both state and society and are used to serve the cause of inculcating and reinforcing national identity.¹ Second, in the field of international relations and political science there has been a new focus on the way in which decision-makers and the media use, and abuse, historical analogies in order

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* I wish to thank the Trustees of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives for permission to quote from the Liddell Hart papers and Mr A. J. Maxse for permission to quote from the Leo Maxse papers.

¹ For an interesting discussion of this approach, see Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Introduction, the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory’, in Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and power in post-war Europe* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1–35.

to justify policy and to simplify the task of interpreting current events. Thus the exigencies of contemporary politics mean that historical episodes are turned into shorthand clichés devoid of their original complexity.²

How though are mythical interpretations of history formed? Up to now this issue has not been fully addressed. This is largely because the historians working in this area have been primarily concerned with the contemporary resonance of historical myths. Moreover, they have tended to focus on the mythical aspects of the most familiar controversies, such as interpretations of a particular nation's memory of its role during the Second World War, where the topic is too complex to lend itself to detailed analysis. However, to study how myths emerge is important, for it is only by understanding their evolution that one can hope to disentangle historical events from the political rhetoric that surrounds them. This is clearly a difficult undertaking, especially when the event in question is still a cause of controversy, but it is possible to simplify this process by identifying and studying neglected myths that, while born of political dispute, have subsequently bred orthodox and relatively uncontroversial interpretations of history. This article looks at one particular example of historical shorthand that has embedded itself in our reading of the past – the idea that the Anglo-Japanese alliance was a singularly close relationship and that its abrogation was a short-sighted mistake – and reveals its roots in the ideological battles of inter-war Britain.

It has long been accepted as a truism in many of the survey studies of British imperial and diplomatic history in the twentieth century that the decision made at the Washington conference in 1921 to end the Anglo-Japanese alliance was a profound error of judgement. Thus one finds in works by scholars such as Correlli Barnett, Max Beloff, and A. P. Thornton the premise that this reversal of previous British policy, which came about largely as the result of American and Canadian pressure, was strategically flawed and compromised imperial defence throughout the inter-war period. It helped therefore to lead to the outbreak of the Second World War and thus contributed indirectly to the dissolution of the empire.³

These historians contend that the termination of the alliance failed on many levels. In regard to relations with Japan, it is held that by getting rid of an alliance of twenty years standing Britain turned its back on 'a useful as well as a loyal ally', and through this unwise policy 'quite gratuitously, raised up a new danger'.⁴

² For the role of analogies in history, see Beatrice Heuser and Cyril Buffet, 'Conclusions: historical myths and denial of change', in Beatrice Heuser and Cyril Buffet, eds., *Haunted by history: myths in international relations* (Providence, 1998), pp. 259–74.

³ The explicitly critical works are Correlli Barnett, *The collapse of British power* (London, 1972), pp. 250–73; Max Beloff, *Imperial sunset, Britain's liberal empire, 1897–1921* (London, 1969), pp. 330–43; and A. P. Thornton, *The imperial idea and its enemies: a study of British power* (New York, 1966 edn), pp. 191–5, but see also the more subtle account in Wm Roger Louis, *British strategy in the Far East, 1919–1939* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 50–108. For briefer statements, see Peter Bell, *Chamberlain, Germany and Japan, 1933–1934* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 3–5; Christopher Hall, *Britain, America and international arms control* (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 30; John Keay, *Last post: the end of empire in the Far East* (London, 1997), pp. 147–8; and C. J. Lowe and M. L. Dockrill, *The mirage of British power* (2 vols., London, 1972), II, p. 303.

⁴ Barnett, *The collapse of British power*, pp. 252, 273.

The result was that in the 1930s, when Britain needed peace in east Asia in order to concentrate on European events, it found itself 'confronting a predatory enemy instead of a loyal friend'.⁵ The end of the alliance is thus said to have created a new strategic menace to the empire, vastly complicating the task of imperial defence. Simultaneously, in terms of relations with the United States, it is argued that Britain gained little compensation for its act of self-sacrifice. At the Washington conference the treaty that replaced the alliance as the arbiter of stability in east Asia was the purely consultative four-power pact, involving Britain, Japan, the United States, and France. In the view of Beloff this meant that Britain substituted an arrangement based 'on a nice calculation of mutual interests and relative capacities' for 'a new system whose functioning would principally depend upon the incalculable shifts and whims of the American democracy': Britain had thus placed its trust and the security of its eastern possessions in a loose multilateral arrangement that had no guarantee of success.⁶

In addition it is argued that Britain, by agreeing to sign the five-power treaty on naval arms limitation that was also negotiated at Washington, gave up the only unilateral means it had for controlling Japan – its maritime supremacy. By agreeing to this pact, which allowed Japan to possess a fleet that was virtually two-thirds the size of the Royal Navy and debarred Hong Kong from being turned into a naval base, Britain forfeited regional naval superiority to the Japanese. The latter therefore became impervious to foreign threats and thus were encouraged in their expansionary ardour.

From this perspective the death of the alliance appears as a tragic act of ingratitude brought about by momentary weakness, and taken with little thought for its portentous consequences. Moreover, implicit in this argument is the hypothesis that, if the alliance had been maintained, Britain could have used its influence to restrain Japan, and that the Manchurian crisis, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Pacific War need never have come about. It is therefore hardly surprising that, drawing on this consensus, a recent study of British decolonization has gone as far as to declare that the lapsing of the alliance was arguably 'one of the gravest errors of twentieth-century British diplomacy'.⁷

Strangely, however, this view is not one that is reflected in the most detailed study of the latter phase of the history of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, Ian Nish's *Alliance in decline*.⁸ Nish argues that the decision made at Washington to allow the alliance to lapse merely constituted the formal burial of a relationship that had already died. Its decline, he observes, had been a long drawn out affair, which

⁵ Bell, *Chamberlain, Germany and Japan*, p. 3.

⁶ Beloff, *Imperial sunset*, p. 343.

⁷ L. J. Butler, *Britain and empire: adjusting to a post-imperial world* (London, 2002), p. 24.

⁸ Ian Nish, *Alliance in decline: a study in Anglo-Japanese relations, 1908–1923* (London, 1972), pp. 391–7. For a recent restatement of his views, see Ian Nish, 'Echoes of Alliance, 1920–1930', in Ian Nish and Yoichi Kibata, eds., *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations: the political-diplomatic dimension, 1600–1930* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 256–7. See also Phillips Payson O'Brien, 'Britain and the end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance', in Phillips Payson O'Brien, ed., *The Anglo-Japanese alliance* (London, 2004), p. 268.

