



# Go KARINA URBACH Betweens FOR HITLER

'A fascinating page-turner'  
*History Today*

## GO-BETWEENS FOR HITLER

Karina Urbach was a Kurt Hahn-Scholar at the University of Cambridge, where she took her PhD. For her German Habilitation she was awarded the Bavarian Ministry of Culture prize. She has published on nineteenth and twentieth-century European history and is currently at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Urbach has worked as historical advisor on many BBC, PBS, and German TV documentaries. She is campaigning for the release of interwar material from the royal archives.

## **Praise for *Go-Betweens for Hitler***

‘engrossing and well-researched’

—Richard J Evans, *London Review of Books*

‘A fascinating page-turner about Hitler’s secret diplomacy in the 1930s, which was intended to secure British amity and then neutrality when he led Germany to war ... Urbach combed her way through archives across Europe to construct this image of a decaying aristocracy using their connections in the cultivation of appeasers in Britain. They were not without influence.’

—Lawrence Goldman, Books of the Year 2015, *History Today*

‘What Urbach offers in this gripping and highly readable account of go-betweens is a rare insight into the unofficial side of diplomacy.’

—Julie Gottlieb, *Journal of Contemporary History*

‘To be sure, *Go-Betweens For Hitler* may essentially be based within the parameters of a scholarly undertaking, but it almost reads like that of a John Le Carre or Robert Littell novel. In and of itself, this speaks volumes.’

—David Marx, *Book Reviews*

‘From peace-feelers in the First World War to appeasers on the eve of the Second World War, this unique book makes fascinating reading’

—Coryne Hall, *European Royal History Journal*

‘A fascinating and painstaking reconstruction of the real history of the go-between, so long shrouded in rumour and speculation. This really is a privileged journey behind the scenes of international diplomacy in the company of a cast of larger than life characters brought vividly to life.’

—Richard Overy, editor of *The Oxford Illustrated History of World War II*

‘Karina Urbach’s scintillating book illuminates a vital and heretofore neglected feature of twentieth-century diplomacy—the role of private intermediaries between governments. Through imaginative research in dozens of archives scattered across the European Continent, Urbach brings to life the hidden world of multilingual aristocrats in the era of the two world wars ... As [she] demonstrates, such high born intermediaries, operating under the radar, helped solidify the Austro-German alliance before 1914 and enabled Hitler to influence the British upper classes in the 1930s. Urbach sketches personalities so vividly and writes so well that, in addition to its scholarly importance, this work reads like a mystery novel.’

—Stephen A. Schuker, University of Virginia

GO-BETWEENS  
FOR  
HITLER

KARINA URBACH

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## *Praise for Karina Urbach*

### *Queen Victoria:*

This clever and enlightening biography of Queen Victoria is a gripping read. With humour and psychological expertise Karina Urbach portrays—supported by a multitude of documents—an impressive portrait of this woman.

Christopher Clark, University of Cambridge

This short and readable biography of Queen Victoria is a remarkable achievement. First and foremost, it is a masterpiece of a biographical miniature, not in terms of its scholarliness, insight or intellectual power—all of which are by no means in short supply given its proportions. Rather, it manages to be readable, clear, interesting, witty and brief, and yet also important. . . . The failure of academic historians to consider Queen Victoria seriously has meant she has been enigmatic to date. A triumph of Karina Urbach's book is that, by its end, if anything, Victoria has become more seriously and urgently so.

John Davis, *Sehepunkte*

A little masterpiece

Andreas Rose, *Historische Zeitschrift*

### *Bismarck's Favourite Englishman:*

Karina Urbach has managed to bring together an impressive amount of new evidence. . . . She gives us a balanced, carefully researched and gracefully written account of personalities and policies.

James J. Sheehan, *Times Literary Supplement*

Karina Urbach has a light touch and a sharp eye. She provides vivid portraits of William I, Berlin in the 1870s and the great Bismarck, with whom Russell had a close relationship. Here is a work which is a sheer delight to read.

Jonathan Steinberg, University of Pennsylvania,  
and author of *Bismarck: A Life*



## Preface

Many of us have been go-betweens at one time or another in our lives. We may have conveyed messages between siblings, parents, or friends after a misunderstanding or argument. But go-betweens not only exist on a personal level, they are also employed in high politics, well hidden from the public eye. Right now they may be working where official channels have become stuck.

Go-betweens are not an invention of the twenty-first century, they have existed for a long time. Those in power who have launched go-between missions over the last century have done so regardless of the form of government. But a common thread existed when it came to choosing the ideal person for such missions: up to 1945 they were mainly members of the aristocracy from every corner of Europe. Only after the Second World War were these people replaced by international businessmen, secret servicemen, and journalists.

In the American television series *House of Cards*, the Vice-President snarls at a congressional inquiry: 'When a back channel becomes public, it defeats its purpose.' It has been my purpose for the last five years to highlight the role of the back channel in the first half of the twentieth century. This book uses new sources found in thirty archives in the United States, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.

It has been a pleasure writing this story because it gave me a chance to meet real life go-betweens. Following James Watson's advice 'avoid boring people', I have been spoilt with wonderful friends and colleagues. This is a, probably, incomplete list of them: Gerry Bradshaw, Christopher Clark, Matthew Cotton, Shawn Donnelley, Andreas Fahrmeir, Otto Feldbauer, Annegret and Peter Friedberg, Lothar Gall, Ulrike Grunewald, Klaus Hildebrand, Paul Hoser, Eva Klesse, Jeremy Noakes, Klaus Roser, Stephen Schuker, Jonathan Steinberg, the Stolzenbergs, Natascha Stöber, Miles Taylor, the Unholzers.



The Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard coined the idea of *Lebensmensch*. I have had three such people in my life: my mother Wera Frydtberg (†2008), who was not just a great actress but also the most enchanting person I have ever met; my son Timothy, and my husband Jonathan Haslam, who have made me so happy.

*London, June 2015*

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## Introduction

In the summer of 1940 a bizarre incident occurred at the German–Italian border—the Brenner. In July the 83-year-old Duchess in Bavaria was refused permission to return to the German Reich. She was stuck in Italy and tried for months to get back to her home in Bavaria. Her aristocratic friends and relatives as well as the German embassy in Rome tried their best to help her. The ambassador Hans Georg von Mackensen explained the case of the displaced duchess to the German Foreign Ministry: she had travelled to Italy ‘for the sole purpose of supporting her granddaughter, the Italian Crown Princess’, during the last stages of her pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> This was required because the mother of the Crown Princess could not come to Italy herself. She was the Dowager Queen of the Belgians and had ‘for understandable reasons’ decided against such a trip.<sup>2</sup>

This family friendly explanation did not have much effect in Berlin, though. Because nothing was done in the following months, the visit of the duchess threatened to turn into a serious diplomatic incident between Germany and Italy. Only when the ‘esteemed’ Nazi Prince Philipp von Hessen intervened did things start moving again. Hessen used pragmatic arguments vis-à-vis Berlin: as long as the Bavarian duchess was stuck at the border, the Italian royal family had to pay for her costly maintenance. This financial burden was seen as a great nuisance. In October 1940 the displaced Duchess was allowed to re-enter Germany. It turned out that she was not the only member of the higher aristocracy who was in trouble at the border. Over the following years the embassy in Rome was kept busy trying to help other German aristocrats get home.

So what was the regime afraid of? This book will show that the Nazi leadership feared the higher aristocracy because it had *used* their international networks for years and it therefore knew of their great potential.

Members of the aristocracy had worked as go-betweens for Hitler and established useful contacts with the ruling elites of other countries. By 1940 the regime feared that these networks could also work against them.

So far research has focused on the support German aristocrats gave Hitler in gaining power *within* Germany. What has been neglected, however, is that there was also an important international dimension.

Aristocrats saw themselves as an international elite—with their marriages and friendships transcending national boundaries. These international ties were tested in the First World War when royal houses and aristocratic families were attacked as ‘hybrids’ and had to demonstrate national allegiance. But behind the scenes some aristocrats continued to use their international networks. As unofficial go-betweens for emperors and foreign ministries, British and German aristocrats conveyed peace feelers. This activity came to an end in 1918. But not for long. In the inter-war period a new common enemy appeared on the scene: Bolshevism. Fear of it was another bonding experience for the aristocracy. The British were alarmed lest the Empire should be undermined, the Hungarians feared a repeat of Bela Kun’s red terror (1918), and the Germans were scared of their emerging communist party, the largest in Europe.

Encouraged by the Italian model—where Mussolini successfully incorporated the monarchy in his regime (1922)—they turned to a German version of the Duce: Hitler. In 1933 the Führer was short of international contacts and did not trust his own Foreign Ministry. He therefore used members of the German aristocracy for secret missions to Britain, Italy, Hungary, and Sweden. One of the most notorious was the Duke of Coburg—a grandson of Queen Victoria. Born in England and educated in Germany, Carl Eduard is an example of thorough re-education. Unfortunately it was a re-education in reverse—away from the constitutional monarchy he was reared in to dictatorship. This process could have remained a footnote in history. But Carl Eduard’s determination to help the Nazi movement first clandestinely, later publicly, had an impact that, like many other go-between missions, has so far not been recognized. Coburg’s importance to Hitler had been known by the British intelligence services for a long time. In April 1945 the code breakers at the Government Code and Cypher School, Bletchley Park, came across a telegram from Hitler. The contents intrigued them:

Source saw a fragment which contained the following sentence: ‘the Führer attaches importance to the President of the Red Cross, the Duke of Coburg, on no account falling into enemy hands’.<sup>3</sup>

Hitler was at this point encircled in the bunker. Since he was not known for his caring side it seems bizarre that he made the effort to give instructions about an obscure duke. His message could mean two things. Either Hitler wanted his old confidant, the Duke of Coburg, to be whisked to safety or this was a 'Nero order', i.e. he wanted him to be murdered before the enemy could get hold of him. One thing appeared certain: the secrets Hitler and the Duke shared seemed to be so important that they needed to be forever hidden from public view. This makes one wonder what role Coburg had played for Hitler. Had the Duke been entrusted with secret missions to Britain including one to his close relative Edward VIII, later the Duke of Windsor?

The aim of this book is not just to untangle Coburg's secret negotiations for Hitler, but to uncover several go-between missions, their origins, their significance, and their consequences. It will span the period from the First World War to the Second World War. Apart from the Duke of Coburg, it throws light on the work of many other go-betweens such as Prince Max Egon II Fürstenberg, Lady Barton, General Paget, Lady Paget, Prince Max von Baden, Prince Wilhelm von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, Princess Stephanie Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingfürst, and Prince Max Hohenlohe-Langenburg.

It will hopefully further refine our image of the manner in which diplomacy was conducted in the first half of the twentieth century and will cast new light on a dimension of Hitler's foreign policy tactics hitherto ignored.



## 4

# Approaching the Appeasers

## The Duke of Coburg

By 1918 go-betweens seemed obsolete. President Wilson's idea of a new diplomacy, disposing once and for all of secret alliances and back-room talks, was applauded by the public. Transparency was yearned for.<sup>1</sup> Even though most go-between missions had never become public, the well-documented Sixtus scandal was seen as a case in point. Clandestine manoeuvres appeared doomed. Yet the inter-war years became far too complicated to follow through with such well-meaning ideals. Go-betweens were soon employed again—by democratic and undemocratic regimes. One of these go-betweens was the Duke of Coburg. His employer was Hitler.

To this day Hitler's system of using go-betweens has been ignored by historians. There is a certain snobbishness involved in this. Since it was run by 'amateurs', i.e. non-professionals, it was simply written off by diplomatic historians. This is a very narrow way of looking at the issue.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to Hitler's foreign policy, focusing on official routes has never been enough. We already know of three separate organizations which covered foreign affairs for him. There was the *Außenpolitisches Amt* der NSDAP (foreign policy department of the NSDAP, or APA for short) which resided in the Hotel Adlon and was headed by the Nazi party's chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. Then there was the less important *Auslandsorganisation* (Foreign Organization branch of the NSDAP or NSDAP/AO) run by Ernst Wilhelm Bohle responsible for Germans living abroad, and at last Joachim von Ribbentrop's office, the increasingly important *Büro (office) Ribbentrop* (later renamed the *Dienststelle Ribbentrop*). These organizations alone show that Hitler obviously had no trust in the German Foreign Ministry (referred to in the note below by its acronym, the AA). Rosenberg wrote after a conversation with his Führer in 1934: 'he still believes in the good will of Neurath [the Foreign

Minister], the AA is, however, a group of conspirators. He regrets that he is still bound by the promises he made when the Cabinet was formed, according to which the President [Hindenburg] makes decisions about the army and the AA. The [army] was fine because of Blomberg, the other one [the AA] is not.<sup>3</sup>

When Hitler came to power in 1933, diplomats were in his eyes the old guard, who had not yet accepted the revolutionary ideas of his movement. Though he had nothing to worry about and most diplomats soon fell into line, the relationship Hitler had with his first Foreign Minister, von Neurath, remained distant, as Rosenberg rightly guessed. The historian Zara Steiner has noted: 'Neurath's role in Berlin was extremely circumscribed; he rarely saw the Führer.'<sup>4</sup> Steiner, however, does not ask the obvious question. Who carried out foreign policy then? In fact Hitler kept the obedient Neurath on for image reasons, knowing how important it was to make a show of continuity to the outside world. In the meantime he developed an alternative system of diplomacy.

Hitler did not think or act like a nineteenth-century statesmen who coordinated his policies with the Foreign Ministry. If one wants to understand his peculiar way of conducting foreign policy, one has to look at his go-betweens. His contemporaries were aware of the importance of these go-betweens. Hitler was, as his adjutant Fritz Wiedemann stressed, 'a revolutionary who did not think much of the old ways of diplomacy'. The Rothermere journalist Ward Price wrote in his enthusiastic book on the 'Great Dictators' that Hitler preferred to bypass bureaucracy and 'rank' and instead used 'confidantes' to implement policy. A person of rank, such as the German ambassador to Britain, von Dirksen, had to take this into account as well. After the war he complained that Hitler's method was indeed highly unconventional: 'its versatility, avoidance of the appropriate offices.'<sup>5</sup> One reason why Hitler liked to use go-betweens was because he distrusted professional diplomats like Dirksen (even though Dirksen was a member of the NSDAP). Apart from distrusting his own diplomats, there were many other reasons why Hitler used back channels. One can be found in his own past. As mentioned above, his adjutant Fritz Wiedemann described Hitler as a 'revolutionary' and, like so many revolutionaries, Hitler had indeed, in the early phase of his political life, learnt to work illegally. After his failed putsch, the NSDAP had been dissolved on 23 November 1923. It continued to work illegally after Hitler was released from prison in 1924. The party was officially refounded on 27 February 1925. This means that Hitler had plenty

of experience outside formal structures. He had learnt the value of clandestine channels; it came naturally to him. In some ways he had been a kind of go-between himself once, a military one. During the First World War he was a 'Meldegänger', a dispatch runner between different sections of the front. Since he romanticized military life, he most likely romanticized this way of communication as well—man to man.

There is only one monograph that tells the story of an Italian intermediary for Hitler. It follows the links the Hesse family established for Hitler in Italy.<sup>6</sup> Yet the Hesse family was no exception but only one of many aristocratic families Hitler used.

