

THE BRITISH ARMY IN 1935-1939: THE MODERNIZATION OF CONTINENTAL STRATEGY AND THE CONTEXT OF APPEASEMENT

A. V. Razhev

Chelyabinsk Institute of Personnel Development and Continuing Education, Chelyabinsk, Russia

The article is devoted to the transformation of views within the UK higher military-political circles on the problems of army rearmament and its strategic role in the context of S. Baldwin and N. Chamberlain's foreign policy in the second half of the 1930s. The article focuses on three main aspects of modernization. First, it analyzes the key problems of the British armed forces during the interwar period and the main directions of troops modernization in terms of the UK armed forces readiness for war. Second, it studies the attitude of Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to funding defense programs, as well as to limiting the strategic role of the Army toward appeasement. The work deals with the basic concepts of continental strategy. Third, it considers the process of military strategy transformation within the changing international situation and foreign policy of the British government in 1939. Finally, it concludes that the lack of common understanding about the general principles of UK military and political strategy made it impossible to determine the role of the army in the approaching war and to outline its modernization program.

Keywords: *United Kingdom, the interwar period, the British army, continental strategy, the strategy of "limited function" appeasement, Chamberlain, AL Khor Belisha.*

Land forces of Great Britain traditionally played a supporting role in the British military strategy. According to the theory of naval power, their task was largely passive: to carry out garrison duty at strategic points of the Empire, execute police powers in the colonies. They considered its temporary derogation, as well as continental strategy in general, as a mistake which led to an enormous field army during the First World War. The difficult situation in the 1920s – first half 1930s led to the stagnation in the British Army. It contributed to a significant shift to left policy and national life democratization, majority participation in public and political life, cultural and ideological renewal of British society. Such public and political sentiments resulted in cutting down military expenditure and introducing "the ten-year rule", which slowed consistent modernization of the armed forces. No wonder that in the army there was an atmosphere of despondency and pessimism. Such feelings were particularly common among progressive officers – potential reformers [Bond: 1981, P.111]. As a result by the beginning of the 1930s UK land forces hadn't matched the requirements of modern warfare.

The growth of aggressive fascist powers and their desire to revise the post-war world order had a negative impact on the position of British imperial defense. In response to the European situation changes the Chiefs of Staff Committee recommended to spend 40 million pounds on the mechanization of troops and the creation of an expeditionary corps in November 1933 [Peden. Sir Warren Fisher: 1979, P.35]. Taking into account increasing "threat of avia-

tion" from Germany, General Staff warned that air safety depended not only on the number of air squadrons, but also on the defense of Belgium and Holland - the starting point for German bombers. And the attention paid to the Royal Air Force pushed the immediate problems of land forces into the background.

The increasing military aggression in the middle 1930s showed a necessity to bring armed forces in balance with the impending threat. However, if the strategic objectives of aviation and navy along with their development programs were generally defined, the situation with the army seemed less optimistic. They did not even resolve the problem of land forces role in the possible European conflict, which would have defined the perspective program of modernization and rearmament.

The Rhineland crisis of 1936 changed the international situation in Europe and demonstrated military weakness of the UK. This prompted the British government to reconsider their views on the pace of rearmament. Although there was little doubt that Britain shouldn't take part again in the "continental adventure". Military and political circles feared that the United Kingdom would not be able to implement measures of Imperial Defense, as well as to take part in the possible actions on the continent. By that time the Cabinet had revealed two basic concepts of using land forces - continental and limited ones.

The first group (Secretary of State for War A. Duff Cooper and Chief of Staff, Field Marshal Cyril Deverell) argued for preparing to the inevitable confrontation with Germany on the continent. In Octo-

ber, 1936 Duff Cooper, whose summer speech about necessary military alliance with France against Germany caused quite a big noise in the press, raised the theme of army problems in the Government: rearmament and recruitment. The War Secretary pointed out the difficulty in manning garrisons and military presence expanding without mobilizing a large part of the Army Reserve. Nevertheless, the closer the forefront was, the more often they faced the problems of strategy principles and the Role of the Army in the war.¹ The War Secretary warned that, being unresolved, these issues could have a negative influence on the defense capability of the empire. Moreover, it could spoil relations with possible allies and dominions. Duff Cooper spoke quite emphatically: if the government did not intend to modernize the land army, then it was a waste of resources to maintain the army in its present condition.²

The supporters of the opposite opinion (Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain) did not see any necessity, as well as resources, to have a strong field army.³ They focused more on the deployment of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. And they primarily tended to a diplomacy course. They hoped to reach an agreement with Germany and ease the arms race. At the same time Chamberlain was determined to preserve financial stability - the "fourth type of forces" [Pedan. British rearmament: 1979, P.2].