'had sapped the mutual confidence which must be at the root of any alliance'.⁹ He also does not see its termination as leading inevitably to Anglo-Japanese alienation, arguing instead that 'the historian is hard put to it to point out any striking repercussions on relations between the two countries of the death of the alliance and its prolonged funeral'.¹⁰ He notes that, if anything, its impact was 'more symbolic than real' and 'psychological rather than practical'.¹¹ Furthermore, in putting the decision in context, Nish reminds us that at the time statesmen from both Britain and Japan 'rated the effectiveness of the new four-power treaty more highly than we would be inclined to do with the benefit of hindsight'.¹² Taking a slightly different approach, John Ferris, a leading authority on British imperial defence, has reinforced this argument by demonstrating that, while the ending of the alliance was a blow, it is a mistake to see Britain as emerging emasculated from the Washington conference, for it still retained its position as the pre-eminent naval power. It was only when it agreed in 1930 to reduce its stock of cruisers and to prolong the naval building holiday for capital ships that had been agreed at Washington that its maritime position began to weaken.¹³ A recent essay by Erik Goldstein has also helped to put the decision to terminate the alliance in context. Goldstein stresses the need to understand British decision-making from a global rather than simply east Asian perspective, and the importance of looking at British suspicions of France and the subsequent need to court the United States.¹⁴ Why then is there such a gulf between the views of the generalists and those of the specialists? Why do so many historians see the termination of the alliance as a selfish and ultimately self-destructive British act, while Nish and others accept it as a natural parting of the ways?

One explanation for this discrepancy is that those engaged in the broad studies of British foreign policy have based their interpretation on a number of unsubstantiated assumptions. They have, for example, presumed that naval limitation necessarily meant an end to British maritime predominance and that American reluctance to co-operate with Britain was no different from American hostility. Most importantly they have assumed that Japan was always a loyal ally to Britain, and have let hindsight blind them to the fact that towards the end the alliance was deeply troubled. But why have historians been content to rest their case on these assumptions? The contention of this article is that, consciously or unconsciously, they have been influenced in their writings by a powerful historical myth, which one can refer to as the 'ghost' of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. This 'ghost' is a sympathetic rather than a frightening spectre. It portrays the alliance as a warm relationship in which Japan had acted as a loyal and true friend, and suggests

⁹ Nish, *Alliance in decline*, p. 392.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ John Ferris, "'It is our business in the navy to command the seas": the last decade of British maritime supremacy, 1919–1929', in Keith Neilson and Gregory C. Kennedy, eds., *Far flung lines: studies in imperial defence in honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman* (London, 1997), pp. 129–34.

¹⁴ Erik Goldstein, 'The evolution of British diplomatic strategy for the Washington conference', in Erik Goldstein and John Maurer, eds., *The Washington conference, 1921–1922: naval rivalry, east Asian stability and the road to Pearl Harbor* (London, 1994), pp. 4–34.

that, if not separated prematurely, the allies would have continued to co-operate in mutual trust and respect. Thus, having come under the 'ghost's' influence, what the general writers describe is not the reality of the alliance and its termination, but rather a very persistent spectral distortion. In other words what we have here is orthodoxy based on a myth.

The prevalence of this received wisdom begs three questions; when and why did this 'ghost' first appear, and how has it been able to exert its influence even to the present day. These are important questions, for it is only by understanding the origins and nature of the myth that one can begin to disentangle the historical record from its baleful influence. This article argues that the 'ghost' first manifested itself almost immediately after the alliance's death. This did not come about due to mere sentimental nostalgia, but reflected the fact that criticism of the alliance's demise became a cause célèbre of the right in British politics, which believed that the relationship with Japan had been sacrificed in the name of internationalism. Praise for the alliance was therefore implicitly a rejection of the tenets of post-war diplomacy and a call for a return to a foreign policy based on the balance of power and national interest. To argue this case effectively, however, it was necessary to mythologize the alliance and turn it into an exemplar of the certainties of 'old diplomacy'. The 'ghost' is therefore an obstacle to our understanding of why the alliance was terminated, but at the same time, like other political myths, it tells us much about the period in which its presence was first felt.

II

The best place to begin such a study is briefly to provide an interpretation based on the specialist literature of why and how the alliance ended in 1921–2. The starting point is that the alliance had been renewed in 1911 for ten years: the British and Japanese governments therefore had to decide in 1921 whether they wanted to continue with this treaty relationship. This issue was very delicate for Britain, for it was clear that the United States was suspicious of Japanese ambitions in Asia and felt that Japan was using the alliance as a shield under whose protection it could infringe the 'open door' in China. American opposition was something that could not be ignored, for the British government of David Lloyd George wished to build up a spirit of co-operation with Washington, a policy that was also strongly supported by the Meighen administration in Canada and that of Smuts in South Africa. Thus in the run-up to the Washington conference considerable pressure was exerted on Britain to terminate the alliance.¹⁵

It is important to note though that Britain had its own reasons for doubting the wisdom of continuing the alliance. Japan had entered the Great War in August 1914 on Britain's side, but its behaviour during the conflict had not on the whole

¹⁵ Ira Klein, 'Whitehall, Washington, and the Anglo-Japanese alliance, 1919–1921', *Pacific Historical Review*, 41 (1972), pp. 460–83; and Nish, *Alliance in decline*, pp. 324–53.

endeared it to its ally. On the positive side Japan had protected the sea-lanes to Australia and New Zealand and allocated destroyers for duty in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, however, it always insisted on a high price for this support, and on a number of occasions abruptly turned down requests for further assistance. This was understandable to a degree, as the alliance did not commit it to come to Britain's aid outside east Asia, but, when added to the way in which Japan's media argued that it had entered the conflict on the wrong side, it created a poor impression. Furthermore, its adventurism in China and Siberia, the rise of pan-Asian sentiment, its refusal to hand over a number of Indian revolutionaries, and the presence of Japanese propagandists in Malaya and India engendered suspicion of its long-term objectives.¹⁶

The result of this war record was that the senior officials involved in the day-to-day diplomacy towards east Asia, such as the past and present ministers to Peking, Sir John Jordan and Sir Beilby Alston, the former ambassador to Tokyo, Sir William Conyngham Greene, and the supervisor of the Far Eastern Department, Sir Victor Wellesley, who were all too aware of Japan's machinations, were opposed to the alliance's renewal.¹⁷ This opposition was reinforced by the fact that, with the defeat of Germany and the collapse of Russia into civil strife, the alliance had in any case lost its *raison d'être*. Indeed, the irony of the situation was that only one power now posed a potential threat to British interests in east Asia, and that was Japan itself.

On the other hand, for some, including Lloyd George, the potential Japanese threat constituted a reason in itself to continue the alliance, as the best way to control Japan's ambitions was to keep it close. Only this, it was held, would stop it from drifting into a future alignment with Germany and Russia.¹⁸ Thus the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, observed at a committee of imperial defence (CID) meeting in December 1920 that the alliance with the 'insidious and unscrupulous' Japanese was necessary to keep them in order.¹⁹ This view was also strongly supported by William Hughes, the prime minister of Australia, who emerged somewhat surprisingly, considering the anti-Japanese line he had taken at Paris in 1919, as the most ardent proponent for continuing the alliance. Hughes, however, had his reasons; he too was concerned for his country's security, but as well as that he also saw renewal of the alliance as a means of forcing Japan to respect Australia's 'white-only' immigration laws.²⁰

¹⁶ Peter Lowe, *Britain and Japan, 1911–1915: a study of British Far Eastern policy* (London, 1969); R. J. Popplewell, *Intelligence and imperial defence: British intelligence and the defence of the Indian empire, 1904–1924* (London, 1995) ch. 11; Antony Best, *British intelligence and the Japanese challenge in Asia, 1914–1941* (Basingstoke, 2002) ch. 3; and Nish, *Alliance in decline*, pp. 115–262.