During the inter-war period the aristocracies of Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Romania, and Germany were very active in trying to play a political role again. Yet for a long time research on these aristocracies has been neglected.<sup>7</sup> This was due not merely to the fact that private archives were closed to historians, but also because the study of the aristocracy was simply seen as unfashionable.<sup>8</sup> Since nobody assumed that the old networks continued to exist, nobody followed E. M. Forster's sage advice: 'only connect'.

But why would a revolutionary like Hitler use aristocrats as go-betweens? At first sight the relationship between Hitler and the aristocracy seems asymmetric. Instead of aristocrats Hitler could have employed many other people he had become close to—e.g. internationally connected businessmen like Thyssen or the Krupp family. That he chose aristocrats instead had several reasons—rational as well as irrational.

Rationally he had had good experiences with aristocrats. They were allies. As Stephan Malinowski has shown, the German nobility had helped Hitler to get ahead socially *within* Germany. Lesser German nobles had been proportionally among the strongest supporters of the Nazi movement. In his study Malinowski did not include the international help for Hitler, though. As will be shown this was in many ways even more valuable.

Seating plans can give a first indication of how aristocrats were used. Whenever high ranking foreign guests came to Berlin, noble names were employed to entertain them. At state dinners for the Hungarian Prime Minister, the Bulgarian Prime Minister, or Italian dignitaries, the Hohenzollerns, Richthofens, Bismarcks, Alvenslebens, Arnims, Jagows, and many others were providing traditional glamour. They were particularly useful during the Olympics. A list of the people who attended the Olympics on 11 August 1936, for example, reads like an extract from *Burke's Peerage*

combined with the *Almanach de Gotha*: Lord and Lady Aberdare, Lord Barnby, Lord Camrose, Lord Douglas Hamilton, Lord Hollenden, Lord Rennell Rodd, the Duke of Coburg, the Prince of Wied, the Hesse Princes, the Duke of Braunschweig, 'Auwi', the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringens.<sup>9</sup>

Despite making fun of the degenerate aristocracy Hitler was not entirely immune to the glamour of old names. This was the irrational side of his decision to take them on. He had grown up under a monarchy. Though he had hardly approved of the Habsburgs, since his school days in Austria-Hungary he had been surrounded by their stories. In his history class, he was taught how the Habsburgs built their empire and used dynastic marriages to form political alliances in the early modern period. Even though such alliances were anachronistic, Hitler seriously toyed with the idea of resurrecting them. In 1934/5 he had Princess Victoria Luise approached, the only daughter of ex-Kaiser Wilhelm II. She was married to the Duke of Braunschweig, a sympathetic follower of Hitler. In her memoirs Victoria Luise wrote:

we received an astounding demand from Hitler, conveyed to us by Ribbentrop. It was no more nor less than that we should arrange a marriage between [our daughter] Friedericke and the Prince of Wales. My husband and I were shattered. Something like this had never entered our minds, not even for a reconciliation with England. Before the First World War it had been suggested that I should marry my cousin [the Prince of Wales], who was two years younger, and it was now being indicated that my daughter should marry him. We told Hitler that in our opinion the great difference in age between the Prince of Wales and Friedericke alone precluded such a project, and that we were not prepared to put any such pressure on our daughter.<sup>10</sup>

Victoria Luise protested too much. Her family was thoroughly pro-Nazi and would have wished to please Hitler. Furthermore the Prince of Wales was the son-in-law every ambitious mother dreamt of. But after 1945 such feelings were naturally no longer admitted. Even though this marriage could not be engineered, using German relatives of the British royal family as go-betweens was another logical route for Hitler. He understood that elites prefer to mingle with other elites. Since aristocrats in particular trusted one another and enjoyed each other's company exclusively, it made sense to use German aristocrats to get into contact with their British counterparts. That the British royal family and the aristocracy were still important was obvious to Hitler. Seen through the eyes of a National Socialist, Britain had

a strict class system where bearers of illustrious names could play a decisive role. Britain seemed to be a meritocracy only in name—family background combined with the right public schools and universities decided career chances. It was also assumed that upper-class networks were extremely tight and hard to penetrate. For the Nazis such penetration was at the top of their agenda and German aristocrats were therefore extremely useful.

Hitler was not carrying out this plan on his own. He had a trusted ally—a man who was ideal for contacts with the international elites: Hermann Göring. In some ways Göring could be called the master of the go-between method. He spotted the potential of this method and acquired great expertise.

His background seemed to predestine him to mingle with aristocrats. He had been interested in the nobility and its customs since childhood. His godfather was Hermann von Epenstein, a rather dubious figure whose wealth and snobbery dominated the whole Göring family. Epenstein was the lover of Göring's mother and little Hermann grew up in Epenstein's castle, while his father was banished to an annexe (Epenstein would later bequeath his castle to Göring, which led to rumours that he had been his biological father). Despite, or because of, this strange upbringing Hermann Göring fled into a fantasy world of knights, castles, and shining armour. His godfather was obsessed with noble pedigrees and he passed this obsession on to little Hermann. Hermann wanted to fulfil Epenstein's ideal and become a Renaissance man. He eventually achieved this with the—looted—paintings to go with it. Being indoctrinated about aristocratic concepts of honour and royal marriages made Hermann Göring realize the potential of illustrious names. He targeted and cultivated aristocrats with great success. Though he had no noble background to flaunt, his reputation as a flying ace during the First World War helped him socially after 1918. So did his time in Sweden. He married Carin, a Swedish noble. She opened up contacts for him within the Swedish elite that he would use until 1945.<sup>11</sup>

Göring did not surround himself with aristocrats simply out of snobbery but also because he rightly guessed that they could give him an entrée to other countries. He had never forgotten his difficult time in Italy when after the failed Hitler Putsch in 1923 he was received by no one in Italian society, let alone his main target Mussolini.

This changed completely when he courted the Princes of Hesse. As Jonathan Petropoulos has shown, they opened the doors to Mussolini for the Nazi leadership. In fact they soon became part of Göring's growing

menagerie of go-betweens—each having different countries to look after. As we will see, Prince Max zu Hohenlohe would work for the regime in Czechoslovakia and Spain; several people did so in Britain and Göring's friend Prince Viktor zu Wied in Sweden.<sup>12</sup> Another good channel was Duke Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1873–1969), cousin of the Queen of the Netherlands, who used his international contacts for Nazi propaganda. In Berlin society he was called the 'grand ducal Nazi agent'.<sup>13</sup>

Carin Göring proudly wrote to her mother in 1930 about how well connected her husband was by now:

The (Princes of) Wied and August Wilhelm [a son of Kaiser Wilhelm II] have introduced us to some very interesting people. Yesterday we had breakfast with Prince Henckel-Donnersmarck... he attends all the gatherings at which Hermann talks.<sup>14</sup>

Carin died shortly afterwards, but now Göring's sister-in-law tried to support him. Her name was Fanny Countess von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1882–1956) and she had been married to a German noble. Fanny was a Swedish novelist and ardent Nazi. Like Carin she would do anything for Hitler and Göring. In 1934 she visited the German Foreign Ministry and discussed her possible work in Britain with the diplomat von Plessen. Plessen in turn informed his colleague at the German embassy in London, Otto II von Bismarck. He reported that the Countess was about to travel to Britain and wanted to use the opportunity to solicit support 'for Germany through private conversations'. This seemed useful since she was a friend of two pro-German voices in Britain at the time—Lord Noel-Buxton and Lady Snowden.<sup>15</sup> The offer of the Swedish-German countess was welcomed by Otto II von Bismarck. He knew her well himself. She had been a guest at his wedding and he shared her beliefs. Bismarck and his wife had become enchanted with the Nazi movement in February 1933, shortly after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. Joseph Goebbels happily acknowledged: 'Afterwards [saw] Prince and Princess Bismarck. They are enthusiastic. The Princess is a beautiful woman.' Goebbels developed a crush on the Princess ('she is wonderful') and enjoyed his conversations with her and Winifred Wagner.<sup>16</sup>

The Bismarcks knew what a good impression noble names made in British society. Wilamowitz was not the only female noble who helped them with propaganda work. On 4 March 1935 the German embassy reported that Baronesse von der Goltz had given a series of lectures 'on the

new Germany in England'.<sup>17</sup> The unpopular Hohenzollern would not have been able to draw crowds in Britain but they were helping in other countries instead. On 11 March 1939, for example, Prince Auwi gave a talk to the *Auslandsorganisation* of the NSDAP (Germans abroad) in Brussels and was received by King Leopold. Auwi spent several hours of conversation with the Belgian King and reported the details to the German Ministry of Propaganda.<sup>18</sup>

So why were aristocrats so willing to work for Hitler in the first place? The aforementioned fear of Bolshevism was one reason. As usual the Queen of Romania put it simply: 'Fascism, although also a tyranny, leaves scope for progress, beauty, art, literature, home, and social life, manners, cleanliness, whilst Bolshevism is the levelling of everything.'<sup>19</sup>

She saw herself as a seeker of beauty. Her stance was quite common among her peer group. As the National Socialist Prince Rohan explained, dynasties and the aristocracy had twice been faced with great political challenges. In the nineteenth century they had had to cope with the emergence of democracy and nationalism. They chose the less threatening one—nationalism. After 1918 another political challenge appeared, the choice between Fascism and Bolshevism. Again it was obvious to Prince Rohan which one would be more appealing for his peer group. The third option, supporting democracy, did not occur to him. The reason was obvious, particularly in Germany. As Prince Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen put it: 'the constitution of Weimar has to be revised. Parliamentarism has proved itself incapable. But most of all Marxism has to be broken.'<sup>20</sup>

Of course, not all aristocrats took the straight route from anti-Bolshevism to Hitler. The Duke of Coburg was one of the earliest converts. Others hoped for a while that an arrangement could be found with the Weimar Republic. During the golden years of Weimar, before the crash of 1929, they seemed to be slowly coming to terms with the new system. This had something to do with the election of Field Marshal von Hindenburg as Reichspräsident of Germany in 1925. Since Hindenburg was a lesser noble and a war hero, aristocrats felt politically represented again for the first time. The contemporary journalist Bella Fromm noted: 'With the coming of Hindenburg, some of the former nobility began to return to Berlin during the season. They had not done this for some time, having retired to their estates in a huff after the revolution and taken up residence in smaller towns like Darmstadt, Dresden, Meiningen or Hanover where there was still the flavour of a miniature court and some sort of princely household

to give them a whiff of the royal atmosphere they had always enjoyed so much. Now, during the social season, they are returning to Berlin and flocking in tremendous numbers to shows, theatres and restaurants, and social events.<sup>21</sup>

That Hindenburg would tolerate and make National Socialism eventually acceptable was also encouraging for the German aristocracy. The synergy worked.

Naturally in order to be able to support Hitler many aristocrats had to pretend a lot of things were not happening. They had to ignore the parts in *Mein Kampf* where Hitler made fun of the limited intelligence and general indolence of the old ruling houses. Though *Mein Kampf* was full of mixed signals to them, the majority of the aristocracy lived in denial about the more troubling ones. The attractions were so much greater.

Via their international networks, aristocrats had first come across authoritarian and fascist regimes in Hungary and Italy. What a great number of aristocrats found attractive about them was that these regimes included the old elite and seemed to give them new relevance. They were also anti-parliamentarian and anti-Bolshevik.

Though fascism has an ultra-nationalist core, it also has a transnational side. This appealed to the higher aristocracy who thought of themselves as a transnational group. They were certainly influenced by what their peers in Italy experienced. The Duke of Coburg was an ardent admirer of Mussolini. His study of Mussolini's Fascism required several field trips and in 1933 he took along seventy German soul mates on an outing to Italy.<sup>22</sup> In Rome they visited an exhibition on the achievements of Fascism and were received by Mussolini. The Duce gave Carl Eduard a special present as the journalist Bella Fromm recorded: 'After dinner the unprepossessing Duke strutted around with his Fascist dagger, an honour bestowed upon him by Mussolini.'<sup>23</sup>

Coburg was not the only one who admired the Italian model. One aspect that appealed to the British and the German aristocracies was that Mussolini integrated the Italian royal family into his regime. Though Jens Petersen argued that 'In essence, the regime used the aristocracy as a symbol for the hierarchical model but did not regard it as a strategic factor,' this was far from obvious to contemporary observers.<sup>24</sup> In their eyes Mussolini had brought the postwar chaos in Italy under control and created a bulwark against Bolshevism. Many members of the British upper classes also travelled to Italy in the 1920s including Winston Churchill, Harold Nicolson,



the Duke of Westminster, the Duke of Buccleuch, and Oswald Mosley. Churchill was impressed at the time:

I will...say a word on an international aspect of Fascism. Externally your [Mussolini's] movement has rendered service to the whole world... Italy has shown that there is a way of fighting the subversive forces... She has provided the necessary antidote to the Russian poison. Hereafter no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism.<sup>25</sup>

Wilhelm II also thought that Mussolini integrated traditional ideas. When the ex-Kaiser was interviewed by the *Evening Standard* and asked: 'What do you think of Mussolini?' Wilhelm replied: 'Mussolini has brought order into his country—a real, disciplined order. Italy today has become a land of peace and of work under the united concentration of all the forces of the nation. That is Mussolini's achievement. A real man!!'<sup>26</sup>

The Italian King had supported Mussolini and was amply rewarded—an example Wilhelm wanted to repeat. This would also become the dream of ex-King Alfonso of Spain. In 1938 Alfonso told the representative of the Berlin International News Service, Mr Pierre Huss, that he welcomed the Rome-Berlin axis. His daughter, the Infanta, was even more outspoken and informed Huss that her family was hoping to return to the Spanish throne. So far Mussolini had been blocking this, but she believed he would change his mind, thanks to the influence of the Italian royal family. She certainly believed that their connection with the Duce was important and profitable. Though the Infanta made negative comments about Mussolini, she stressed the fact that her father had great sympathy for the new Germany.<sup>27</sup>

That Mussolini continued to do well for the monarchy was also praised by Prince Otto II von Bismarck. In 1936 he was impressed by Mussolini's 'beautiful voice' and what he had achieved for the Italian monarchy. When Mussolini made the Italian King Emperor of Ethiopia, aristocrats thought they had been proved right to set their hopes on the Duce: 'The little king would not have thought in his wildest dreams that he could become Emperor.'<sup>28</sup> If Mussolini could make the (diminutive) King Victor Emmanuel III Emperor of Ethiopia, anything seemed possible.

