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East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis

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Pratt, Lawrence R. *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis 1936-1939*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975. 215pp.

Great Britain began rearming in 1935, against the threat of a resurgent Germany in Europe and the threat of an expansionist Japan in the Far East. Italy, like France and the United States, was explicitly excluded from the list of Great Britain's potential enemies when rearmament began. The 1935-1936 crisis over Italy's conquest of Ethiopia changed all that. Mussolini defied the League of Nations and challenged Great Britain's traditional predominance in the Mediterranean. In this 1936 war scare, a colonel in the Cabinet Office wrote at the time, "we were properly caught with our trousers down." Great Britain now also confronted a third potential enemy, Italy, capable of endangering the Empire's Mediterranean lines of communication from the home islands to the Middle East, India and the Pacific.

Professor Pratt's theme in this excellent and provocative new study is the consequences and implications of the 1935-1936 Mediterranean crisis for long-range British strategy and policy. Skillfully using recently opened British official records (especially from the Cabinet and Foreign Office papers), Pratt expands our knowledge of the origins of the Second World War beyond the "Germanocentric" interpretations that have for so long dominated the histories of this period. By focusing on the Mediterranean crossroads, east of Malta and west of Suez, Pratt reveals how the demands of imperial and home defense conflicted and interacted in Great Britain's ultimately unsuccessful effort to recover the secure position she seemed to have had in the 1920's.

By 1936 the tensions between Great Britain's commitments and her limited military capabilities were overwhelming. Faced with intractable strategic problems British ministers and defense

planners began to suffer from what Pratt calls a siege mentality, and a pessimism bordering on defeatism. "It was no accident," he writes, "that those who were closest to the rearmament programme and privy to the secrets of the defense effort were among the most fervent advocates of those policies that history has lumped together under the opprobrium of 'appeasement'."

After some 15 years of disarmament and the neglect of defense requirements, Great Britain by the mid-1930's was underprepared and overcommitted. To escape from the Mediterranean vulnerability which the 1936 war scare had exposed, Great Britain could either strengthen her forces in that area, or she could attempt to placate Italy by diplomatic concessions. Hardly anyone found the prospect of appeasing Mussolini attractive. Yet the alternative—the strengthening of British forces in the Mediterranean and Middle East—would both divert resources urgently needed for the defense of Great Britain against Hitler's Germany, and dangerously reduce the Royal Navy's capacity (still calculated in numbers of available capital ships) to fulfill the British Government's repeated promises to protect Australia and New Zealand against Japan in the Pacific. By looking at Great Britain's strategic problem as a whole, Pratt makes the shifting and competing views of British policymakers understandable. Pratt leaves us in no doubt that Great Britain's diplomatic and strategic situation on the eve of the Second World War was vastly more complex and difficult than the traditional indictments of the "guilty men of Munich" have led us to believe. This book is no *apologia* for Neville Chamberlain or his Government, but it does reveal the severe constraints which limited the range of their choices. After 1936 the British Government pursued rearmament and appeasement policies simultaneously, not least because Great Britain simply lacked the resources and

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military capacity successfully to fight Germany, Italy, and Japan all at once and alone. Not only was the Empire "disjointed, disconnected and highly vulnerable," the First Sea Lord, Admiral Chatfield, wrote in 1936, but it was open to debate whether it was in reality strategically defensible at all.

Lawrence R. Pratt is a professor of political science at the University of Alberta. He pays tribute to the influence on his work of Donald C. Watt, Professor of International History at the London School of Economics, and this book can profitably be read along with Watt's important recent book *Too Serious a Business: European Armed Forces and the Approach to the Second World War*. Professor Pratt's detailed study of the formation of British Mediterranean appeasement policy solidly supports Watt's thesis that the chiefs of staff of all the European great powers were reluctant to risk war right up to the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939.

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Winter, J.M., ed. *War and Economic Development: Essays in Memory of David Joslin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975. 297pp.

This volume contains 11 papers and an introductory essay written in memory of the late British economic historian David M. Joslin by his students, colleagues and friends. Arranged in chronological order, the essays treat a broad range of topics relating to the impact of war on economic development in Europe. Not surprisingly, most of the papers, 8 of the 11, deal with Great Britain. Four of the papers focus wholly or in part on the First World War. Others consider such diverse subjects as the effects of war taxation on the English economy in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, and the economic costs of the Dutch Revolt in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

In the opening essay, Edward Miller makes a persuasive case that heavy taxation in the period 1294-97 significantly reduced living standards of all ranks of English society. He further argues that war taxes in the subsequent 50 years altered the economic structure in a variety of ways, and had particularly adverse effects on agriculture. He argues that taxes led to declines in agricultural prices and eventually in reductions in the amount of land under cultivation. Other economic factors were also at work during the period, of course. The weakness in Miller's paper lies in his inability to assess the relative importance of various factors. General deflation, apparently accompanied by (and probably caused by) declines in the money supply occurred during the period, together with sharply rising labor costs after 1320. The existence of these factors leaves his case that taxation played a leading role in the decline of agriculture unconvincing.

Next, G.R. Elton traces the transition, in the early Tudor period, in the right of the English Crown to collect direct taxes from a right to do so only in time of war or impending war, to a right to do so on "whatever grounds of need could be put forward." He draws the conclusion that, "Down to 1529, [the historian] can treat all taxation (and its effects) as the product of war; thereafter he needs to distinguish. It then becomes desirable to follow up the collection of revenue by an investigation of expenditure, in order to ascertain whether the impact of government on the economy through direct taxation may be ascribed to actual war . . ." (p. 46). While the evidence marshaled concerning the change in the right to tax is impressive, the conclusion fails to account for the obvious fact that revenues are fungible. Investigation of expenditure is desirable in any case.

Third, Geoffrey Parker examines the economic consequences of the Dutch war of liberation—the so-called Eighty