¹⁷ See, for example, CID130-C, 'Suggestions for an Anglo-Saxon policy in the Far East', Alston memorandum, 1 Aug. 1920, London, National Archives (NA) CAB5/3.

¹⁸ See John Ferris, 'Armaments and allies: the Anglo-Japanese strategic relationship, 1911–1921', in O'Brien, ed., *The Anglo-Japanese alliance*, pp. 254–7.

¹⁹ CID 134th meeting, 14 Dec. 1920, NA CAB2/3.

²⁰ Sean Brawley, *The white peril: foreign relations and Asian immigration to Australasia and North America, 1919–1978* (Sydney, 1995), pp. 73–4.

From the meeting of these two competing views of the alliance there eventually arose a mutually acceptable compromise, namely that the simple answer to American and Canadian criticism was that the treaty should be expanded to include the United States. Accordingly, at the Imperial Conference in London in the summer of 1921 the delegates agreed that this should become the objective for Britain to pursue at the forthcoming gathering in Washington. However, when the Washington conference opened in November 1921 the American secretary of state, Charles Evan Hughes, summarily rejected any such arrangement.²¹

By this time events had proceeded to such a point that it was unthinkable that Britain could return to straightforward renewal. This was because at Washington the future of the alliance became inexorably linked to the issue of naval arms limitation. By 1921 the naval arms race that had developed between the United States and Japan had led the Admiralty to call for the construction of new capital ships, lest Britain be left behind. This was an expenditure that the Treasury could ill afford and which had the potential to spark an Anglo-American naval competition that the British were unlikely to win. As a result Britain realized that the only way in which it could avoid involvement in an arms race was if it agreed to forego the alliance and thus create an environment in which the United States would agree to naval limitation. This was not an unattractive proposition, for what was on offer at Washington was a deal that in theory offered Anglo-American parity, but in reality allowed Britain to maintain a slight quantitative and qualitative advantage over the United States, and a two-power standard in relation to Japan and France.²²

It can therefore be argued that Britain accepted non-renewal largely because the reasons for maintaining the alliance were not substantial enough to warrant jeopardizing American goodwill, and because the strategic disadvantages arising from termination were compensated for by the introduction of naval arms limitation. Thus in analysing the story of the death of the alliance one cannot say that Britain was enthusiastic about continuing its ties with Japan but was cruelly denied by circumstance from attaining this goal. In fact it only desired to keep its link with Tokyo for the purpose of controlling this otherwise potentially dangerous rival, which it had little reason to trust. However, once it became clear that this expedient policy would damage imperial unity, impair relations with Washington and possibly lead to a naval arms race, the sacrificing of Japan was inevitable. To argue from hindsight that the end of the alliance was simply dictated by Washington and Ottawa, or that it was merely a naive decision influenced by a nebulous desire to construct an Anglo-American world order, is therefore to miss the point. This was not a rash move by the British government, but one that squarely met the strategic and financial circumstances that faced Whitehall in the autumn of 1921.

²¹ Nish, *Alliance in decline*, pp. 368–71.

²² See Ferris, “‘It is our business in the navy to command the seas’”, pp. 129–34.

Contrary to some accounts, opinion in parliament and the media broadly agreed to the severing of the alliance with Japan and saw the Washington conference as an unmitigated success.²³ In the House of Commons, there was no debate on the issue of the alliance's future, but on the eve of the gathering in Washington a unanimous resolution was passed supporting the conference's objectives.²⁴ Furthermore the tone of parliamentary questions concerning Japan was generally critical. For example, MPs from the coalition benches often expressed concerns about Japan's activities in China, while Labour members lobbied the government to press for a Japanese withdrawal from eastern Siberia. In the media many voices, including those of the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Spectator*, argued that military pacts had no place in an international order now defined by the League of Nations and that the alliance should be abrogated in order to draw closer to Washington.²⁵ Moreover a notable symbol of Britain's changing attitude towards Japan was that *The Times*, which had been one of the original advocates of an alliance at the turn of the century, now took a strongly anti-Japanese stance.²⁶

It was not merely internationalism and the desire for Anglo-American solidarity that led the media in this direction, for a number of journalists were influenced by suspicion of Japan and its war record. For example, Henry Wickham Steed, the editor of *The Times*, noted in September 1921 his belief that Japanese ambitions in Asia were 'incompatible with British interests either in the Far East or in Asia generally'.²⁷ Meanwhile, the veteran military correspondent, Charles à Court Repington, recorded in his diary that 'Japan seems to me to have constantly infringed both the letter and the spirit of her alliance with England, and has been openly aiming at the protectorship of China.'²⁸ Thus one can conclude that if the government had decided to retain the alliance at the cost of American friendship it would have been running against the broad tide of public opinion.

In the years immediately following the Washington conference, anti-Japanese sentiment continued to be expressed. In 1923 the British ambassador to Tokyo, Sir Charles Eliot, observed, while on home leave, that among the politically well-informed the popularity of Japan had much declined since his previous visit three years before.²⁹ Much of this distaste can be attributed to the claims made at this

²³ The claim that the decision was taken in the face of public opinion is in Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint, and R. John Pritchard, *Total war: the causes and course of the Second World War* (2 vols., London, 1989), II, p. 47. For a more accurate account, see Inbal Rose, *Conservatism and foreign policy during the Lloyd George coalition, 1918–1922* (London, 1999), pp. 170–1.

²⁴ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 147, cc. 2093–145 (4 Nov. 1921).

²⁵ Charles Nelson Spinks, 'The termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance', *Pacific Historical Review*, 6 (1937), pp. 321–40, at p. 327.

²⁶ *The history of The Times: the 150th anniversary and beyond, 1912–1948* (2 vols., London, 1952), II, pp. 612–22.

²⁷ 'British policy in the Pacific', Steed memorandum, 22 Sept. 1921, London, British Library, Steed papers, Add. MSS 74156, fo. 187.

²⁸ C. À. Court Repington, *After the war: a diary* (London, 1922), p. 399.

²⁹ Eliot to Vansittart, 3 July 1923, NA Curzon papers FO800/155.

time by the Admiralty that Japan posed a potentially serious threat to British interests. To a substantial degree the Admiralty's fixation with Japan after 1922 arose from its own budgetary considerations, but in order to strengthen its case the propaganda it directed at the cabinet made biting references to Japanese wartime behaviour.³⁰ Thus, in 1924 the first sea lord, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Beatty, warned the government that 'The behaviour of Japan during the late war should not be forgotten' and that it could not be trusted in the future.³¹ In March 1925 Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes followed suit, noting that if the Japanese, who were engaged in 'a steady and ruthless preparation for war', were not checked they would 'turn Europeans out of China and, in time, Asia'.³² The naval lobby in the House of Commons also voiced hostility. Between 1922 and 1925 the debates on naval estimates, and in particular those concerned with the construction of a naval base at Singapore, witnessed a number of Conservative MPs openly criticizing Japan. For example, Sir Frederick Penny, the MP for Kingston-upon-Thames, warned in March 1924 that the Japanese had the same mentality as the Germans, while in March 1925 Carlyon Bellairs, the MP for Maidstone, drew parallels between Japan's naval expansion and the Anglo-German arms race before 1914.³³