The Italian model was therefore a tempting reason to align oneself with fascist regimes. Another reason for German aristocrats was Hitler's foreign policy. As we will see in Chapter 6 on Max Hohenlohe, Austro-German aristocrats felt attracted to Hitler's policy towards Austria and Czechoslovakia. They hated the Czechoslovak republic and hoped to get their property

in Bohemia back courtesy of Hitler. This was one reason why the old go-between Max Egon Fürstenberg was able to switch effortlessly from the Kaiser to the Führer. He had always worked for an Austrian–German alliance and Hitler offered a modern version of it. After 1918 several pressure groups had sprung up in Austria, lobbying for unification with the German Reich. Organizations like the Austro–Bavarian Oberland League argued that postwar Austria was too small to survive.<sup>29</sup> In 1920 Baernreither wrote to Fürstenberg: ‘Slowly the Entente—at least the English and the Americans—seems to grasp that Austria cannot stand on its own feet, but is still far away from envisaging annexation to Germany as a possible solution.’<sup>30</sup>

Fürstenberg agreed and waited for the right opportunity. He continued to visit his old friend Kaiser Wilhelm in exile, regularly promising things he could not deliver (the Kaiser’s adjutant noted: ‘E promised to do everything necessary for the Kaiser’s return. He wants to start a sort of central office’).<sup>31</sup> By 1933 Fürstenberg’s true loyalty was with Hitler. In the same enthusiastic tone he had once used for Wilhelm II, he had started to praise the Führer: ‘it was overwhelming to face this great man.’ To support ‘the great man’ made sense to Fürstenberg and many other German aristocrats. Unlike the Bolsheviks, Hitler did not threaten to dispossess property. This was a very important point for German landowners.<sup>32</sup> Among Fürstenberg’s papers is a memorandum that circulated in many German aristocratic families at the time. It is an interview Hitler gave to a man called Friedrich Svend. Svend tackled the key question big aristocratic landowners in Germany cared about. Did Hitler’s agrarian programme mean expropriation? Hitler assured Svend that this would never happen. He also assured him that his party wanted to win the support of the landowners, and the ‘educated classes’ (the *Intelligenz*). ‘From the son of the Kaiser down to the last proletarian’ they all had to work together ‘to fight Bolshevism’.

Fürstenberg reacted to such uplifting talk by becoming a member of the NSDAP on 1 May 1933. He also joined the SA.<sup>33</sup> Despite his age he now tried his best to help the new movement. He wanted it to be successful across the generations and he therefore wrote to a young Hitler supporter, Prince zu Bentheim–Tecklenburg: ‘You are for me the role model of a young aristocrat who understands the new times. . . . I am convinced that you will succeed in leading the aristocracy in the right direction!’<sup>34</sup>

Bentheim–Tecklenburg did his best and won over the young and the old. One of the reasons why aristocratic houses joined the NSDAP en masse was the avalanche-effect in these large, close-knit families. If the head of house joined, the wife, children, and cousins often followed.<sup>35</sup>

That the Nazi ideology included anti-Semitism was not a hindrance. Like Carl Eduard Coburg, German aristocrats in general had identified Jews with two movements they deeply resented—liberalism and socialism. By 1917 a third movement had been added to the list. Jews were now seen as the carriers of Bolshevism. This made them part of the aristocracy's greatest threat.

Recovering status and power were other great driving forces for German aristocrats to join the NSDAP. Carl Eduard also stressed how important it was to feel 'useful' again. He wrote to his sister Alice in 1939: 'What pleases me most is that they still need our help. In spite of their saying nowadays that the young must rule.'<sup>36</sup>

While they had felt 'useless' and discarded during the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich needed them. Princess Wied wrote in her memoirs that she had appreciated the idea of the Nazi movement that 'Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz'—the common good was more important than individual self-interest.<sup>37</sup> By the 1930s Carl Eduard von Coburg could therefore proudly state that 'apart from a few exceptions the aristocracy was an opponent of the parliamentary regime. It now supports Hitler.'<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting that, despite his great commitment to the NSDAP, the Duke of Coburg did not become a party member until 1933. He would later state that he had from the beginning fought 'for the nationalist forces and for Adolf Hitler to become leader... despite my environment not understanding it and even personally defaming me'.<sup>39</sup> This was a version of the truth. One reason why he did not join the NSDAP before 1933 might have been his old loyalty to Ehrhardt, his preferred right wing leader. Another reason seems to have been that Coburg was more useful to Hitler not being a party member. He could still pretend to his conservative friends that he was an honest broker while at the same time subtly proselytizing for Hitler. Once Hitler was in power, Coburg became an official, highly honoured, party member. He now proudly sent off signed photos of himself in uniform and had himself photographed at Nazi functions always in the front row, next to other Nazi dignitaries. He had worked hard for this front row seat and enjoyed his place in the spotlight. He gave up his hotel life in Berlin and purchased his own headquarters in the capital—a place where he could network. It was called Villa Coburg and run like a second court, away from his 'regional court' in Coburg—and of course away from his wife.

To understand what an important asset Carl Eduard became for Hitler, one has to look at the Duke's regional, national, and international

contacts—ranging from local Coburg businessmen to members of the British royal family.

Regionally Carl Eduard still dominated the social circles of Franconia. Franconia also included the world of Bayreuth which offered more than Wagner operas. By the 1920s Bayreuth represented a combination of music and the ideology of the Wagner family. Hitler made his first pilgrimage to Haus Wahnfried, the Wagners' villa, in 1921 to meet one of his heroes—the anti-Semitic writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain, son-in-law of Richard Wagner. During this trip Hitler caught a glimpse of the excellent network system of the Wagner family. Richard Wagner's widow Cosima was still alive at the time, forever busy cultivating an international elite. Thanks to her, Bayreuth had remained a place that attracted the rich and famous. Cosima was supported in this by her son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain and later by another obedient in-law Winifred Wagner. The bizarre world view of Houston Stewart-Chamberlain was attractive to Hitler and Carl Eduard because of its racial concepts but also because of his firm belief that the war between Great Britain and Germany, those two 'racially connected countries', had been a mistake. They agreed that this mistake should not be repeated. When Houston Stewart Chamberlain died in January 1927, among the prominent mourners were Hitler, the former Tsar of Bulgaria, Ernst II Hohenlohe-Langenburg, and Prince August Wilhelm of Prussia. Carl Eduard was out of town and sent an expensive wreath. He would continue to attend the thoroughly Nazified Bayreuth Festival. Shortly before the outbreak of war in August 1939 Carl Eduard and Hitler listened to *Tannhäuser* together.

Apart from these Franconian connections, Carl Eduard offered good contacts for Hitler at the national level. The Duke was close to many members of the—Protestant—German aristocracy through friendships and marriage. His sister-in-law had been married to August Wilhelm, nicknamed Auwi (one of Kaiser Wilhelm II's younger sons), and though she divorced him in 1920 for his homosexuality, Carl Eduard stuck by him. He had after all almost grown up with 'Auwi' and his brother the Prussian Crown Prince Wilhelm. The Crown Prince had already been close to radical right wing movements, such as the Pan Germans, before 1914 and therefore showed an early interest in Hitler. So did Auwi, who became an ardent Nazi.

These contacts were useful for Hitler. Before he gained power, he therefore employed Carl Eduard's aristocratic network *within* Germany. When in 1930 aristocrats discussed the future of the monarchy at Pommersfelden,

the Duke of Mecklenburg was named as a likely successor to President Hindenburg. Hitler was naturally keen on meeting Mecklenburg. The person who arranged the meeting for him was none other than Carl Eduard.<sup>40</sup> It gave Hitler the opportunity to find out how much of a rival Mecklenburg actually was. He need not have worried—Mecklenburg was no serious threat to him.

But the question remained which of the radical right wing parties would in the end win the upper hand. The idea that they should all pull together was something Carl Eduard had been working on for years. In October 1931 it seemed to be within his reach. Together with the DNVP leader and media tycoon Alfred Hugenberg (the DNVP, *Deutschnationale Volkspartei*, was the main conservative party, with anti-Semitic sympathies), Carl Eduard organized a meeting of anti-democratic right wing groups in the little spa town of Bad Harzburg. The DNVP, NSDAP, *Stahhelm*, *Alldeutscher Verband*, *Bund der Frontsoldaten*, and many others declared a united front against the Weimar Republic calling themselves the Harzburg Front. It was a rather unfortunate name. The left wing press ridiculed Carl Eduard as the 'Duke of the Harzburg Front'. The word 'Harzburg' sounded odious to Germans, since a particularly smelly cheese, *Harzer Käse*, is produced in Bad Harzburg. It was not only the left wing press that created a stink about the meeting. Despite Coburg's best efforts the right wing groups within the Harzburg Front continued their infighting behind the scenes. Hitler himself was at the centre of this, playing everyone off against each other and never seriously contemplating a merger with anyone. His aim remained absolute power.

Carl Eduard was still slow at comprehending this. His eagerness to unite conservative and radical right wing elements was again tested in the election of the German President in 1932. Against all the odds the Duke tried to get the DNVP and the NSDAP to agree on a single candidate—without success.<sup>41</sup> The DNVP put forward their own candidate. In the first round of the election Hindenburg received 49.3 per cent, and Hitler 30.1 per cent of the votes. The DNVP came third. Not surprisingly the NSDAP achieved its best result in the town of Coburg—48.1 per cent. Carl Eduard publicly endorsed Hitler in the second round and the people of Coburg followed his advice. This was a very public gesture by a man who so far had preferred to play the whole right wing field. Hitler received 57.1 per cent of the votes in the town of Coburg, and in the rest of Germany 36.8 per cent.<sup>42</sup>

In the end Hindenburg won the election against Hitler, but Carl Eduard continued to be an excellent propagandist for the NSDAP. Coburg also

used his daughter's wedding a few months later to demonstrate his support for the Nazis. The nuptials offered a wonderful opportunity to combine two points on his agenda: his behind the scenes networking for the Nazi party and improving his own family's fortunes. The war had damaged them considerably but an advantageous marriage was a way forward. By marrying off his oldest daughter Sibylla to Gustav Adolf (the son of the Swedish Crown Prince) Carl Eduard brought prestige back to the tarnished house of Coburg. Sibylla conformed dutifully to her father's expectations, yet her depressed look on the wedding photos may have been an indication of what was to come. Her life in Sweden was not a success and she never became queen.<sup>43</sup> Such personal feelings hardly mattered at the time. Many high ranking party members were invited and amply used the opportunity to mingle with the old elite. The whole town was decked out with Nazi flags and a torch parade took place in honour of the happy couple. Hitler and Göring sent congratulatory telegrams.

The wedding also gave the ducal family—fourteen years after the war—an excellent chance to be at the centre of international society again. Although the guest list was dominated by German and Swedish aristocrats it also included English cousins: HRH Prince Arthur of Connaught, his sister Lady Patricia Ramsay, and of course Princess Alice.<sup>44</sup> Their presence established that relations between the German branch and the royal family were back to normal.

After the successful wedding of his daughter Sibylla, Carl Eduard hoped to repeat the coup. One of his cousins was Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and another advantageous match would have been to marry Wilhelmina's daughter Crown Princess Juliana to his oldest son Johann Leopold Coburg. In the end this did not happen and Carl Eduard—always bad at losing—blamed his 'useless' son. When Johann Leopold finally did get married, thoughmorganatically, he was disinherited. Carl Eduard's other children also turned out to disappoint him—a second son was secretly homosexual, and a younger daughter kept marrying inappropriate men (she would later accuse her father of sexual abuse, backed up by one of her brothers). Whether this abuse actually took place could never be verified, but looking at family photos, it is clear that the Coburgs were a far from happy family. Carl Eduard seemed to run his children like a military unit and they obviously lived in fear of him.

He was not just hardheaded when it came to running his family. Hitler knew that he could rely on Coburg's ruthlessness. The Duke's national

contacts had been of great use, but they were no longer needed once Hitler had seized power. Decisive from now on was what Carl Eduard could deliver on an international level, i.e. his foreign contacts. Not all members of the higher aristocracy could offer them. The Hohenzollern princes, for example, had helped the Nazis at national level, but were useless abroad. Their reputation was ruined after the war, particularly in Britain. They would forever be identified with the 'war criminal' Wilhelm II. Carl Eduard on the other hand would be rehabilitated with the help of his influential sister Alice and was soon being received again in British circles. He was therefore ideal for missions in the English speaking world.

His general capability was first tested on a world tour in 1934—via Britain and America to Japan. The Duke summarized the whole trip meticulously in a memorandum for Hitler. (It is not recorded whether his Führer, who was not known for reading reports attentively, actually studied it though.) The Duke reported on Roosevelt's New Deal, expressed the opinion that the black population was under control, and stated his fear that German-Americans were losing their connection to the fatherland.<sup>45</sup> On this trip Carl Eduard acted as if he were still the head of a reigning house. Like Emperor Wilhelm II, he continued to distribute signed photographs of himself to his various hosts. The process followed a hierarchical order—depending on the recipient's status the photo frames were either of cheap wood or elegant leather.<sup>46</sup> Though the Americans seemed fairly flattered by the visit, they were just a sideshow. The second leg of the trip was Carl Eduard's visit to Japan. After the war his lawyers claimed that the Duke had not been involved in any of the negotiations for the German-Japanese anti-Comintern pact. This is not entirely true, his role was certainly part of a larger propaganda tour. To send a high ranking Nazi with a long pedigree to a monarchy like Japan demonstrated to the status conscious Japanese how much the German government valued rank and traditions. Coburg was president of the German Red Cross and in this capacity he now attended a conference in Japan. Using him as a Red Cross figurehead was also a highly sophisticated move by the Nazis. First of all to appoint a member of the old elite to such a position signalled continuity and stability. Aristocrats had traditionally been associated with medical and charity work and Carl Eduard's distinguished name would help to camouflage the fact that the German Red Cross had been turned into a Nazi organization. Secondly the position gave Carl Eduard a convenient cover. While cultivating his contacts abroad he could travel without arousing suspicion. In Japan Coburg gave

the obligatory speeches in which he talked about 'his personal relationship with the Führer'.<sup>47</sup> He also attended many glittering social events with the German ambassador Willy Noebel.

This world tour was a highly visible trip, yet Carl Eduard was also used for the more 'shady' ones. His brief was to establish contact—behind the scenes—with the highest social echelons in Europe.

In 1934 the Nazis had prohibited monarchical organizations in Germany, but though Hitler got rid of indigenous monarchists he still courted British ones. It is surprising how much time and energy he invested in cultivating the British establishment. One of his contemporaries called him an 'anglo-phile romantic'.<sup>48</sup> His hope of winning over Britain—via its upper classes—has often been belittled as a case of 'wilful blindness'. There was—according to this argument—no realistic chance that he could succeed. So was he really just an irrational romantic? Or was it a sensible move to start courting the higher echelons of British society?

The British aristocracy has sometimes been portrayed as a political role model for its European cousins. According to this argument it helped to prevent the rise of a Mussolini, Horthy, or Hitler in Britain. Peregrine Worsthorne puts forward this thesis in his book *In Defence of Aristocracy*, namely that aristocrats guaranteed 'for three centuries... the rights and liberties of all the British people so effectively as to make a written constitution unnecessary'.<sup>49</sup> Even David Cannadine, a historian at the opposite end of the political spectrum, argues that the British aristocracy in the inter-war years retreated into an 'aristocratic equilibrium', suffering its loss of power stoically. The general verdict is therefore that apart from a few eccentric exceptions—the Cliveden Set and other characters portrayed in novels like Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*—everything remained quiet on the western front of European aristocracies. This ignores the fact that, long before the war, many British aristocrats felt attracted to radical right wing ideas and that this attraction grew after the First World War. While before 1914 diehards advocated a national and military awakening, fought the House of Lords reform, and tried to prevent Home Rule for Ireland,<sup>50</sup> after the war, the fear of social unrest haunted the British aristocracy. To them British society was in a deep crisis. Indeed one could argue that, despite winning the war, Britain had problems coping with the peace. The economic and political challenges seemed huge and the Empire had overextended itself after the Versailles Treaty. The Liberal party had fallen apart, the Labour party had produced the weak Prime Minister Ramsay



MacDonald. The conservatives showed no sign of reforming and the monarchy seemed to be frozen in aspic. British elites reacted to this in an extreme way. Much of the intellectual elite turned to the left, while many members of the upper classes (including members of the royal family) went the other way.