The government, as one might expect, studiously avoided such heated rhetoric. Indeed, they went in the opposite direction. In order to reassure Japan about Singapore, ministers strenuously denied that the base was being built because of suspicion of that country. To reinforce this argument they began to make sentimental references to the alliance and to laud, in the words of the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, the 'special bond of an historic and valued relationship'.³⁴ Thus, when the naval estimates for 1925 came up for debate in parliament, both the Lord President of the Council, Lord Balfour, in the Lords, and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir William Bridgeman, in the Commons, referred to the long history of British friendship with Japan.³⁵ The alliance therefore became an official object of nostalgia. Ironically, at the same time a similar interpretation of the past was used by opponents of the Singapore base who contended that its construction wantonly risked alienating Britain's formerly 'scrupulously loyal' ally.³⁶ Thus in one of the debates Lloyd George paid testimony to Japan's assistance during the Great War, noting 'she was one of our best Allies; she kept her bargain very faithfully with us; she held those seas for us; she protected our

³⁰ On naval policy and Japan in the early 1920s see Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, seapower and strategy between the wars* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 18–19.

³¹ 'Consequences of suspending work at Singapore', Beatty note, 28 Apr. 1924, in B. M. Ranft, ed., *The Beatty papers: selections from the private and official correspondence and papers of Admiral of the Fleet Beatty* (Aldershot, 1993), p. 395.

³² Keyes to Churchill, 21 Mar. 1925, in Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill, v, Companion*, part 1 (London, 1979), p. 443.

³³ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 171, c. 1226 (25 Mar. 1924), and vol. 181, c. 2625 (19 Mar. 1925).

³⁴ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 180, c. 1590 (23 Feb. 1925).

³⁵ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Lords), vol. 60, c. 386 (4 Mar. 1925), and (Commons), vol. 181, c. 2525 (19 Mar. 1925).

³⁶ 'The Singapore base', *Spectator*, 28 Mar. 1925, p. 488.

commerce ... when we wanted our ships at home'.³⁷ Both of these efforts to sentimentalize were political manoeuvres and did not mean that these figures actually questioned the decision to end the alliance. However, by asserting a benevolent interpretation of the alliance's history, they began to create an environment in which that case could be made.

III

One of the few commentators on foreign affairs who openly criticized the decision to terminate the alliance was Leo Maxse, the editor of the monthly journal, the *National Review*. In a number of editorial essays from 1922 onwards, Maxse and other contributors to the journal savagely lambasted the Lloyd George government for its gross incompetence in allowing the alliance to collapse. In these attacks they consistently noted the stability that had existed under the alliance and paid tribute to Japan's resolute friendship. For example, in February 1925 Maxse observed in typically biting prose that:

Great Britain had always found the Japanese a singularly loyal ally, and the splendid service they rendered the cause of civilization by coming into the Great War on our side should have spared them the humiliation which the emasculates of Downing Street allowed the Washington Government to inflict upon them.³⁸

It was therefore Maxse and his acolytes who first began to cultivate the idea that the alliance had been some kind of golden age which Britain had foolishly turned its back upon.

In order to place this attack on British policy in context it is important to note that, first, Maxse was a long-standing admirer of the Japanese and, second, that the *National Review* was no ordinary journal, but was, along with the *Morning Post*, one of the splenetic mouthpieces of the 'die-hard' wing of the Conservative party. The assault on the abrogation of the alliance therefore needs to be seen in the light of the 'die-hard' faction's extreme hostility to many of the ideas that influenced British thinking on foreign policy in the 1920s. Wedded to the Hobbesian idea that international politics was defined by an unrelenting competition between states for power, the 'die-hards' dismissed the League of Nations as an idealistic, liberal pipe dream that was doomed to failure and also raged against the concepts of naval limitation and disarmament. Indeed, they even went as far as viewing internationalism as a pernicious collectivist creed that was the antithesis of British patriotism and which, if unchallenged, had the potential to

³⁷ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 186, c. 1663 (16 July 1925). See also the comment by the Labour politician Commander Kenworthy in *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 193, c. 960 (22 Mar. 1926).

³⁸ 'Episodes of the Month', *National Review*, 84 (Feb. 1925), p. 822. Maxse's attacks began in the May 1922 edition. For other commentators see 'Centurion', 'A first-class blunder and its results', *National Review*, 85 (May 1925), pp. 382-96, and 'Diplomaticus', 'The choice', *National Review*, 85 (Aug. 1925), pp. 902-10.

sap the nation's spiritual strength. For them Britain's national interests could only be defended by a 'realistic' policy of imperial isolation based on strong armaments.³⁹ In addition, they had little time for the 'Atlanticism' that permeated liberal thought in Britain. For the 'die-hards' the United States was an unreliable power and one that posed, due to its financial and economic strength, a potent threat to the future of the empire. Nothing symbolized this better than the on-going debate about Britain's war debts, which showed to the right of the Conservative party the liberal folly of assuming that the Americans would look benevolently on their English cousins.⁴⁰

Maxse himself epitomized die-hard views. He had, for example, once rejected an offer of membership of the English Speaking Union on the grounds that he would have no truck with 'all this Anglo-American "slobber"'.⁴¹ His praise of the alliance was thus implicitly not merely an attack on a single misguided decision, but rather part of a general criticism of modern practice and a plea to return to the certainties of the pre-war era. Therefore from the very start the debate about the alliance's termination contained an ideological element.

At first only a few observers supported Maxse's view that Britain had erred in scrapping the alliance, but slowly the chorus of criticism began to grow. The first major event that brought about a wider reassessment of the alliance's demise was the seizure by the Chinese nationalist party, the Kuomintang (KMT), of the British concession at Hankow in central China in January 1927. To some conservatives this humiliation, which came after two years of Chinese provocation, displayed all too clearly what Britain had lost by sacrificing the alliance in 1921–2. As one observer, Captain Bertram Ramsay, noted in April 1927 'there is no doubt whatever that it [the alliance] would have made all the difference in the present disturbance & might conceivably have prevented it'.⁴² Thus, this event led conservatives to lament the loss of an alliance that, they contended, had guaranteed regional stability; a basic matter of strategy that Britain had foolishly neglected in 1921.

Further reinforcing this tendency was the fact that by 1927 a number of problems had come to dog Anglo-American relations. In regard to east Asia it was felt that, although the alliance had been sacrificed for the *beaux yeux* of the Americans, little had been gained by such a manoeuvre, for the United States had not once come to Britain's aid in China. The most controversial area of dispute, however, was over naval policy. Here two linked issues, Washington's calls for a redefinition of the freedom of the seas and its demand for parity in cruiser numbers, threatened the Royal Navy's global predominance. Accordingly, the

³⁹ See G. C. Webber, *The ideology of the British right, 1918–1939* (London, 1986), pp. 116–17; Markku Ruotsila, *British and American anticommunism before the cold war* (London, 2001), pp. 71–4 and 142–52; and Rose, *Conservatism and foreign policy*, pp. 56–9.

⁴⁰ Rose, *Conservatism and foreign policy*, pp. 107–27.

⁴¹ Maxse to Wrench, 22 July 1919, Chichester, West Sussex Record Office (WSRO), Maxse papers, 476, fo. 57.

⁴² Ramsey to Keyes, 9 Apr. 1927, in Paul G. Halpern, ed., *The Keyes papers: selections from the private and official correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Baron Keyes of Zebrugge* (2 vols., Aldershot, 1980), II, p. 211.

Geneva naval arms limitation conference in the summer of 1927 was a bad-tempered affair in which, to British eyes, American bellicosity contrasted with the goodwill of the Japanese delegation.⁴³

The newly found sympathy for the alliance went, however, beyond strategic considerations, for also underlying this reappraisal was an assumption that Britain and Japan stood for similar values and approaches to international politics. In order to understand this thinking one has first to grasp that the Chinese policy pursued by the Conservative foreign secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain in 1926–7 was deeply unpopular with many in his party.⁴⁴ Chamberlain's diplomacy was based upon the idea that Chinese nationalism was a phenomenon that could not be suppressed through the use of force. As such, the best way to protect British interests was to show a willingness to negotiate away the trappings of imperial privilege and to move towards a more equal relationship. This policy appealed to liberals, but to the 'die-hards' it smacked of weakness; to them it proved, as one individual noted succinctly, that Chamberlain 'has no guts'.⁴⁵ The prevailing view on the Conservative benches in parliament was that the pretensions of Chinese nationalism were illegitimate; Britain, after all, had acquired its privileges in China as treaty rights. Moreover, China's recent history, in which it had been torn asunder by civil war and plagued by bad governance and labour agitation, hardly suggested that the sacrifice of British treaty rights would guarantee future prosperity. Then there was, of course, the most damning indictment of all, which was that the KMT in its campaign to reunify China had turned for support to the entity that the Conservative party loathed above all others – the Soviet Union.

This disdain for revolutionary China led conservatives to contrast it with Japan, which stood as the antithesis of Chinese disorder. As a country that had a constitutional monarchy and which put great stress on property, tradition, and the upholding of law and order, Japan possessed values that British conservatives could understand. It also, as the Conservative MP for Norwich, Edward Hilton Young, observed in the House of Commons in February 1927, benefited from good leadership, a concept alien to China – 'the worst governed country in the world'.⁴⁶ In addition, Japan respected international treaties, shared the conservative antipathy towards communism, and was itself a victim of China's call for the end of foreign privileges. Furthermore, in contrast to Chamberlain's line, Japan was represented as standing firm in defiance of Chinese nationalism and

⁴³ See B. J. C. McKercher, *The second Baldwin government and the United States, 1924–1929: attitudes and diplomacy* (Cambridge, 1984), ch. 3.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Amery to Baldwin, 18 Sept. 1926, Cambridge University Library (CUL), Baldwin papers, vol. 115. For commentators in the right-wing media see J. O. P. Bland, 'Plain truths about China', *English Review*, 44 (Feb. 1927), pp. 145–54; and Ernest Remnant, 'Conciliation or capitulation?', *English Review*, 44 (Apr. 1927), pp. 392–400.

⁴⁵ King to Maxse, 7 Sept. 1926, WSRO, Maxse papers, 479, fo. 484.

⁴⁶ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 202, c. 341 (10 Feb. 1927).

as insisting that treaty rights be respected.⁴⁷ This was, of course, a self-serving interpretation of Japan's China policy, for its diplomacy was considerably more complex than this, but it was a convenient image to hold when the object was to criticize Britain's supposedly supine Foreign Office.⁴⁸

Contemporary events thus appeared, as far as the right was concerned, to confirm that much had been lost when the alliance had been terminated. Britain had forsaken a like-minded ally only to find itself isolated in a sea of adversity. In this environment the criticism of Japan that had been evident on the right in the immediate wake of the Washington conference was forgotten. Now it was Maxse's interpretation of the alliance that attracted attention, for it presented a romantic image of the once stable world that had existed before the storm. Influenced by such thinking, a few Conservative MPs, including former critics from the naval lobby, went beyond wallowing in nostalgia and began to call openly for a rapprochement with Japan, with whom, as one put it, Britain had 'had the happiest alliance for many years'.⁴⁹ Some government officials expressed similar sentiments. For example, in February 1930 a memorandum by the governor of Hong Kong, Sir Cecil Clementi, warning of Japan's ambitions in China, led the director of naval intelligence to note forlornly that this was 'sad reading for one who regrets the surrender of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance mainly in deference to American susceptibilities with the resultant decrease in security in the Far East, and what gained?'.⁵⁰

IV

If the 'northern expedition' sowed the seeds of the conservative reassessment of the alliance, then the troubled course of the Manchurian crisis of 1931–3 was the catalyst that caused it to come into full bloom.⁵¹ From the very start of this new period of turbulence the 'die-hards' took a pro-Japanese stance, claiming, for example, that its aggression within southern Manchuria constituted a legitimate act of self-defence in the face of constant provocation.⁵² These statements of support were a natural evolution of the views expressed in 1927–8, but what was different about this crisis, and led them to be even more fervent, was that on this occasion the League of Nations was involved. By appealing to Geneva to mediate

⁴⁷ 'Current comments', *English Review*, 44 (Mar. 1927), pp. 263–5.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Harumi Goto-Shibata, *Japan and Britain in Shanghai, 1925–1931* (Basingstoke, 1995).

⁴⁹ Looker (C-Essex SE) speech in *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 211, c. 2356 (14 Dec. 1927). See also the speech by Bellairs (C-Maidstone) in vol. 210, c. 2174 (24 Nov. 1927), and the PQ asked by Howard-Bury (C-Chelmsford) in vol. 211, c. 1836 (12 Dec. 1927).

⁵⁰ DNI minute, 18 Feb. 1930, NA ADM1/8744/128.

⁵¹ For the international diplomacy of the Manchurian crisis see Christopher Thorne, *The limits of foreign policy: the West, the League and the Far Eastern crisis of 1931–1933* (London, 1972); and Ian Nish, *Japan's struggle with internationalism: Japan, China and the League of Nations, 1931–1933* (London, 1993).

⁵² See, for example, Bland to Editor, *The Times*, 19 Oct. 1931, p. 8, col. C; and 'Orient', 'Practical politics in the far east', *Empire Review* (Apr. 1932), p. 212.

the crisis in September 1931, China raised the dispute on to an entirely different level, for suddenly a successful solution to the problems in Manchuria became a measure of whether the League would be able to live up to the hopes that it had engendered.

The involvement of Geneva heightened support for Japan in 'die-hard' circles, for they had never been sympathetic towards the League, seeing it as the ill-starred creation of that naive utopian President Wilson. Moreover, this antipathy towards the League was, of course, reinforced by the fact that the Labour party and the detested progressive intellectuals so resolutely put their faith in the idea of collective security. Indeed there existed at the time a stifling intellectual climate, particularly in parliament itself, in which criticism of the League was seen as heresy.⁵³ Accordingly the crisis represented a chance for the 'die-hards' to demonstrate what they saw as the absurdity of diplomacy centred on the League rather than national interest, particularly once the internationalists began to call for sanctions against Japan.