There was certainly admiration for Mussolini among the higher echelons of British society. The same was true for Horthy. The relationship to Hitler's Germany was more complex, but it became of greater interest to many after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. According to the British historian Maurice Cowling,

the Franco-Soviet pact was disliked and was a source of sympathy for German action in the Rhineland. Disillusionment about the League, the Russian intervention in Spain and Labour hysteria against Franco then turned the coin over.<sup>51</sup>

That Spain became a republic in 1931 had come as a shock to continental as well as British aristocrats. Princess Löwenstein wrote about the abdication of King Alfonso XIII:

We are shattered by the news from Spain. It has happened so fast, without a whimper. As with all our Princes' abdications. Was it really necessary? One cannot assume that the King lost his nerve, that would not be like him at all... What thankless beasts these peoples are!... The moment the Socialist government is in power they will start passing dispossession laws... The German press will probably be very happy that another Republic has been founded.<sup>52</sup>

It was not just the Austro-German Princess Löwenstein who feared the consequences of another abdication. The news from Spain also travelled to Britain via dynastic networks. King Alfonso had a British consort, a cousin of George V who brought her accounts of the Spanish situation to London. Even without her stories, it was obvious to the British establishment that Spain was now becoming a centre in the war of ideologies. British politicians felt that they had to take sides. According to Cowling, Franco was perceived among British conservatives as a 'Christian gentleman' and 'one did not expect British interests to suffer if he won'.<sup>53</sup> One great propagandist for Franco in London was the right-winger and staunch monarchist, the Duke of Alba (by 1939 officially Spanish ambassador to London), who was related to the Duke of Marlborough. A famous Marlborough offspring, Winston Churchill, was particularly close to Alba.<sup>54</sup>

Cries for help by Spanish aristocrats certainly had an effect on their British counterparts. In June 1937 the Duke of Windsor's close friend

Don Javier Bermejillo (nickname Tiger) had become a refugee in the Romanian embassy in Madrid. He wrote to Windsor:

The moral and physical suffering we are going through is indescribable, over two stones of weight have I lost, but my real agony is not the fear of being shot, like over 70.000 in Madrid alone, but not to be able to be on the side that fights and dies for one's ideals.

Bermejillo then went on to ask the Duke of Windsor to get him out of Spain. This was arranged by the Duke.<sup>55</sup>

Thanks to Ernest Hemingway and countless books on the subject we know a lot about the prominent supporters of the Republican forces, but we do not know how many aristocrats actually fought on the other side, in Franco's army. It was not only British circles who supported Franco. Princess Löwenstein saw herself as one of many aristocrats who supported Generalissimo Franco. But she was not entirely happy that her friends' children fought in Spain. To her husband she wrote in 1936 that the 'young Metternich—who is 19—has gone to Spain to fight in Franco's army! It is incomprehensible that one has allowed this. He is the sole heir and not Spanish. I do not understand why his mother allowed it. I don't know who would be next in line, if he died. The fear that he might be massacred by those beasts.'<sup>56</sup> (This did not happen. Metternich became, after the Second World War, president of the German automobile Club ADAC.)

When Franco's troops won in 1939, there was a sigh of relief in many families.

Coburg tried his best to use the Spanish situation for his work in Britain. He knew that one way to impress the British upper classes was to stress Hitler's record in the fight against Bolshevism. Hitler was perceived as a man who had crushed the trade unions and helped against Russian interference in Spain. As Cowling indicated, anti-Bolshevism in the British establishment was an unspoken assumption. An anonymous member of the Cambridge Apostles rebelled against this in the 1930s: 'we were all of obvious military age, and the war we saw coming was clearly not going to be one that we wanted to fight. It was already clear to anyone with any sense that the main aim of British policy was to send a re-armed Germany eastwards.'<sup>57</sup>

Hitler would have certainly welcomed this. Since he and Coburg both dreamt of an understanding with Britain, it seemed natural that Carl Eduard went there on endless reconnaissance trips in the 1930s. From being a social

outcast after the war, Carl Eduard turned within a few years into a welcome visitor to Britain. He owed this to three factors: to Hitler, to members of the royal family, and to the changing opinion of Germany in British society.

That he was welcomed again was made possible by his sister Alice. She fought for his acceptance and how well she succeeded is illustrated by Carl Eduard's appointment book. He was received again in British salons and most importantly by the royal family. These visits did not appear in the court circular; they took place in private. Carl Eduard was at first invited in January 1932 and 1933 to Sandringham to see George V and Queen Mary during their Christmas holiday.<sup>58</sup> From then on he came to England several times a year and, as will be shown, always at crucial political moments. He also brought high ranking Nazis with him. This was an embarrassment that Alice had to play down after the war. In her memoirs she wrote:

One day Granpa [her husband 'Algy' Athlone, the brother of Queen Mary], Charlie and I lunched with Ribbentrop whose continuous talk about the 'New Deutschland' we found most objectionable.<sup>59</sup>

Alice was portraying herself here as a sceptic of Nazi Germany. Like so many of her peer group she made fun of Ribbentrop—after 1945. Ten years earlier she welcomed him as a guest because her brother worked closely with him. Her husband Athlone's aversion to Ribbentrop cannot have been so intense either. Athlone was Chancellor of the University of London and Ribbentrop donated to this very university volumes of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in 1937. A few students protested when Ribbentrop turned up for the handing over ceremony, but nobody really cared. It had been organized extremely well.

That Coburg managed to play a special role in Britain was confirmed by the Nazi diplomat Carl August Clodius. Clodius was captured by the Russians and interrogated in 1946:

The Duke of Coburg as a close relative of the English royal family, had spent his youth at the English court. In pursuit of an Anglo-German rapprochement he offered his social connections and as president of the [Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft] tried to invite to Germany many prominent Englishmen and put them in touch with important people in Germany. In England at that time not only Lord [*sic!*] Mosley . . . but many representatives of English society close to the Duke of Coburg were ready to act in the same spirit. Also in Germany among leaders of the National Socialists party, there were supporters of a rapprochement with England. Above all was Hess who grew up in Egypt and knew the English frame of mind well and as a consequence sustained influential ties in London. In addition

there was Rosenberg who in the course of many years was considered as a replacement for Neurath as Foreign Minister. He was also a supporter of the English orientation in Germany's foreign policy.<sup>60</sup>

MI5 was aware of Ribbentrop's modus operandi in Britain. In a report that the Russian spy Anthony Blunt passed on to Moscow, MI5 had noted that the senior staff of Ribbentrop's Dienststelle commuted between Berlin and London: 'Their job, in essence, was to influence the broadest possible range of British public opinion in a pro-German direction. The Dienststelle [Ribbentrop's office] thus included individuals with connections in royal as well as diplomatic, political and industrial circles.'<sup>61</sup>

Ribbentrop was an excellent networker. His aide, Wilhelm Rodde, later explained to Russian interrogators:

Ribbentrop began working by making a series of trips to England and France where he met up with his foreign friends with the aim of drawing them in and making use of them in the interest of his work. In France there lived a famous Count Polignac [Melchior de Polignac, whose firm would do extremely well out of the German occupation] the owner of a famous champagne firm and in England Sir Alexander Walker, from the Whiskey firm Walker. They were old friends of Ribbentrop, and eased his way accomplishing his political goals.<sup>62</sup>

Coburg helped Ribbentrop as well. German aristocrats who supported the NSDAP used their country seats for secret get togethers and Coburg was no exception. To keep meetings discreet he organized them in his various castles. Horthy, for example, was usually invited by Carl Eduard to hunts at his Castle Hinterriss in Austria (Coburg himself travelled to Hungary often and was a board member of the German-Hungarian Society). At such hunting weekends he could successfully deploy all the old pre-war charm.

The problem was, however, that in Britain Carl Eduard did not own a country house any more and therefore had no hunt to offer. Alice had to help him out. Her country house Brantridge Park had royal approval, being visited frequently by Alice's sister-in-law Queen Mary.<sup>63</sup> This made it attractive for other prestigious visitors and useful for Coburg's missions. In her memoirs Alice just wrote that 'my brother Charlie visited us several times and was so happy amongst so many relics of Claremont'.<sup>64</sup> But it was not just the furniture that gave him comfort. At Brantridge, far away from prying journalists, he could create a relaxed atmosphere for meetings. The beautiful surroundings (and illustrious hosts) impressed the participants. How many visits took place is difficult to verify; only

thank you letters give an inkling. For example, after the Rhineland Crisis had been resolved to Hitler's satisfaction in 1936 Carl Eduard wrote to his sister:

Dearest Tigs,

I do not know how I can thank you enough for all the hospitality you extended to me and my gentlemen at Brantridge. At any rate I want to thank you once more with all my heart for all the help you gave me and for all the love you showed me. You and Alge are really two dears. You both made Brantridge a true second Claremont for me. I felt so at home this time staying with you, that when I left Croydon, I felt quite as if I was leaving home.<sup>65</sup>

As usual Carl Eduard was careful in this letter. But it is clear that he tried to mix in 'his gentlemen' with British politicians at Brantridge. The Secretary of State for War Duff Cooper, however, was not impressed. In January 1936 he was on the guest list and as usual Alice acted as hostess. Cooper resented having been lured by her:

The point of it was to meet the Duke of Coburg, her brother. It was a gloomy little party—so like a German bourgeois household. It reminded me of the days when I was learning German in Hanover. I was tactfully left alone with the Duke of Coburg after luncheon in order that he might explain to me the present situation in Germany and assure me of Hitler's pacific intentions. In the middle of our conversation his Duchess reappeared carrying some hideous samples of ribbon in order to consult him as to how the wreath that they were sending to the funeral [of George V's] should be tied. He dismissed her with a volley of muttered German curses and was afterwards unable to pick up the thread of his argument.<sup>66</sup>

Even had Carl Eduard been able to concentrate more, it would have been pointless. Although Duff Cooper was a great friend of the pro-German Prince of Wales, he was suspicious of Germany and resigned the day after the Munich agreement.<sup>67</sup>

Coburg had to face a variety of opinions in British parliamentary circles, and he was fully aware of the uphill struggle. His title, however, did help. Great names could still impress in London, as the example of Otto II von Bismarck shows. In a Chatham House discussion in April 1933, he had explained to his British audience the policy of the NSDAP and was praised by another discussant, Colonel Christie:

The fact that a man of Count Bismarck's breeding and tradition has given his wholehearted support to the Nazi Movement should persuade us to examine without prejudice the underlying principles of this somewhat feverish nationalism which has been accepted by millions of well educated Germans.<sup>68</sup>

Today we know that Christie worked in the intelligence world and needed to act as a pro-German. But he expressed something that others thought. If Hitler's regime was supported by the upper echelons of German society—a Bismarck, a Coburg—it could surely not be *that* revolutionary. Of course Otto II Bismarck advertised his country as an *official* diplomat, but when even a 'private individual' like the Duke of Coburg, a grandson of Queen Victoria, admired Hitler, it made an impact.

Ironically, behind the scenes, the official and the private Nazi diplomats—Coburg and Bismarck—indulged in rivalry. Though both were committed NSDAP members, the *official* diplomat Bismarck felt threatened by the *unofficial* diplomat Coburg. When in the summer of 1934 Coburg appeared in London, Bismarck reported back to the German Foreign Office in Berlin:

I told the Duke of Coburg at a reception this morning that the Foreign Editor of the Daily Mail visited me yesterday and asked me whether Lord Rothermere should receive the Duke and Ribbentrop. The Duke was very affronted by this and avoided my question whether there really was a meeting taking place with Lord Rothermere. In an embarrassed tone he said 'that it seemed to be impossible to carry out private trips these days.' I would like to add that I had a feeling the Duke's circle had strict instructions not to inform the embassy about the fact that von Ribbentrop was here. In my opinion this case is further proof of the distrust towards our diplomatic representatives abroad. It also shows that even the best kept secrets usually come out.<sup>69</sup>

This summed up Hitler's method of using back channels quite well. But it naturally caused resentment. Bismarck in particular felt that such distrust of diplomats was unnecessary; after all he and his wife had lobbied for Germany relentlessly. Indeed, his Swedish wife Ann Mari was doing her best in British society circles for the Nazi cause. It was of course a question of honour for the German embassy to collect the few glittering prizes available and not be outshone by 'amateurs' like Coburg and Ribbentrop. One of the advantages the German embassy had in England was the fact that some British royals still saw it as a point of contact. This dated back to Queen Victoria's time and, despite the war, old habits seemed to have died hard. In 1928, for example, Princess Alice simply employed the embassy as her postal service. She instructed them to send 'two small accompanying parcels in the [diplomatic] bag to Germany...leather cigarette lighters for her two nephews, the sons of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha'.<sup>70</sup> Her uncle, Arthur Duke of Connaught, felt the same. Arthur had been Queen Victoria's favourite son and was married to a Prussian princess. Despite his advanced age (he had

been born in 1850) he was lucid and still very much interested in Germany. The German embassy was a useful communication channel for him. An overjoyed Otto II Bismarck reported in March 1934 that he had caught a big English fish: 'a close acquaintance of mine, the adjutant of the Duke of Connaught, Captain Fitzroy Fyers, has told me that he would like to travel to Germany to meet prominent representatives of the new Germany.' A few weeks later Bismarck was more precise:

Fyers wants to be brought into contact with several members of the [German] government and the NSDAP to inform the Duke of Connaught about Germany from the best sources. The Duke is very interested in Germany and because of his influence within the royal family it is important to inform him correctly. Fyers wants to know about:

1. Our fight against unemployment. If possible he would like to visit an *Arbeitslager* [forced labour camp] near Berlin [the Duke of Connaught had probably heard about Oranienburg Concentration Camp. In March 1934 it consisted of communists, social democrats and homosexual prisoners]
2. The current situation regarding the Jewish question
3. The conflict within the evangelische Kirche [protestant church].<sup>71</sup>

Fyers was a member of the English Mistery (a reactionary political group that was ultra-royalist) and eagerly provided his Nazi friends 'Dr Diekhoff and Dr. Hanfstaengl' with information material about this dubious organization.

The Duke of Connaught was by no means the only well-connected person who was interested in German labour camps. The Marquess of Graham and his brother Lord Ronald Graham had a similar interest and also wrote to the German embassy. They wanted to visit Germany to find out what the Nazis did 'to bring race purity and fitness... We would also like to see if possible a Labour Service Camp and a concentration camp—in fact anything which might help to throw a true light on the situation as opposed to what we read in the Press.'<sup>72</sup>

Like Connaught's adjutant, the Graham brothers' enquiries were welcomed by German diplomats.<sup>73</sup> Counsellor Rüter came to the conclusion that the Grahams were useful for German interests. They could help to spread Nazi ideology in South Africa (where the Marquess lived most of the time). However, Rüter was hesitant about them visiting a concentration camp and told them that such wishes were fulfilled rarely because not everyone who showed interest 'wanted to achieve a better understanding between Germany and Britain'. It was, however, arranged that the brothers

could meet Goebbels. The Marquess of Graham later continued his racial obsessions in South Africa. In 1954 he succeeded to the title of Duke of Montrose and eventually became Minister of Agriculture in Rhodesia. Graham and the Duke of Connaught were a good catch. But one of the greatest trophies the German embassy gunned for was the then Prince of Wales (by 1936 Edward VIII). His interest in Germany was constantly monitored by German diplomats. In September 1935, for example, Diekhoff, Otto II von Bismarck's superior in Berlin, wrote happily that he had received a distinguished visitor from Britain: Ralph Wigram, head of the German desk at the Foreign Office. Wigram was considered to be anti-German and his trip to Germany seemed completely out of character. Diekhoff therefore thought it might have been due to the influence of the Prince of Wales:

Perhaps this visit was triggered by the Prince of Wales who has been reported to have told (Wigram) some time ago that it was scandalous that the German expert in the British Foreign Office did not know Germany.<sup>74</sup>

Though the trip did not change Wigram's opinion of Germany, it confirmed to the Germans that the Prince of Wales was trying to play a role when it came to Anglo-German relations. It would turn out to be a completely unconstitutional role.

Indeed the Prince of Wales enjoyed visiting the German embassy. On such occasions Ann Mari von Bismarck helped the unmarried ambassador Hoesch to entertain Edward and Wallis Simpson. The pretty Ann Mari was an ideal hostess, who talked with Edward in German. The friendship between the Bismarcks and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor would continue after the war, when they all holidayed together at the Bismarcks' villa in Marbella.<sup>75</sup>

Even though the Bismarcks got close to the Prince of Wales in the 1930s, the Duke of Coburg got closer. As a relative he had the advantage of seeing 'David' (as everyone within the family called the Prince of Wales) more often and was able to talk openly. He had two motives to charm his nephew—personal as well as political ones. Personally he hoped for the return of his English property (in the same manner that he had been compensated for his Gotha property after the war). Politically his aim was nothing less than an Anglo-German alliance. That the Prince of Wales listened to his German cousin once removed had several reasons: like many men of his generation he was committed to the idea of preventing another



war. He was involved in veterans' organizations and this commitment combined with his interest in welfare policies made him susceptible to Nazi propaganda.

That Carl Eduard managed over the years to gain influence over 'David' has been shown by the press officer at the German embassy Fritz Hesse. In his memoirs, Hesse describes meeting Carl Eduard in June 1935 in London and telling him how difficult negotiations with the British were in the run-up to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

The Naval Agreement was meant by Hitler as the first step in building an Anglo-German alliance against the Soviet Union. It was also intended to undermine the Versailles Treaty and alienate Britain from France. Indeed it turned out to be a slap in the face for the French.

Ribbentrop was sent over to London for the negotiations on 2 June 1935. With him came the Duke of Coburg. Both men stayed at the same hotel. From the beginning Ribbentrop alienated the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare. Hoare was outraged about the demands the German side made and the negotiations were about to collapse.

According to Hesse, the Duke of Coburg was very agitated about the situation. He claimed that there existed an anti-German circle in Britain that was trying its best to ruin relations with Berlin. He also criticized King George V who 'indulged in his private hobbies and ignored politics'. In his conversation with Hesse, Coburg said that it was the royal family's 'historic duty' to stand up for Germany:

Has the House of Windsor forgotten that it has German roots and that Great Britain and my grandmother owe their Empire to Bismarck's help? Are we in Germany not allowed to have the same rights that Great Britain would give to any negro tribe?<sup>76</sup>

Carl Eduard then declared that he would give the Prince of Wales a piece of his mind about 'the pitiful part the monarchy was playing' in this affair.<sup>77</sup> It obviously worked.<sup>78</sup> On 11 June, while the naval negotiations were still in full swing, the Prince of Wales gave a speech to the British Legion. He was patron of the Legion and very involved with their work.<sup>79</sup> *The Times* reported on it with the headline 'Suggested Visit to Germany'. In the speech the Prince of Wales encouraged 'his fellow comrades' to visit Germany and to stretch out their hand. In fact it was not such a spectacular statement, but Ribbentrop used it in a follow up comment for *The Times* portraying it as a great pro-German gesture. It certainly seemed to be sufficient to upset the

French and also the Foreign Office.<sup>80</sup> 'David' was reportedly reprimanded by King George V.

To everyone's surprise Hoare suddenly gave in to all the German demands. It seemed obvious that the successful conclusion of the Naval Agreement had something to do with behind the scenes work.

The Duke of Coburg certainly saw it as a great success. The British Legion eventually visited Germany and Carl Eduard, who was in charge of its German equivalent, made sure that a return visit was arranged.

A more personal reason for the Prince of Wales listening to his cousin Coburg seems to have been the influence of his mother. In many ways, Queen Mary is the main link to the network her sons Edward VIII, the Duke of Kent, and George VI had with Germany. This aspect has never been analysed, though. Letters from German relatives to Queen Mary or copies of her letters to them for the period after 1918 are not made available by the Royal Archives. According to the royal archivist, Queen Mary only received one postcard from the Duke of Coburg in the 1930s. Since Queen Mary invited him regularly, it seems rather impolite that he never wrote a thank you note. Mary's correspondence with the Duke of Braunschweig, another dedicated Nazi, is also currently unobtainable.<sup>81</sup> We will see later that Queen Mary's son George VI was concerned about this correspondence after 1945. It is clear that Queen Mary stayed in touch with her German relatives in the inter-war years. It was part of her concept of family that she passed on to her sons. She strongly believed in an idealized aristocratic code of conduct which meant loyalty to one's roots, i.e. one's ancestors and all current members of the wider family. Marie of Romania has probably given the best analysis of her 'cousin May'. She saw the Queen as a person who was interested in family, pedigrees, and order: '[May] told it to me herself: she does not like uncomfortable things. She likes prosperity, ease, politeness, everything running on well-greased wheels. . . . She is fundamentally tidy, orderly, disciplined. She likes possessing, collecting, putting things in order. She likes wealth and position, jewels, dresses. She has little imagination, but she likes reading, history interests her, and family trees. . . . A placid, undisturbed woman who keeps all that is unpleasant at arm's length.'<sup>82</sup>

The war had been a disaster for her and all she wanted after 1918 was to unite the wider family again. No more unpleasantness.

That her own husband had obviously broken the ideal of royal solidarity in the First World War had to be glossed over. The murder of their Russian relatives was something Carl Eduard could certainly capitalize on in his

conversations with 'David'. Ever since Carl Eduard had been surrounded by royal Russian refugees in Coburg, he considered himself an expert on the subject of Bolshevism and its consequences. It has already been mentioned how interested Edward VIII had been in the murder of the Tsar, interviewing the Russian ambassador at great length. His biographer Ziegler has shown that in the year of the General Strike, 1926, Edward sat up until 2 a.m. to talk about Russia with Robert Bruce Lockhart: 'By the end of the 1920s his thinking was dominated by sharp fear of the communist threat from Russia... It was his fear of the communists and doubts about the French that combined to make him view the future of Germany first with apprehension than with hope.'<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, to Count Mensdorff he stated in 1933 apropos the Nazi party: 'of course it is the only thing to do. We will have to come to it, as we are in great danger from the Communists too.'<sup>84</sup>

That the Prince of Wales was known to be pro-German did affect the rest of the establishment. It made it respectable, even fashionable. That the Nazis were anti-Semitic did not seem to hinder the Prince's admiration. His benevolent biographer Philip Ziegler thinks that Edward was only 'mildly anti-Semitic, in the manner of so many of his class and generation'.<sup>85</sup> This is a very generous interpretation. As the papers of General Franco show, Edward was *deeply* anti-Semitic.

The Spanish government had a good contact with the Duke of Windsor, Don Javier Bermejillo. He reported in June 1940 that the Duke was upset about the war: 'He throws all the blame on the Jews and the Reds and Eden with his people in the Foreign Office and other politicians all of whom he would have liked to put up against a wall.' To Bermejillo this was nothing new; he stated that Edward had already made remarks about the Reds and the Jews to him long before he became King.<sup>86</sup>

In fact Edward would keep up this 'tradition' well into old age, after the concentration camps had been filmed.

It was therefore relatively easy for Coburg to remind Edward of family values, his duty to his German roots, and to encourage his anti-Bolshevism at the same time.

To this day there are numerous conspiracy theories circulating as to how far Edward VIII was willing to go in his support for Germany. This has not made it easier to reconstruct the actual facts. That there was a cover up of Edward's activities has been suggested since the 1950s, when American historians insisted on publishing parts of the Windsor file (the captured

German Foreign Ministry documents concerning the Duke of Windsor and his closeness to the Nazis).<sup>87</sup> They were outraged about the way that documents had been suppressed. As the Churchill papers indicate, the Prime Minister was genuinely shocked about the Duke of Windsor's behaviour, but as a convinced monarchist did everything to keep the institution intact.<sup>88</sup> This policy is continued by the Royal Archives, which also embargo papers of the Duke of Kent, brother of the Duke of Windsor. We know from other sources how involved Kent was in establishing contacts between Britain and Germany up to 1939. His cousins, the Princes of Hesse, saw him as a useful ally. Prince Ludwig von Hesse wrote in 1938 about Kent: 'Duke of Kent. Very German-friendly. Clearly against France. Not especially clever, but well-informed. Entirely for strengthening German-English ties. His wife is equally anti-French.'<sup>89</sup>

In 1939, Kent met Prince Philipp Hesse, who was part of Göring's menagerie, in Italy with the intention of preventing the war. Kent was eager to act as a go-between and wanted to arrange a face-to-face meeting with Hitler. At the time he was acting on the instructions of his brother King George VI. The King had suggested to Chamberlain that Philipp von Hesse be utilized to approach Hitler. Petropoulos therefore comes to the conclusion that the Hesse Princes and the royal family cooperated 'to avert a war'. Several members of the royal family were involved in this cooperation: 'on the British side alone one has the Duke of Windsor, the Duke of Kent, and King George VI.'<sup>90</sup>

The Duke of Kent/Prince of Hesse channel has therefore been established. Yet the channel between Edward VIII and the Duke of Coburg is still played down. This is surprising, given the role Coburg played during the Anglo-German naval negotiations. Furthermore some of the rather damaging conversations Coburg had with Edward VIII surfaced soon after the war. The official biographer of Edward VIII, Philip Ziegler, quoted them (only to dismiss them). He comes to the highly disputable conclusion that the Duke of Coburg was deluding himself when he believed that his royal nephew was an avid supporter of the 'new' Germany. Instead Ziegler describes Coburg as the embarrassing uncle who everybody endured but nobody took seriously. He thinks Carl Eduard must have been hallucinating when he sent Berlin a telegram stating:

British King sees an alliance with Germany as a necessity. It has to become a *Leitmotiv* of British Foreign Policy. The alliance should not be directed against France but should include it.

Coburg had reported to Berlin that he also asked the King whether Hitler and Baldwin should meet. Edward VIII answered according to this report: 'Who is King here? Baldwin or I? I myself wish to talk to Hitler, and will do so here or in Germany. Tell him that please.'

Ziegler concludes that 'it is inconceivable that Edward VIII would have expressed himself with quite such freedom or such folly'.<sup>91</sup> This is a very benevolent, if not illogical interpretation. As we know, Edward did get his meeting with Hitler eventually (albeit when no longer king) and Coburg was one of his German hosts in 1937.

Ziegler, who could not know about the Duke of Coburg's special role in Britain and his frequent invitations to Buckingham Palace, just dismisses him as the 'absurd Duke of Saxe-Coburg'.<sup>92</sup> This is bemusing to say the least, since in many other instances Ziegler has to admit that Edward VIII did show interest.

Edward was certainly indiscreet to many more people than his cousin, Coburg. In January 1936 a report arrived from the German embassy in Washington, which Hitler read two days later. It must have cheered him up. The American diplomat James Clement Dunn had said at a meeting with State Department officials that he expected the British position to become more pro-German now that Edward was king. Dunn's comments had been leaked to German diplomats, who reported the gist of it to Berlin. Dunn had talked to Edward when he was still Prince of Wales in spring 1935. During this conversation the Prince had been quite 'open' about his political views.<sup>93</sup> He had said that he disapproved of France's efforts to revive the *entente cordiale* and force England onto the French bandwagon. He was convinced that France was thinking only of its own interests and would drop England, if it got into difficulties. He also disapproved of the French line of forcing Germany onto its knees and showed a lot of understanding for Germany's difficult situation. He had stressed that he was not adopting his father's stance, who blindly followed the Cabinet's decisions. On the contrary he, as Prince of Wales, felt obliged to interfere when the Cabinet was planning something which was contrary to British interests. Dunn had been impressed by these straightforward comments. He had come to the conclusion that the new King Edward VIII would not openly and directly intervene in politics, but would try to use his influence as much as possible behind the scenes. Dunn was of the opinion that King George V had been passionately in favour of peace and therefore supported the Hoare-Laval Pact, but that Edward VIII was cold towards France.<sup>94</sup>

It is obvious from this statement that Edward VIII saw himself as a political actor. In 1940 he would tell a Spanish diplomat that he had retired 'from politics four years ago.' This meant that he had tried to *be* a political player up to his abdication in 1936. Edward VIII was indiscreet not just when talking to an American. More significantly he was also candid with the German ambassador von Hoesch. Hoesch's dinner parties accompanied by Hungarian dance music had obviously paid off. He reported home repeatedly about the Prince of Wales and summed up in January 1936 that the feelings of the new King towards Germany were 'so deep and strong that he would resist contrary influences'.<sup>95</sup> His report praised the easy manner of the new King, and his strong temperament (which differed so markedly from his father George V). He described him as a man of the world who was also interested in social problems including the living conditions in mining communities and housing problems in general. German diplomats with a good knowledge of history must have been reminded of Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert by these descriptions. Like his Coburg great-grandfather Edward VIII seemed to care about social problems. The question was therefore: would he also want to realize his great-grandfather's dream of an Anglo-German alliance?<sup>96</sup>

Hoesch saw some potential here. He went on to say that Edward was not a pacifist but wanted a strong, honourable Britain which was ready to defend its honour and possessions if necessary... But he was of the opinion that a new European war would mean the end of Europe and a descent into Bolshevism and therefore the end of all culture. Despite being rooted in the parliamentary tradition, [Edward VIII] does understand the development of other states, and, in particular, Germany... E. has the firm intention of attending the Olympic Games in Berlin. He (also) asked me to tell the members of the German Frontkämpfer [veterans' association], whose visit is expected, that they should put aside two hours because he wants to talk to them all. And he also wants to join the dinner afterwards at the German embassy. King Edward will, of course, from the start have to show restraint regarding tricky questions of foreign policy. But I am convinced that his friendly disposition towards Germany will have some influence on the formation of British foreign policy. There will be a king on the throne who understands Germany and is willing to have good relations between England and Germany.

The King's wish to visit the Olympic Games in Germany in 1936 was never fulfilled and never became public.