The result was that from 1931 onwards a growing number of Conservative MPs sought both publicly and privately to defend Japan's actions, and, moreover, to argue that the crisis would never have happened if the alliance had been allowed to continue. Indeed it is at this point that one might say that this view became an established item of conservative dogma, for even those not normally associated with the 'die-hards', including figures such as R. A. Butler and Cuthbert Headlam, now began to repeat it as received wisdom.⁵⁴ Lamentations for the lost days of the alliance and calls for friendship with Japan were now expressed fairly frequently in debates in both houses of parliament.⁵⁵ Thus, in May 1934, none other than Admiral Keyes, now the newly elected Conservative MP for Portsmouth North, observed that the present unsatisfactory conditions had their roots in the recent past when Britain had made the 'deplorable mistake' of terminating its alliance with Japan. This was a decision, Keyes claimed disingenuously, that he had always regretted, for Japan had listened to Britain when the alliance had existed. He ended his peroration by recommending to those in government that they should do 'all in their power to return to the excellent understanding with Japan which existed in those days'.⁵⁶ His colleague Victor Cazalet, the Conservative MP for Chippenham, enthusiastically agreed, noting that 'in the Great War Japan had shown herself as a very loyal ally of this country' and affirming that Britain should accept its dominant role in east Asia.⁵⁷

⁵³ See R. Bassett, *Democracy and foreign policy: a case history* (London, 1952), p. 569.

⁵⁴ Butler to Brabourne, 12 Dec. 1935, London, British Library, Asian, Pacific, and African Dept, Brabourne papers, MSS.Eur.F97/20A; and diary entry, 8 Mar. 1936, Durham, County Durham Record Office, Headlam papers, D/He 32.

⁵⁵ For such comments, see *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 275, c. 2220 (16 Mar. 1933); and *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Lords), vol. 97, cc. 527–42 (3 Apr. 1935), and vol. 102, cc. 22–6 (20 July 1936). ⁵⁶ *Parliamentary debates*, 5th series (Commons), vol. 289, c. 2084 (18 May 1934).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, c. 2085.

These views were also echoed in the media, where one of the new adherents to this line was Viscount Rothermere. In editorials in the *Daily Mail* and in speeches made during a visit to Japan in 1936 he deplored the alliance's termination and lambasted the League enthusiasts whom he saw as poisoning relations with the Japanese.⁵⁸ In addition, the *Empire Review*, the *English Review*, the *Morning Post*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *National Review* produced a series of articles that lamented past errors and called for renewed friendship. For example, in April 1933 Sir Clement Kinloch-Cooke, the editor of the *Empire Review*, observed in his monthly column that

After much harassing of mind and not a little sympathetic feeling, people are beginning to recall the benefits of the alliance and the generous and unceasing aid given by Japan to this country during the Great War. They are thinking more of what the alliance stood for than of the tricky ways of Geneva, where a great deal is talked about but comparatively little achieved.⁵⁹

In a similar vein another passionate plea for better Anglo-Japanese relations, which was published anonymously in November 1933 in the *English Review*, included the remarkable assertion that in 1914 'the Japanese were absolutely the only people we could depend upon'.⁶⁰ A number of studies of contemporary east Asia also included similar arguments, most notably those by Malcolm Kennedy, a former Reuters correspondent in Japan, and Ernest Pickering, a former Conservative MP.⁶¹

The allusions to the 'golden age' of the alliance were not restricted to the political foot soldiers, for those in the highest reaches of power also expressed such sentiments. For example, in September 1933 the chief of the imperial general staff, General Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, declared that the decision to end the alliance had been one of 'insensate folly' which had deprived Britain 'of a valued ally for no compensating gain in the shape of a less jealous America'.⁶² Another significant critic was the chancellor of the exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, who observed at a meeting of the CID in November 1933 that he considered the abrogation of the alliance to have been a mistake as 'it had gradually poisoned our relations with Japan'.⁶³ Accordingly he proposed that

⁵⁸ Viscount Rothermere, *Warnings and predictions* (London, 1939), pp. 180–5, and Spinks, 'The termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance', p. 321.

⁵⁹ The Editor, 'Round the empire', *Empire Review* (Apr. 1933), p. 195.

⁶⁰ 'R', 'Anglo-Japanese relations', *English Review*, 57 (Nov. 1933), pp. 519–25. See also the comments by George Sale in the 'Summary of discussion' appendix to Lord Lothian, 'The crisis in the Pacific', *International Affairs*, 14 (Mar.–Apr. 1935), pp. 170–1.

⁶¹ Malcolm Kennedy, *The problem of Japan* (London, 1935), pp. 64–74; and Ernest H. Pickering, *Japan's place in the modern world* (London, 1936), pp. 318–19. For a review of this literature, see Jon Pardoe, 'British writing on contemporary Japan, 1924–1941: newspapers, books, reviews and propaganda', in Gordon Daniels and Chushichi Tsuzuki, eds., *The history of Anglo-Japanese relations*, v: *The social and cultural perspectives, 1600–2000* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 281–304.

⁶² Montgomery-Massingberd (CIGS) to Hankey (Cabinet Office), 11 Sept. 1933, NA CAB21/369.

⁶³ CID 261st meeting, 9 Nov. 1933, NA CAB2/6.

Britain should attempt to restore its former friendship with Japan, a line that he was intermittently to pursue with a marked lack of success for the rest of the decade.

The belief that abrogation of the alliance had been a calamitous mistake thus rapidly gathered converts and led a sizeable minority to argue that, if Britain revoked its obeisance to Washington and Geneva, a new relationship could be built with Japan that would guarantee the security of British interests in the east. But while this argument was frequently voiced by the right and had some support within the government, it did not become nearly as influential as the calls for appeasement of Germany. In part one can attribute this to circumstance, for the Japanese threat was clearly not as immediate as that posed by Hitler. In addition, however, it is important to see that much of the debate about Japan consisted of mere rhetorical point-scoring rather than mapping out a real alternative policy. Indeed, reading the statements of those who decried the alliance's demise one is struck by the fact that their words of enthusiasm for Japan were not so much for the country itself, but for what it represented. At heart their arguments were expressions of hostility towards China, the United States, the Soviet Union, and, perhaps most of all, the League. Thus Japan was not appreciated for what it was so much as for what it was not. As such the sympathy for Japan was not deep and genuine, but rather a symbolic expression of dissatisfaction at the way in which international politics had evolved since the end of the Great War. It is therefore no accident that the vague talk of reviving the alliance failed to turn into anything more substantial, for real pro-Japanese sentiments existed only among a few.

While the lamentations over the alliance's demise undoubtedly had popular appeal, it is also important to note that this view never possessed a monopoly over British opinion, and that many saw it as a flawed argument. Criticism came from a number of angles. Some, such as Sir Austen Chamberlain and the cabinet secretary Sir Maurice Hankey, took a realpolitik line. They agreed that the alliance's demise was regrettable, but from their own experience stated that it was inconceivable that Britain could have resisted American and Dominion pressure in 1921–2.⁶⁴ Others rejected the sentimental images of Japan because the latter's aggressive trade policy in the early to mid-1930s directly threatened their livelihood. Thus in areas such as Lancashire conservative opinion began to be attracted more by 'yellow peril' rhetoric than by stories about the special ties that existed between the 'two island empires'.⁶⁵

The most biting criticism, however, came from liberal publicists, who directly attacked the idea that termination had been an error because Japan had proved

⁶⁴ See Austen Chamberlain to Howard, 25 Apr. 1927, Birmingham University Library, Austen Chamberlain papers, AC54/264; and Hankey to Montgomery-Massingberd, 22 Sept. 1933, and Hankey to Neville Chamberlain, 30 Oct. 1933, NA CAB21/369.

⁶⁵ Antony Best, 'Economic appeasement or economic nationalism?: a political perspective on the British empire, Japan and the rise of intra-Asian trade, 1933–1937', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 30 (2002), pp. 77–101.

itself to be a trustworthy ally in the Great War. In April 1932 Wickham Steed argued in the journal *Nineteenth Century and After* that the alliance had been removed for the very good reason that Japan could not be trusted, and described in detail the suspicion of Japanese activities that he had discovered in British Columbia in 1921.⁶⁶ The military correspondent of *The Times*, Basil Liddell Hart, took a similar view. In March 1935, in a conversation with Major-General John Dill, he refuted the latter's assertion that Japan had been a 'good ally to us in the last war' asserting that 'as an ally she wanted to get but not to give'.⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, the pro-American lobby in British politics also rose to the challenge. In the autumn of 1934 Lord Lothian helped to organize a campaign of public speeches and newspaper articles that refuted the claim that Britain's destiny lay in renewed friendship with Japan. Among his supporters were figures such as J. L. Garvin and Lord Astor, the editor and proprietor of *The Observer*, respectively, and General Smuts, who was on a brief visit to London.⁶⁸

Behind the scenes many in the Foreign Office took the same line. In 1926 Sir Victor Wellesley was recorded as stating that the Japanese were 'basically untrustworthy and unscrupulous' and that 'If one had nothing else to go by, their attitude towards us during the War would be enough'.⁶⁹ The minister in Peking, Sir Miles Lampson, who had been present at the Washington conference, took the same line, noting in typically blunt style that 'The people who killed the A-J Alliance were primarily the Japanese themselves', due to 'their misdeeds in China' during the Great War.⁷⁰ In 1934 Sir John Pratt of the Far Eastern Department affirmed his belief that proposals for a return to the alliance were 'counsels of sentiment and not of wisdom', and observed that Japan's behaviour during the alliance had meant that the relationship had become 'a source of embarrassment' to Britain.⁷¹ The Foreign Office thus acted as a strong institutional check to the idea that the alliance could be revived. Others in Whitehall expressed similar scepticism. When faced in 1930 with Clementi's plea for better relations with Japan, one anonymous member of the War Office noted:

When all the past history of the Alliance is reviewed, can it be seriously supposed that Japan will act in a different manner in the future? On the contrary, if it teaches anything, one is forced to the conclusion that she will use an Entente to increase her own prestige, to

⁶⁶ Wickham Steed, 'British policy in the Pacific', *Nineteenth Century and After*, 111 (Apr. 1932), pp. 396-409.

⁶⁷ 'Talk with Dill', Liddell Hart note, 27 Mar. 1935, London, King's College, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Liddell Hart papers, file 11/1935 part 1/69.

⁶⁸ See the speech by General Smuts reported in the *Times*, 13 Nov. 1934, p. 15, col. F, and Lord Lothian, 'The crisis in the Pacific', *International Affairs*, 14 (Mar.-Apr. 1935), pp. 170-1.

⁶⁹ Casey (London) to Bruce, 15 Apr. 1926, in W. J. Hudson and Jane North, eds., *My dear P.M.: R. G. Casey's letters to S. M. Bruce, 1924-1929* (Canberra, 1980), p. 175.

⁷⁰ Lampson (Peking) minute, 14 Apr. 1927, NA FO228/3405.

⁷¹ CP77(34) 'Situation in the Far East, 1933-1934', Simon note, 15 Mar. 1934, NA CAB24/248.

obtain facilities that would otherwise be denied her; but when we in our turn ask for her to carry out the spirit of the Entente and render us assistance it will not be forthcoming.⁷²

This was a telling dismissal, for it not only refuted the drift towards nostalgia, but also pointed to the potential dangers inherent in a sentimental reading of the past.

It is also notable that the first serious attempts to write the history of recent events in east Asia paid little heed to the argument espoused by the right. In 1937 G. F. Hudson noted in his book, *The Far East in world politics*, that the alliance had lost its *raison d'être* with the defeat of Germany and had thus been 'practically inoperative since 1918'.⁷³ Its termination in 1921 was therefore only a simple recognition of the reality of the situation. Moreover, he observed that the problem that beset the Washington treaties was not that they had been flawed from the outset, but rather that they had been overtaken by events, namely the rise of nationalist China.⁷⁴ G. E. Hubbard, the expert on east Asian affairs at Chatham House, took a similar view, observing in his study of contemporary British policy that the decision to terminate the alliance came about largely because of the 'disastrous possibility' that Japan might lead Britain into war with the United States.⁷⁵ The belief that the continuation of the alliance might have averted later Japanese aggression was only referred to, rather derisively, in a short footnote.⁷⁶

V

The battle over the death of the alliance was thus neatly poised in the inter-war period, and it was a competition defined first and foremost by ideological preferences. But how did the contested view that the alliance's death was a disaster become received wisdom in the post-war period? The answer lies partly in its occasional appearance in the memoirs and retrospectives that appeared during and after the Second World War. These books, which were written with the benefit of hindsight and for the aggrandizement of their authors' reputations, criticized many of the decisions made in the inter-war period, and tended to do so from a *realpolitik* rather than an internationalist perspective. Most of them focused entirely on European events, but a few also dealt with the origins of the war in the Pacific. In this field the Washington conference was a ripe target, for self-evidently it had not fulfilled its promise to bring peace and stability to east Asia. If the decisions at Washington had been misguided, it naturally followed that history might have taken a different path if the alliance had been maintained. Thus the idea that Britain had paid a heavy price for foolishly discarding its

⁷² 'Note upon Sir Cecil Clementi's despatch', unattributed and undated [Feb. 1930?], NA WO106/130. ⁷³ G. F. Hudson, *The Far East in world politics* (London, 1937), p. 202. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ G. E. Hubbard, *British Far Eastern policy* (New York, 1943 edn), p. 33. See also Stephen King-Hall, *Our own times, 1913-1938: a political and economic survey* (London, 1938), p. 226; E. H. Carr, *Britain: a study of foreign policy from the Versailles treaty to the outbreak of war* (London, 1939), p. 58; G. M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A short history of international affairs, 1920-1939* (London, 1950 edn), pp. 63-5; and Spinks, 'The termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance', pp. 321-40. ⁷⁶ Hubbard, *British Far Eastern policy*, p. 33.

formerly loyal ally was repeated for a new generation. The most notable author to include this argument was that great generator of historical myths, Winston Churchill. In *The gathering storm* he observed portentously that ‘The annulment caused a profound impression in Japan, and was viewed as the spurning of an Asiatic Power by the Western world. Many links were sundered which might afterwards have proved of decisive value to peace.’⁷⁷ Typically, Churchill neglected to mention in this account that he had been one of the alliance’s opponents in 1921.⁷⁸ This interpretation of events was also present in the memoirs of the former first sea lord, Lord Chatfield, and those of three figures who had served during their careers at the Tokyo embassy, Sir Robert Craigie, Sir Thomas Hohler, and Major-General F. S. G. Piggott, and was also hinted at in the memoirs of Lord Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office for most of the 1930s.⁷⁹ The ‘ghost’ thus continued to exert its grip, and the fact that many in the inter-war period had viewed Japan’s record in the Great War with disquiet and had not regretted the end of the alliance was largely forgotten except by a few specialists.