Edward VIII may have listened to father figures like Hoesch and his cousin Coburg for personal reasons too—as a rebellion against his own father. The aversion towards his father was already obvious to contemporaries. Hoesch had indicated in his report that Edward wanted to be different from George V, and so had Dunn. It was also the opinion of Edward's cousin Queen Marie of Romania. She had spent a lot of time partying with 'David' in Paris after the war and was famously shrewd in her analysis of people. In 1935 she wrote about the Prince of Wales: 'For the moment he is inclined to be a revolutionary, that is to say, one in opposition, especially to his father's steadiness. David (as we call him in the family) kicks against traditions and restrictions, without realising that tradition made him, is his *raison d'être*; he will have to find the right balance between today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Not easy.'<sup>97</sup> An astute observation.

After the death of George V in January 1936, Carl Eduard's social standing in England had taken another leap forward. The former traitor peer was invited to attend the King's funeral. On film Carl Eduard cuts a pitiful picture, stooping and limping in row six of the funeral parade, looking much older than his 52 years. He was wearing an unflattering German army uniform and corresponding helmet which did not enhance his looks either. Yet the pitiful nature of the picture was deceptive. Though his health problems haunted him again, he was at the height of his networking game. It was, after all, Carl Eduard who had been chosen by Hitler as the official representative of Germany (together with the German ambassador) to offer his condolences to the new King. At the funeral dinner Carl Eduard was seated at Edward VIII's table. They both seemed to have before them a promising future. In Berlin Hitler was also eager to show his sympathy with Britain and attended a special church service at the Anglican church of St George on 25 January 1936. Quite a sacrifice for a man who was not known as a church-goer.

Such symbolic gestures were certainly understood in Britain. After the success of the Naval Agreement in 1935, the first test for Anglo-German relations came during the Rhineland crisis.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was expected by the British government, but the timing was not. Zara Steiner has shown that from February 1936 onwards the Foreign Office had considered 'the dangerous question of the demilitarized zone', but had not expected the Germans to act so quickly.<sup>98</sup> Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden never seriously contemplated fighting over the Rhineland. But, since remilitarization would violate the

Locarno treaty, he developed the idea of using this as a bargaining chip, e.g. negotiating an Air Pact in return for giving up the demilitarized zone.<sup>99</sup> As Steiner puts it so succinctly: ‘In other words, Britain would abandon its commitments with regard to the Rhineland, in an agreement negotiated behind France’s back.’<sup>100</sup>

However, Hitler could not be sure how the Baldwin government would react. He had no informant inside the British government and was rightly concerned lest the British, under pressure from the French, might stop German troops from marching into the Rhineland. Consequently he used all available channels to London—official and unofficial ones—to make sure the British government did not act against Germany. The unofficial channel was the Duke of Coburg whose brief was to influence Edward VIII as a conduit to the Prime Minister. The official channel was the German ambassador von Hoesch.

In March 1936 the world—including the British Foreign Secretary—was distracted by the atrocities Mussolini had committed in Ethiopia. Hitler, via his ambassador von Hassell in Rome, had already made sure that Italy would not side with France and Britain in case they were considering steps against the Rhineland remilitarization. Once he had this assurance he had his troops march into the Rhineland on 7 March. Confronted with a *fait accompli* Eden was taken aback. To calm French nerves, the British government asked Hitler to withdraw the troops—naturally he refused. Though the French were outraged, they had a weak hand. First of all they were under the impression that Germany had a much greater military capability than was actually the case. Secondly they were well aware of their own lack of military preparedness. They could not risk a serious conflict.

In his ghosted recollections Edward VIII portrays himself during the crisis as the confidant of several European statesmen:

some of my visitors advocated a policy of standing up to Germany; others wanted my Government to pursue the opposite course. While I saw the pros and cons of both courses of action, I must confess that I was not convinced that either would lead to a peaceful solution. Intuitively I felt that another great war in Europe was all too probable; and I saw but too clearly that it could only bring needless human suffering and a resurgent Bolshevism pouring into the vacuum of a ravaged and exhausted continent.<sup>101</sup>

The argument in Edward’s favour has been that since he was only King for eleven months and wasted most of the time on his personal problems, he played no part in this at all. Yet his cousin Coburg certainly hoped he would.



It has been argued that the few people Hitler consulted before 7 March could not have gone beyond Ribbentrop, Göring, and Goebbels. Coburg worked closely with Ribbentrop and had been making unusually frequent trips to London in January and February 1936. On 7 March, the day of the remilitarization, he was sent immediately to London and stayed there until 16 March. His mission was obviously to calm British nerves. And they needed calming. Though the British never seriously contemplated fighting for the Rhineland, they now looked extremely weak. Since Hitler could not be entirely sure during the first 48 hours after his 'coup' how the Locarno powers would react, he accompanied the move with his usual peace rhetoric, including the offer of a twenty-five-year non-aggression pact and even the idea that Germany might resume its place at the League of Nations.

The German ambassador, Hoesch, was decisive in selling this offer.<sup>102</sup> Hoesch definitely played his part in the whole drama with great aplomb. It helped that he was not considered to be a Nazi, but a respected diplomat—a gentleman who would honour his word. He could therefore sell Hitler's peace rhetoric convincingly to the Foreign Office (admittedly a Foreign Office which had not much choice but to pretend to believe it).

It is not uncommon for 'successes'—and the unhindered remilitarization of the Rhineland was a great success for Hitler—to be claimed by several people. Whether Carl Eduard's efforts to influence the King were really important remains debatable. But since Hitler had an overblown idea of the King's influence, it was a logical step for him to send his most illustrious go-between. Thanks to Coburg's and Hoesch's reports it must soon have become clear that 'the congress was dancing, but never moving'. Once it was obvious that Hitler would get away with it, the Duke of Coburg left London. Back in Germany he wrote to his sister:

What an awful lot has happened in the world since I left Brantridge [Alice's country house]. I do so hope we should pull through this strong weather and bring our ships into a good well-built harbour. The possibility is there I feel. If only the neighbours quieten down and contemplate everything peacefully... Did Alge see D. after I left and what did he say? Alge was going to let me know.<sup>103</sup>

Alge was of course Alice's husband and Queen Mary's brother. The opinion of D. that was so important for Carl Eduard to know was the opinion of David, Edward VIII. The 'neighbours' were the French and they had had no choice but to quieten down.

Relations between Carl Eduard and the German embassy had improved considerably after this crisis and they were about to get even more friendly. This was due to the arrival of Ribbentrop as the new ambassador. His predecessor Hoesch had never been completely trusted by Hitler. When Hoesch died unexpectedly, the Duke of Coburg wrote to Alice: 'Is that not too sad, poor old Hoesch going off like that at this critical moment. I never knew he was not up to the mark. Really a loss.'<sup>104</sup>

It turned out to be his gain, though. Ribbentrop and Carl Eduard had worked well together since 1934. The closeness between the new ambassador and Carl Eduard was also noticed by the British press. According to the *Morning Post* of 25 October 1936 it was Ribbentrop who had arranged for Carl Eduard to become head of the Ex-servicemen's Association—a great honour for a man who had never actually fought in a war. This honour was further proof that since the King's funeral Carl Eduard had become increasingly visible in Britain. He now dined regularly with conservative politicians (including Neville Chamberlain). But then in December 1936 Edward VIII suddenly abdicated because—as his lover Wallis Simpson herself succinctly put it—'he could not have his crown and eat it'. Not everyone appreciated the humorous side of it. Edward VIII's close relative Marie of Romania was outraged: 'Personally I am too royal not to look upon David as a deserter... The whole world was open to him... it seemed so unnecessary to stand the whole British Empire on its head, to compromise the throne, and shake the foundations of monarchy... Perhaps I am full of royal prejudice.'<sup>105</sup>

We do not know of the Duke of Coburg's reaction to the abdication. He was in bed with flu at the time and the news must have raised his temperature. Edward VIII's downfall was certainly seen as a tragedy by the Nazi leadership while it raised spirits at the Soviet embassy. The Russians had been nervous after the Naval Agreement and Britain's apparent indifference to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. Now Maisky, the Soviet ambassador, sent a telegram to Moscow stating what a blow Edward's abdication was to Germany—a common analysis at the time.

It was certainly a blow to the Nazi leadership, but it did not mean the end of go-between work in Britain. The Nazis wanted good relations with Britain and consequently the German press did not attack the British royal family. After the abdication scandal this was appreciated in London. In a confidential report the German Foreign Ministry stressed that it was seen in Britain as a 'noble gesture' that the German press had been very helpful

during the abdication crisis. ‘The King [George VI] was very angry about the American scandal press. He will not forget the attitude of the German press. If he remains on the throne the German attitude will be useful since he has great sympathies for the Third Reich [Nazi Germany].’<sup>106</sup> George VI’s sympathy for Nazi Germany made it possible for Carl Eduard to stay in contact with both kings—the former and the new one. He now cultivated George VI and at the same time helped organize the Duke of Windsor’s visit to Germany. He probably discussed the details with Hitler during the celebrations for the fifteenth anniversary of the ‘Train to Coburg’. For the occasion Hitler had arrived in Coburg and spent an hour with Carl Eduard.<sup>107</sup> Both men were determined to make the Duke of Windsor’s visit a great social and political success. Carl Eduard’s first step was to prepare the international press.

It was, of course, not unusual for the German government to organize information trips for foreign journalists.<sup>108</sup> This tradition had started long before the First World War with Baron Würtzburg, who in 1907 had been the host of a British press delegation. He was chosen because he was related to the Duke of Norfolk and could explain in perfect English how much Germany had learnt from British institutions. Thirty years later, British journalists still preferred an aristocratic tour guide. Now the Duke of Coburg was doing the guiding. As a duke he offered even more glamour than a baron. The difference with 1907 was, however, that Carl Eduard was not a politically moderate *grand seigneur* like his predecessor Baron Würtzburg, but a committed National Socialist. With German press policy now run by Goebbels, Carl Eduard subjected the international gathering of journalists to a perfect propaganda offensive.

On 21 October, one day before the Duke of Windsor and his wife arrived, Carl Eduard opened his charm offensive. The group he entertained included journalists from the USA, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The British contingent included correspondents from the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Express*. The Duke himself was supported by minders from Goebbels’s Ministry of Propaganda as well as people from the Dienststelle Ribbentrop. They duly reported back about the great success of the enterprise: Duke Carl Eduard had been a ‘very friendly host’ and ‘established direct contact with the Anglo-Saxon race’.

Accompanied by their friendly host, the journalists had visited the sights that are still offered to tourists in Franconia today: a visit to the rococo



**Figure 6.** A front row seat again (left to right): Emmy Sonnemann (later Mrs Göring), Hermann Göring, the Polish ambassador Jozef Lipski, Carl Eduard Coburg and Joseph Goebbels, 26th February 1935.

Vierzehnheiligen church, a tour of Castle Veste in Coburg where Martin Luther lived for a while, and a visit to Banz monastery.

In Banz the young priests received their guests with the Hitler salute which ‘impressed’ the foreign visitors ‘visibly’. According to the enthusiastic Nazi press report the priests then had animated conversations with the accompanying SS and SA members and got along with them extremely well. This was meant to prove to the foreign journalists that there were no problems between the government and the Catholic Church. In the report an unnamed foreign journalist was quoted as having been impressed that ‘the nationalist-socialist revolution had not senselessly destroyed the values of the past’. The journalist claimed that he had now realized that a civilized and cultured life still existed in Germany: ‘Values that the National Socialists respected while Bolshevism had destroyed them.’<sup>109</sup>

Whether this journalist worked for the pro-German Rothermere Press is not mentioned in the report. Also the comments of the (usually more critical) *Manchester Guardian* are not included. Whether any were made,

however, is doubtful. Since expulsions of foreign correspondents were not uncommon, it can be assumed that all participants kept critical remarks to themselves. This little episode shows how useful it was for the NSDAP to employ a member of the old elite for representational events where the social capital of a former Duke had more influence than the power of a Nazi Gauleiter.

The actual visit of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor a few days later is well documented. They were received by Hitler in Berchtesgaden, by Göring at his country seat of Carinhall (playing with his train set), and Edward even gave the Hitler salute. His cousin Carl Eduard entertained him in Nuremberg. For the Nazis the whole trip (for which they had paid) had proved a great success.

The aftermath of this visit indicates that the Duke of Windsor continued to flirt with the regime. As will be shown later, the Nazi leadership never seems to have lost touch with him after 1937.

The royal family did not seem to disapprove of the Duke of Coburg hosting his nephew in Germany. One month after the Duke of Windsor's visit, Carl Eduard was invited by Queen Mary for tea.<sup>110</sup> One wonders whether she discussed her son's German visit. But she must have been aware of why Carl Eduard was in London again. He had arrived at the invitation of the British Legion and was also received by the new King, George VI. Later that year at the Anglo-German Fellowship (AGF) dinner he was the guest of honour, hobnobbing with the Earl of Glasgow and Viscountess Snowden. The Anglo-German Fellowship had been important to him ever since 1935. It was supported by people with business interests in Germany and was not intended to be a pro-Nazi organization from the outset. But the Nazis hoped to use it for their own ends. It turned out to be more difficult than they thought. First of all the Fellowship was full of businessmen and not, as the Germans had hoped, politicians. Second, some of them occasionally voiced criticism of the Nazi regime, which did not go down well in Berlin. As it turned out everybody tried to use the Anglo-German Fellowship for their own purposes: There were well-meaning members who wanted to avoid another war. There were businessmen who wanted to make deals with Germany. There were the British security services who hoped their moles would provide them with a fuller picture of private Anglo-German contacts. And there was the NKVD [Soviet Intelligence], which instructed their up and coming young spies Kim Philby and Guy Burgess to work for the AGF for the same reason (Kim

Philby was even made editor of the Fellowship's newsletter). Indeed Philby's analysis of the AGF raised fears in Moscow. The first information he passed on to his handler was 'a list, covering several pages, of the names of Nazi sympathizers in the upper echelons of government, in the political class, and among the aristocracy of Britain. Attached to the list was an analysis of the opinions of sundry aristocrats, business leaders, and politicians about National Socialism and about Hitler himself. This list seemed rather insignificant until the outbreak of war.'<sup>111</sup>

The Anglo-German Fellowship provided a good cover for the work of Carl Eduard. He used his visits to the AGF 'while he conducted negotiations with Edward VIII to try to engineer an Anglo-German pact'.<sup>112</sup> This was naturally going on without the knowledge of most AGF members. They would have been surprised that an unidentified Nazi agent reported to Hitler's Adjutant's office on 11 December 1935 from London that the AGF seemed to succeed in winning over members of the British elite for the Nazi cause. The informant first praised a football match between British and German players for which the Duke of Coburg had come over especially. According to the informant the game had had a great moral effect, because the British trade unions had tried to prevent it taking place. This had been perceived as an act of unfairness which the British public reacted against. When the game took place, the good behaviour of the German fans then made a very positive impression on the British. Afterwards the Anglo-German Fellowship continued the good work at a higher level, with a grand dinner. They entertained the German Sports Minister, Tschammer und Osten, on 5 December 1935—an event the Duke of Coburg attended as well. The informant was of the opinion that the dinner was a success, but that more had to be done. The big political names were still missing among the AGF. The reason for this was, according to the informant, that active politicians feared they could be criticized for supporting the suppression of Jews and Christians. Once the church question was solved in Germany, the membership of the Anglo-German Fellowship would grow. The informant summed up his report by saying:

The organisation of the evening was outstanding and the German guests were chosen with great sensitivity to English psychology. The Duke of Coburg in particular is a personality who ought to be attractive to English society members.<sup>113</sup>

Hoesch also reported the meeting a success, apart from one unfortunate aspect: 'the Jewish problem is casting a dark shadow over German-English

relations. Almost all English members talked about it with their German guests.' Mount Temple and Lord Eltisley had mentioned it in their speeches. Prince Otto II von Bismarck had then ended the discussion by saying that people should not believe the 'biased press reports but instead visit Germany and see what was going on for themselves'.<sup>114</sup>

Hoesch's report had immediate effect. Hitler exploded and ordered in December 1935 'that the German members of the Anglo-German Fellowship should be withdrawn immediately, since it was not acceptable for the German racial laws to be discussed in the way ambassador von Hoesch has reported'.<sup>115</sup>

Since there were no German members in the AGF, the instruction could be ignored. Ribbentrop wanted to play a long game. He had made Carl Eduard president of the sister organization, the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft (DEG).<sup>116</sup> The idea was to use the DEG to influence the AGF in an unofficial way. A recently published Russian source shows how Ribbentrop, as a first step, purged the German counterpart of the AGF of unwanted members. SS-Oberführer Wilhelm Rodde,<sup>117</sup> who had worked for Ribbentrop, told his Russian interrogators in 1947:

One has to remember that a great number of [British] industrialists and financiers and especially those who had long maintained friendly relations with Germany were members [of the Anglo-German Fellowship] the task of which was to strengthen the political and economic ties with Germany. Among them Ribbentrop was unable to find support. It was clear that friendly contacts by members of the English society with members of the same society in Germany were one of the reasons for the sceptical and partly hostile attitude of the English towards the Third Reich in so far as all the leading posts in the German-English Society in Berlin were taken by big financiers negatively disposed against the new Nazi regime. Extreme measures were necessary to reorganize this society so that it worked in the interest of the new regime, that is to say to replace all the leading figures by National Socialists who could be counted upon politically. Ribbentrop tasked me [Wilhelm Rodde] and Eugen Lehnkering with the difficult job. We should do whatever it would take to purge German-English Society people ill disposed towards National Socialism who had held up our work. We carried out this task speedily.

The Russian interrogator then asked how this was done and Rodde explained:

It was not difficult for us. As far as it was known that members of the Board were negatively disposed and uttered sceptical remarks directed at the leaders of the

National Socialist party we simply suggested to these gentlemen that they give up their powers and leave the Society in return for our promise not to take any repressive measures against them. Thus we got rid off people we did not like. In the positions they vacated, we put at Ribbentrop's suggestion, members of the NSDAP—namely as President the Duke of Saxon-Coburg-Gotha, Carl Eduard.<sup>118</sup>

At the first meeting of the 'sanitized' Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft, Rudolf Hess and Joachim von Ribbentrop, along with the British ambassador to Berlin and the president of the AGF, Lord Mount Temple, were present. Between April 1937 and spring 1939 the membership of the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft rose from 176 to 700. The head office was in Berlin. There were branches in Bremen, Hamburg, Heidelberg, Essen, Stuttgart, and Wiesbaden. Ernest Tennant proudly wrote to a Cabinet Minister in February 1939 that 'in March further branches are to be opened in Frankfurt and Cologne and in April in Vienna and, given real support from the British side, there is almost no limit to the number of branches that the Germans propose to open throughout their country.'<sup>119</sup>

Wilhelm Rodde thought that the appointment of the Duke of Coburg as president of the DEG was decisive for the success of both organizations:

relations between England and Germany started to improve immeasurably. Being a member of the English royal family the Duke wielded great influence in commercial and industrial circles in England and met with complete support from influential English friends. As to Englishmen who took a pro-German position but weren't members of the [Anglo-German Fellowship] we persuaded them to join and undertake intensive propaganda for Germany. All the work in drawing the English in [the AGF] was undertaken by Count Dürckheim and Hewel [a diplomat] who had contacts in English society.<sup>120</sup>

Count Dürckheim was the desk officer for England at the Büro Ribbentrop (the office Ribbentrop ran before becoming a 'proper' diplomat). In postwar Germany Dürckheim would 'reinvent' himself as a psychologist and Zen teacher. Rodde was less lucky; he died as a Russian prisoner of war. But before that he named the following British contacts Ribbentrop 'counted on in his propaganda work in Britain':

Lord Rothermere [the newspaper proprietor], Ward Price [Rothermere's chief correspondent]; Jack Evans [owner of an insurance company]; Francis Cooper [President of Unilever]; Mr. Proctor, Industrialist; Lord Londonderry, a personal friend of Göring; Mr Ernest Tennant; Lord Mount Temple [President of the Anglo-German Fellowship]; Prof. Cornwall-Evans; Sir Arnold Wilson MP; Captain Kennedy [political correspondent of the Times]; Captain Richardson [industrialist];



Lord Hamilton; Lord Duncan-Sandys [son-in-law of Winston Churchill]; Mr. Brant, an important banker; Samuel Hoare; Mr Oliver Hoare; Allan of Hurtwood; Mr Beamish; Lord Lothian.

The majority of the people named were members of the Anglo-German Fellowship and Rodde stressed that 'these people were used by us for propaganda and spreading the pro-German policy in England'. The interrogators then asked Rodde to give the names of Ribbentrop's agents in Britain. Rodde replied:

I know the following subjects who carried out intelligence work for us:

Sir Arnold Wilson. He was a private guest of Ribbentrop in 1935/36. He stayed at the Kaiserhof Hotel and for a short time spent large sums of money on alcohol, on Ribbentrop's instructions I paid for them myself.<sup>121</sup>

Arnold Wilson MP wrote his first pro-German article in the *English Review* in June 1934: 'Herr Hitler himself impressed me profoundly. After a conversation lasting three quarters of an hour I left with the feeling that I had been talking to a man who was national by temperament, socialist in method, but, like our best conservatives, desirous of change in particular directions.'<sup>122</sup>

The next person Rodde named as an agent was Thomas P. Conwell-Evans, who was probably playing both sides and will feature in Chapter 6. Conwell-Evans would later half admit that he was at first taken by the Nazis: 'I was sadly late in perceiving the real nature of the Nazi German menace'.<sup>123</sup>

Another more plausible candidate as agent Rodde identified was 'Captain Kennedy. He paid private visits to Ribbentrop and Count Dürckheim. As a correspondent of the Times he wrote pro-German articles.'

The fourth agent named was Henry Hamilton Beamish. Beamish had once been a supporter of Pemberton Billing and was now vice-president of the Imperial Fascist League and a supporter of the Madagascar Plan for Jewish deportation. According to Rodde he arrived in spring 1936 'in Germany without money and shabbily dressed. He was fully looked after by Count Dürckheim.'

Agent five was, according to Rodde, Ernest Tennant, a founding member of the Anglo-German Fellowship. According to Rodde,

one fact draws one's attention to him. On one occasion in the winter of 1935 I met Ribbentrop in his apartment and brought documents to sign. I opened the door and wanted to walk into his study and suddenly Ribbentrop grabbed me and literally

pushed me out of the room, making excuses that he was in conference and asked me not to disturb him. Amongst those present I recognized Tennant and one employee of the Abwehr [the German military intelligence service]. From this I draw the conclusion that Tennant worked with Ribbentrop and was connected with the German intelligence services.<sup>124</sup>

Ernest Tennant does not mention such work in his autobiography *True Account*, which might more appropriately have been entitled 'Untrue Account'.<sup>125</sup>

The Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft (DEG) and the Anglo-German Fellowship remained close to the Duke of Coburg's heart. He reported to Alice in March 1939 that his old friend Lord Brocket 'is now Chairman of the Anglo-German Fellowship. It was such fun talking about Brocket (Hall) and now he has also bought Bramshill'.<sup>126</sup>

Brocket spoke German fluently. He entertained leading Nazis at his houses and was a guest at Hitler's 50th birthday celebrations.<sup>127</sup> In 1940, as we shall see, he tried to persuade Chamberlain to reach a peace deal with Hitler.

Neville Chamberlain was a great hope for Coburg as well. When Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937 he initiated a new foreign policy towards Germany—appeasement. At the time two issues were in the foreground—Austria and Czechoslovakia. The Foreign Office had come to the conclusion that: 'the German establishment was united in its belief that Anschluss was inevitable and that an attack on Czechoslovakia was probable unless the Sudetenland was transferred to Germany'.<sup>128</sup>

Chamberlain had no serious intention of standing up to Hitler on these issues. He accepted the Anschluss and he would eventually accept Hitler's stance in the Sudeten question. Since the Sudeten question was handled by two other go-betweens, it will be discussed in more detail later. Coburg seems to have played a role though. According to his appointment book he arrived in London on 22 September 1938, the very moment Chamberlain was meeting Hitler in Munich. After his arrival Coburg was first briefed in the German embassy and, according to his appointment book, a day later saw 'Bertie and Elizabeth' (George VI and Queen Elizabeth). After meeting the King and Queen he reported immediately back to the embassy again. Altogether he went to the embassy five times within three days.<sup>129</sup> He also seems to have had several conversations with George VI, but there are no notes of these meetings (and there is no hope that if such notes exist the Royal Archives will make them available). But we know that George VI was

a supporter of the Munich agreement. He later appeared on the balcony with Chamberlain to celebrate it. Originally he had planned to go a step further and welcome Chamberlain at the airport on his return. He was, however, advised against such a step. Queen Mary wholeheartedly agreed with her son's opinion: 'I am sure you feel as angry as I do at people croaking as they do at the Prime Minister's action. He brought home peace, why can't they be grateful?'<sup>130</sup> Her relative Coburg would have been pleased with such a statement.

While Britain remained his main target, Coburg was also busy using his other contacts. As head of the House of Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha, Carl Eduard had very uncomplicated access to many other royal houses. Only prominent members of the higher aristocracy could so easily have been granted audiences such as the following: 'At the end of January', Coburg wrote to his sister, 'I was 3 days in Rome during which I had a nice talk with the King and Emperor [Victor Emmanuel III] and a most interesting one with Mussolini.'<sup>131</sup>

It was therefore natural that after the annexation of Austria in March 1938, Carl Eduard was sent to Italy to deliver the Führer's special thanks to Mussolini.

Coburg continued to be sent on such charm offensives. Together with his 'adoptive son' Schwede-Coburg, Carl Eduard visited Poland in February 1939. It was a great success. Only six months later Hitler and Stalin would wipe out the Polish army, but before that Coburg solemnly laid a wreath on the grave of an unknown Polish soldier. He was received like a high ranking politician, having talks with the Minister of War and an audience with President Moscicki. After sightseeing visits in Warsaw and a trip to Krakov, he laid another wreath on Marshal Pilsudski's grave and then lunched with Polish officers.<sup>132</sup> This visit was typical of Coburg's work: the rather charmless charmer, making sure that the facade was kept up while war plans were finalized in Berlin.

But by 1939 the situation had certainly got more difficult for Coburg's work in Britain. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in March, British appeasers were on the back foot. In the summer of 1939 political pressure forced Chamberlain to talk to the Soviet Union about an alliance. It was not just Labour or Liberal politicians but also Conservatives who had concluded that Germany was becoming too dangerous. Across party lines there was now support for an alliance with the Soviet Union. Chamberlain and Halifax still thought they could reach a deal with Hitler, but they had at

least to pretend to be in negotiation with the Russians. While Chamberlain started this pretence in the foreground, in the background he signalled to Germany via a private channel that he was not serious about the Russian negotiations. Since Chamberlain did not trust his own diplomats, mirroring Hitler's methods, he used a go-between for the signalling—Lord Kemsley. He was the owner of the *Daily Telegraph* and on his way to Germany. As a 'fellow press magnate', Kemsley had been invited to Germany by Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels in July 1939. The Nazi party's chief ideologue, Rosenberg was one of Kemsley's hosts. Rosenberg, like Coburg, considered himself an expert on Anglo-German relations. Together with von Weizsäcker from the German Foreign Ministry, he entertained Lord and Lady Kemsley for a leisurely lunch.<sup>133</sup>

Rosenberg told his guest that Germany had no intention of interfering with the British Empire. In return Lord Kemsley repeated several times that a war between England and Germany would be a disaster, since the only beneficiary would be the Soviet Union. He added 'that Chamberlain would negotiate in Moscow reluctantly and was ready to back out, but he had started the negotiations to take the wind out of the opposition'. He also stressed that 'Chamberlain was the leader of England and would remain it'. In other words at the end of the day, Chamberlain was deciding British foreign policy and not Parliament. This naturally pleased Weizsäcker and Rosenberg. Lady Kemsley's comments added to the cheerful atmosphere. She declared that 'only the Jews wanted to bring about a war between Germany and England' and then continued to explain that she had seven children, of whom five were sons of military age. For personal reasons alone she could therefore not support the madness of a war with Germany. Lady Kemsley's reproductive productivity naturally made an impression. So did her anti-Semitism. She also added that before they had left for Germany, they had received countless letters and telegrams from all over Britain, asking them to do everything possible to avoid a war. Rosenberg ended his report summarizing that Lord and Lady Kemsley had given the impression that they had been instructed by Chamberlain to speak for him and to stress that Chamberlain's position as Prime Minister was safe. This report was not simply wishful thinking. The German ambassador to Britain, Herbert von Dirksen, gained a similar impression of the Kemsleys shortly afterwards: 'Lord Kemsley spoke with pleasure of his conversation with Reichsleiter Rosenberg ("a charming personality"), to whom he had said that Chamberlain was in his way the Führer of England, similar to Hitler and Mussolini. This had visibly made an impression upon Rosenberg.'<sup>134</sup>

That the British negotiations with the Soviet Union were just a facade was therefore obvious to Hitler. The British appeasers were indeed 'guilty men' who had given him to understand that in Britain fear of communism was greater than fear of Nazism.

After the war Kemsley rejected the Dirksen report as fantasy. Like so many appeasers he suffered from amnesia. Not so his critic, the journalist Elizabeth Wiskemann, who challenged him. Despite her unusual name Wiskemann was British and had been arrested by the Nazis in 1936. She got out in time and later worked for the British intelligence services in Switzerland. She had quoted and read Kemsley correctly. So had another man who was in the intelligence services. Yet this man had a rather different biography from Wiskemann's and certainly did not make his knowledge public. His name was Guy Burgess. In his daytime job Burgess worked for the BBC (later for MI6 and the Foreign Office), yet his real passion lay somewhere else. Like Philby and Blunt he had been recruited as a Soviet agent. It was an inspired choice by the Russians. Burgess was from a wealthy and well-connected family and knew, since his time as a political journalist, all the key people in Whitehall. He was an expert on the Foreign Office mentality and understood Chamberlain well. In August 1939 when negotiations between the British, French, and Russians were going on regarding a possible pact, Burgess saw this as the facade it was:

It is a basic aim of British policy to work with Germany whatever happens, and, in the end, against the USSR. But it is impossible to conduct this policy openly; one must manoeuvre every which way, without opposing German expansion to the East.<sup>135</sup>

Burgess was not the only one who believed this to be true. His contemporary Conwell-Evans, came to the same conclusion:

It seems clear that the British government continued to believe that Hitler's affirmation of his anti-Bolshevism were wholly genuine, that he intended solely to crusade eastwards against Soviet Russia.<sup>136</sup>

Conwell-Evans noticed that Chamberlain was just pretending to negotiate with Russia when a senior Foreign Office clerk was sent to Moscow 'by boat instead of plane'.<sup>137</sup>

When the Russians learnt that Göring was planning to visit England, they realized it was time to commit.<sup>138</sup> The Hitler/Stalin Pact was signed on 23 August 1939. A week later Hitler attacked Poland and Britain declared war on Germany.