Even more significant was that the original explicitly conservative ideological edge to the pro-alliance argument found new adherents in the ‘declinist’ school of British historians that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The most detailed criticism of the termination of the alliance appeared in Correlli Barnett’s *The collapse of British power*, which was published in 1972. Drawing on the newly released minutes of the Imperial Conference of 1921, Barnett noted the grave choice facing Britain in 1921, including the difficulties posed by the naval issue, but argued that in the end facile pro-American sentiment led Britain to make the wrong decision. In making his case, he relied heavily on the arguments made at the conference by Billy Hughes, whose hard-headed realism he contrasted with the naivety of Meighen. He portrayed the decision to allow the treaty with Japan to lapse as a betrayal of Britain’s traditional balance-of-power thinking, which should have taught Lloyd George and his cabinet that they needed to renew the alliance in order to contain the United States.⁸⁰ This clearly echoed the anti-‘Atlanticist’ views of the *National Review* and the ‘die-hards’. Indeed, with Barnett’s reference to Britain’s ‘grovelling ardour’ for America, and his characterization of the Washington conference as ‘one of the major catastrophes of British history’, it read almost as if Leo Maxse were still with us.⁸¹ Barnett was also similar to Maxse in that he relied on the ‘ghost’ of the alliance. He affirmed that Japanese

⁷⁷ Winston S. Churchill, *The gathering storm* (London, 1985 edn), p. 13. For Churchill’s memoirs, see David Reynolds, *In command of history: Churchill fighting and writing the Second World War* (London, 2004).

⁷⁸ See Churchill memorandum, 4 July 1921, in Martin Gilbert, ed., *Winston S. Churchill*, III, *Companion*, part III (London, 1977), p. 1450.

⁷⁹ Lord Chatfield, *The navy and defence: the autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Chatfield*, II: *It might happen again* (London, 1947), p. 88; R. L. Craigie, *Behind the Japanese mask* (London, 1946), pp. 12–13; Sir Thomas Hohler, *Diplomatic petrel* (London, 1942), pp. 71–2; F. S. G. Piggott, *Broken thread* (Aldershot, 1950) passim; and Lord Vansittart, *The mist procession* (London, 1958), p. 281.

⁸⁰ Barnett, *The collapse of British power*, pp. 250–75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 262, 272.

assistance had been vital to the British war effort between 1914 and 1918, but did not mention that many, both in the Foreign Office and the Royal Navy, did not believe this to be true. He contended that 'the Japanese had always been scrupulously loyal', but made no mention of the 'twenty-one demands' or Japanese links to Asian revolutionaries.⁸² The fact that British and Japanese attitudes towards the 'open door' in China differed so markedly was referred to in passing, but there was no recognition that this fundamental disagreement meant that any future alliance would have been built on the most unsound of foundations.

Barnett and the other 'declinist' writers were able to make an impact, because their accounts of the end of the alliance were framed within wide-ranging books that also covered the area of greatest interest to historians, namely the appeasement of Germany. Their polemical writings thus reached a larger audience than the more detailed analyses provided by those who specialized in the region. As a result it was the former's view that came to be adopted, often without its overtly political connotations, as a historical cliché that was regularly aired whenever the alliance came up for discussion.

VI

The 'ghost' has thus survived intact until the present day and continues to hinder understanding of both the nature of the alliance itself and the decisions made at the Washington conference. But by looking carefully at the myth and studying its assumptions, it is possible to strip away the sentiment and nostalgia that has encumbered our vision. The first part in this process is to realize that the myth presupposes that the alliance was something it never really was, close and harmonious. It needs to be understood that this interpretation has its roots not in solid fact but in the fantasyland of Leo Maxse and the 'die-hards', who deliberately created a positive image of the alliance as part of their struggle to resist the rise of 'new diplomacy' and all of its works. In reality the situation was that even before 1921 British and Japanese interests in east Asia seriously diverged. Thus the end of the alliance did not cause Anglo-Japanese alienation but in fact can be seen as symptomatic of the steady erosion of the ties between the two countries. Any renewal of the alliance would most likely have been a fruitless attempt to stop the haemorrhaging. It is also essential to recognize that the problems that eventually compromised the security arrangements agreed at Washington would have provided a severe test for any agreement. For example, can it really be argued that the alliance would have better weathered the storms created by the rise of Chinese nationalism and the arrival of the depression? In addition, it is vital to understand that in 1921 Britain had little choice but to opt for co-operation with the United States, for only that option provided a realistic chance of settling the many strategic and economic problems that beset the fragile post-Paris order;

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

the alliance with Japan provided no practical alternative. This gamble may not always have paid off, but surely America's intermittent friendship was preferable to its permanent hostility.

While the *National Review's* interpretation of the alliance may be an obstacle to understanding the events of 1921, it is though significant on its terms, for this politically charged argument necessarily sheds light on the time in which it was made. The debate over the alliance's termination illuminates the fact that, while historians of the vagaries of British foreign policy in the inter-war period have paid much attention to matters of strategy and resources, domestic public opinion and ideological arguments should not be ignored. What is apparent from the battle over the alliance's reputation is that after the Great War there was at heart a profound ambivalence in British society about how to approach international politics. Britain was precariously caught between the certainties of the 'old diplomacy', as symbolized by the alliance, and the promise of the 'new', which was encapsulated by the League. In the conflict over which way to turn recent history became one of the battlefields and in that process myths were created that linger to this very day. The failure to cohere ideologically in favour of one approach to foreign policy was thus arguably for Britain as much a problem as its indecision over its strategic priorities.

Thus, as Beatrice Heuser and Cyril Buffet have shown in their recent edited collection on myths in international relations, politically charged interpretations of the past create both challenges and opportunities.⁸³ Myths create obstacles to research because they obscure historical events with a web of rhetoric. In some cases, as with the alliance, the initial impulses behind a particular interpretation of history can be forgotten, thus allowing what was once a controversial opinion to become widely accepted and repeated. This can only be overcome by first acknowledging that the myth exists and then by engaging in an excavation to allow the original judgements of decision-makers and the informed public to emerge untarnished. At the same time, however, the very process of disentanglement provides an opportunity to study the period in which the myth was formed and to come to a clearer understanding of its intellectual and ideological roots. In the case of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, its alluring ghost, summoned up by the *National Review* and its ilk, provides a fascinating insight into the inter-war years; yet for the sake of understanding the events of 1921 its exorcism is long overdue.

⁸³ Heuser and Buffet, eds., *Haunted by history*, pp. 259–74.