One would have thought that the outbreak of war with Britain might have been so traumatic that it would have ended Coburg's activities. Yet there does not seem to have been a single moment of reflection for him. The man who would later claim that he worked tirelessly for peace did not draw any conclusions from 3 September 1939. On the contrary. He now did his best to support the war effort. His presidency of the German Red Cross meant that Carl Eduard became responsible for the cover up of crimes against civilians in Poland. When he was informed that one of his cousins, the mentally ill Princess Maria of Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha, had been gassed, he dismissed this as gossip. He preferred to be in denial about concentration camps and the Nazis' 'euthanasia' programme.<sup>139</sup>

This was his 'domestic' record after the outbreak of war in 1939. His foreign record as a go-between continued as well. He was now used for trips to Germany's new friends—Japan and Russia. In January 1940, before Carl Eduard started on his second world tour he was first received by Hitler and then briefed in the German Foreign Ministry afterwards (Hitler and the Foreign Ministry were also his first port of call on his return in May). Officially Carl Eduard was travelling to Japan to congratulate the Emperor on his jubilee, yet his real mission was to 'explain' the situation (or better, calm Japanese nerves) five months after the Hitler–Stalin Pact. Since Russia and Japan had been enemies since 1904, this must have meant a lot of explaining. Carl Eduard seems to have been successful enough and included a trip to the United States to sound out the American commitment to neutrality. His last stop was Moscow, where he had the pleasure of meeting, together with the German ambassador v. Schulenburg, Molotov on 31 May 1940. He told Molotov his American trip had reassured him that Roosevelt was not going to join the war, even though he was surrounded by advisers who supported this. Molotov wanted to know more about these advisers and was told by the Duke that they were of course people who were warmongers.<sup>140</sup> After Carl Eduard had left, Molotov asked Schulenburg why the Duke 'looked so old'. Though Carl Eduard was only 56 at the time, he looked more like 80. His bent posture and leg problems were evident to everyone. Schulenburg tried to avoid an honest answer since Coburg's inherited family diseases were naturally an embarrassment to the Aryan ideals of the Nazi movement, and instead elaborated on Carl Eduard's long pedigree and that he had been a great supporter of the Nazi movement for a long time. He also made a joke about the Duke's connections with other royal houses. Three days before the meeting with

Molotov, Belgium had capitulated to Hitler. The King of the Belgians was Carl Eduard's cousin and Schulenburg had toyed with the idea of telling the Duke: 'your nephew has surrendered.' Molotov seemed fascinated by this connection and told Schulenburg 'that such old family relationships are a rather complex chain'.

They were indeed. It is not clear whether Coburg used his 'complex chain' for one last time in June 1940.

Much has been written about Hitler and Ribbentrop's plan to 'lure' the Duke of Windsor to Germany in the summer of 1940. Since Ribbentrop was working closely together with Coburg, it is likely that he asked him for advice on this endeavour. The mission was codenamed 'Operation Willi' and senior intelligence officer Walter Schellenberg was dispatched to Portugal. In his unreliable memoirs Schellenberg portrays the whole affair as doomed from the start. In fact the story was already circulating within the intelligence world at the time. According to the double agent Dusko Popov, Hitler wanted to offer the Duke a return to the British throne (and a crown for Wallis Simpson). In the meantime the idea arose of depositing



**Figure 7.** Celebrating their achievements in Coburg: Adolf Hitler and Carl Eduard 24th October 1935.

50 million Swiss francs in a Swiss bank account so that the Duke could 'live in the appropriate style'.<sup>141</sup> Whether the Duke was tempted could never be verified.

Several intelligence agencies were watching the Duke of Windsor in Spain and Portugal. One is of particular interest—the NKVD [Soviet Intelligence]. So far it has never revealed its reports. Yet it seems that it had good information on the Duke. In the summer of 1940 the head of the Fifth Department Pavel Fitin sent to the Kremlin a memo:

The former king of England Edward together with his wife Simpson is at present in Madrid, where he is in touch with Hitler. Edward is conducting negotiations with Hitler on the question of the formation of a new English government and the conclusion of peace with Germany contingent on a military alliance against the USSR.<sup>142</sup>

This message fuelled Stalin's worst fears. By then the Nazi–Soviet pact was almost a year old. Would Hitler switch sides? Was this the beginning of a larger plan?

It would be interesting to know what else this source told the Russians, yet access to KGB files is even more difficult than access to files of the Royal Archives, Windsor. Still, in recent years the SVR (a successor to the KGB) has allowed trusted researchers to use material and publish it in Russian periodicals. Whether this new transparency has something to do with the current patchy Russian–British relations or is a way of advertising old espionage successes is irrelevant. Another source for insider material on the royal family was the Soviet spy Anthony Blunt, a relative of the Duchess of York (later Queen Elizabeth, mother of the current Queen). As children Blunt's mother and Queen Mary had been neighbours in Windsor Great Park and remained lifelong friends, sharing a passion for charity projects. Blunt picked up royal gossip easily and would later be promoted by Queen Mary's son George VI. It is therefore likely that he was one source for the Russians' information on the royal family. That he played a decisive role was insinuated in June 2014 by the intelligence analyst G. Sokolov who is close to the Russian intelligence services. He gave an interview a month after Prince Charles had compared Putin to Hitler, a comment which had caused outrage in Russia. In response, Sokolov hinted that Anthony Blunt's file would be released in the near future.<sup>143</sup> This would also include Blunt's clandestine work in Germany in 1945. This trip has fascinated historians for a long time. Officially Blunt was sent off in the summer of 1945 by George VI



to retrieve the correspondence between Kaiser Wilhelm II's mother, Empress Frederick, and her own mother, Queen Victoria. Yet it is rumoured that he retrieved something very different, namely incriminating correspondence from members of the royal family to their Nazi relatives. Blunt travelled with the royal archivist Sir Owen Morshead, who later wrote an entertaining account of their 'archive trip'. Yet Blunt went to the Continent altogether three times that year retrieving 'artwork' for the royal family.<sup>144</sup> He also went to Holland to visit Kaiser Wilhelm II's former home. According to Sokolov, Blunt informed his handler in London about the details of his trip.

Blunt's work for the Russians was uncovered in 1963 but not made public until 1979. The MI5 counter-intelligence officer Peter Wright wrote a controversial book about his interrogation of Blunt. Asked about his trip to Germany in 1945, Blunt snapped at Wright: 'Now this isn't on. You know you're not supposed to ask me that.'<sup>145</sup> This exclamation may well suggest that Blunt struck a deal with the British intelligence services promising not to make public his knowledge about the royal family's German correspondence.

That this correspondence was collected is very likely. In his biography of Blunt the former ambassador to Britain Popov discusses the Morshead–Blunt mission to Germany. His research was inconclusive, but the Russian intelligence services informed him that Blunt was still working for them at the time and had instructions from Moscow 'to meet in Germany a person of interest to Soviet intelligence'.<sup>146</sup>

Apart from patchy Russian sources, there are also FBI files which were released in 2003. However they are full of unsubstantiated gossip, including the story that the Duchess of Windsor slept with Ribbentrop and that the Duke of Windsor was in close contact with Göring.<sup>147</sup> Still there exists a reliable source which so far has not been used: the Franco papers. They show that the Duke of Windsor was indeed making outrageous comments about his own country.<sup>148</sup> According to the Franco papers, the Duke of Windsor had a conversation with his old friend the Spanish diplomat Bermejillo on 25 June 1940 in which he said: 'if (the Germans) bombed England effectively this could bring peace. He [the Duke of Windsor] seemed very much to hope that this would occur. He wants peace at any price.' This report went to Franco and was then passed on to the Germans. The bombing of Britain started on 10 July.

On 15 July 1940, Bermejillo had another conversation with the Duke of Windsor who informed him that he had been offered the position of Governor of the Bahamas:

I had to laugh out loud and said it was impossible, absurd. It was only then I realised he had accepted the offer. He said the appointment was offensive but had several advantages: First, official recognition of *Her* [his wife Wallis]. (Second) not having to take part directly in the conflict, to which he had never been party. (Third) to have more freedom to exert his influence in favour of peace. Fourth, the proximity to Her native country (America). He also counted the reaction of public opinion in his favour. These are the reasons why he will accept what he called 'St. Helena 1940'.<sup>149</sup>

The Duke of Windsor was hardly in the same league as Napoleon I, but the British government spirited him away before he could cause any further damage. Damage limitation would be British policy for the next seventy years.

Coburg's work as a go-between probably ended after his world tour of 1940, but he continued to collect countless Nazi honours over the next five years. Even when one of his sons was killed at the front, he remained a fanatical supporter of Hitler. He was also not irritated when 'the Princes' decree' was issued in 1940. This was a decree excluding members of Germany's former royal houses from serving in the Wehrmacht. It had been triggered by a funeral. Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler had become increasingly suspicious of monarchical feelings among ordinary Germans after the death of two Hohenzollern princes. Their funerals had elicited an unforeseen degree of compassion amongst the German population. A monarchical renaissance threatened; the Nazis had every reason to intervene. The Princes' decree was followed in May 1943 by a secret sequel that took action against 'internationally connected men in the State, Party and Armed Forces'. This resulted in some princes having to leave the army. Coburg was not under suspicion, however, and he continued to wear his uniform and travel to occupied, neutral, and allied countries, a privilege not many had.

His trip to neutral Sweden is particularly intriguing. He visited Stockholm in February 1942, ostensibly to see his eldest daughter, who was married to the son of the Swedish Crown Prince. Coburg was a private guest of the royal family and it is therefore highly likely that politics were discussed. The relationship between the Swedish royal family and Nazi Germany was good. This is still a taboo subject in Sweden and has so far not been

researched properly (papers in the Swedish royal archives relating to this period are closed). Intelligence material shows, however, that the Crown Prince of Sweden was certainly pro-German, while the Crown Princess, a Mountbatten, hated the Nazis. According to the couple's tennis coach Meller-Zakomel'skii this led to marital conflict, at least on the tennis court. The tennis coach moonlighted for Walter Schellenberg as a Nazi agent.<sup>150</sup> He was an impoverished White Russian aristocrat who hated Bolshevism and was therefore eager to help the Germans. According to him, the Crown Princess called National Socialism 'Barbarism', whereas her husband praised German institutions. In 1940 he had already expressed the hope that the British would 'come to their senses', i.e. make peace with Hitler, otherwise the whole of Europe would turn 'red'. The tennis coach fully agreed with such sentiments—if Germany did not win this war 'the red flag would soon be flying from Swedish castles'.<sup>151</sup>

Even more important than the view of the Crown Prince was King Gustav V's active support for the Germans. According to Churchill, the Swedish King was 'absolutely in the German grip'.<sup>152</sup> That Gustav was indeed pro-Nazi was confirmed by the reports of the German ambassador to Sweden, Prince Wied—a friend of Coburg's. Like Coburg, Prince Victor zu Wied was related to the Swedish royal family. He was a second cousin to Queen Victoria of Sweden (who during the First World War had tried hard to help Max von Baden to negotiate a Swedish–German alliance). Victoria had died in 1930 but her husband King Gustav V had stayed the pro-German course. He also seems to have been instrumental in Wied coming back to the German embassy in Stockholm. Since 1923 Wied had been on extended 'garden leave' from the German Foreign Ministry.<sup>153</sup> Yet after meeting Göring in 1930 his fortunes improved. He joined the Nazi party and introduced Göring to politicians and diplomats. Wied knew Foreign Minister Neurath well and in 1932 was used by Hitler as a channel to Neurath—promising him he could keep the Foreign Ministry in case of a Nazi election victory. As a reward for his good services Wied was 'reactivated' in 1933. For ten years, from 1933 to 1943, he acted as ambassador to Stockholm. The King invited him on summer retreats with Swedish politicians and treated him 'like family'.<sup>154</sup>

This closeness paid off. After the attack on the Soviet Union, Germany demanded a *de facto* end to Swedish neutrality. Prince Wied had a long conversation with Gustav V on 25 June 1941 and it was only thanks to the Swedish 'King, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Ministry' that a German

division was able to use Sweden for transit.<sup>155</sup> Sweden eventually permitted access to its railways and allowed passage through its seas; it also gave access to its telecommunications as well as landing rights for German planes. The King seems to have played a decisive role in making all this possible. Though Swedish historians are still debating whether the King really threatened to abdicate if Germany did not get these rights, Gustav V and the Swedish Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson seem to have put enormous pressure on parliament to give in to German demands. That the King did his utmost to help Hitler was entirely in character. As we have seen in Chapter 3, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, King Gustav V wrote him a congratulatory letter. His hatred of Bolshevism had made him a great supporter of Nazi Germany. This was an experience he shared with Coburg. Both men were united in their support for Hitler and it is very unlikely that they did not trade notes in 1942.

What Coburg did for Hitler during the rest of the war is unclear, but whatever it was it was well paid. Hitler had a special fund, the 'Dispositionsfonds', from which he paid selected members of his elite for their services. Until April 1945 Coburg was on this exclusive list and received 4,000 Reichsmark monthly.<sup>156</sup>

Looking back at his Nazi career, it is indeed impressive how long he survived at Hitler's court. Not everyone stayed in the Führer's favour for twelve turbulent years and Carl Eduard had, of course, many rivals. However, his previous experience with courts had taught him good survival techniques. After all he had been part of Kaiser Wilhelm II's court since his childhood. He knew that it was necessary to make alliances and that to be a lone fighter could be dangerous. He therefore worked together with Ribbentrop over the years and he also made sure that he stayed close to Hitler's adjutant, Fritz Wiedemann (who was in the opposing camp to Ribbentrop). Coburg often invited Wiedemann to his get-togethers in Berlin, his 'beer evenings' which were good networking opportunities. He even awarded the influential Wiedemann an order of his house, the 'Komturkreuz'.<sup>157</sup> Coburg had always loved to decorate people and old habits obviously died hard. Apart from distributing the Komturkreuz, he also used the opportunity to give out Red Cross medals. One of these honorary Red Cross medals (the Ehrenkreuz des Deutschen Roten Kreuzes) was received in 1937 by a very special friend of Wiedemann. She was an unusual recipient indeed—Princess Stephanie Hohenlohe.<sup>158</sup> This woman was no Florence Nightingale. But she was a colleague of Coburg's: Princess Stephanie Hohenlohe was another very effective go-between for Hitler.