The discussion between these two points of view on army lasted from winter 1936 to spring 1937 [Razhev. Bol'shaja strategija: 2012, S. 67-73].

The pendency of continental strategy meant uncertainty in the foreign policy. The disproportion of tasks and actual resources prompted Baldwin and Chamberlain to conduct the policy of concessions that would allow, on the one hand, reducing tension in Europe and, on the other hand, gaining time to rearm. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and his followers tried for the first option, while military and political officials and diplomats focused on the second variant.

The doctrine of "limited function" formulated by Chamberlain, after his coming to power in May 1937, emerged from several related provisions. The Prime Minister sought to prevent the financial overflow by limiting military expenditure to \$ 1.5 billion

GBP within five years.⁴ Moreover, it was required to review strategic priorities for the British armed forces. Considering that it was a mistake to wage a war on the continent for a maritime nation such as Britain, Chamberlain focused economic resources on the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. The Prime Minister expected to avoid a new European war and resolve all conflicts at the negotiating table. Chamberlain supposed that the accelerated rearmament based on continental model could cause anxiety in Berlin and provoke further German aggression while the development of aviation, in which the United Kingdom lagged, should have been a deterrent for Hitler. Thus, the role of the army was reduced to defend the British Isles, especially from the air, and key regions of the empire. If necessary, Chamberlain admitted sending symbolic contingent forces to the continent.

The military authorities reacted skeptically to the new doctrine. The Chief of General Staff, Field Marshal S. Deverell, and his colleagues refused to consider reorganizing troops which were to be air defense oriented. Deverell still urged to continue a mechanization course improving the organization of forces and including the purchase of arms and equipment for the Territorial Army [Ironsides: 1962, P.38]. The Prime Minister was unpleasantly surprised at "persistence and dedication old ways", which seemed to him "incredible" [The Private Papers: 1960, P.36].

It was possible to implement Chamberlain's views, full of authoritarian leadership style, only after War Secretary Duff Cooper had been replaced by loyal Minister of Transport L. Hore-Belisha. The appointment of Minister of Transport to this high office caused mixed feelings. The army remembered his speeches as Financial Secretary to the Treasury in the early 1930s against increasing of the military budget. However, the ambitious politician did not want to show any connection to the military department, its traditions, internal hierarchy, its "clan" organization.

The first months of Hore-Belisha in the office indicated that his appointment was a well-considered step. Therefore, it is hardly possible to agree with the statement that Chamberlain "naively" did not see the collision between the bright and ambitious Jewish politician and conservative, even reactionary generals [Trythall: 1981, P.396]. The crisis resulted from the clash of both principles and characters. The new minister gave not only an "energetic shake" in the highest military ranks, having dismissed conservative members from the Army Council headed by Deverell in December 1937. In addition, he introduced a number of successful social and economic reforms that allowed Britain to leave manning the army on

¹ PRO, CAB 23/86, Vol. 53. L. 23-25. C.C. 60(36)9.

² PRO, CAB 23/88. Vol. 55. Ll. 181-182. C.C. 20(37)4. Conclusions of the Cabinet, 5 May 1937.

³ PRO, CAB 24/265. Vol. 139. Ll. 265-266. C.P. 334(36). Chamberlain N. "The role of the British Army. Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer", 11 December 1936.

⁴ PRO, CAB 24/270, Vol. 143. L. 271-272. C.P. 165(37).

a voluntary basis [Razhev. «Novaja metla»:2014, 46-51; Razhev. Social'no-ekonomicheskie reformy: 2014, S. 15-21].

The *anschluss* of Austria was the first challenge to the new strategy and the whole policy of Chamberlain. The aggressive actions of Germany prompted the heads of military departments to request a review of funding policies.¹ Chamberlain, who retained control over the political situation under the parliamentary opposition pressure, continued policy of appeasement, being confident in the possibility of a German-Italian agreement. According to R. Shay, as a result the government decided to take the risk: to abandon strengthening of the armed forces and, in particular, under no circumstances to send troops to the continent, hoping thereby to secure conditions for a large-scale agreement with Germany. "Choosing between finance and defense, the government under the influence of the Prime Minister has chosen the first" [Shay: 1977, P.199].

During the Munich crisis, which was the apex of Chamberlain's policy, Duff Cooper and Hore-Belisha insisted on bringing the troops into combat readiness, considering it the only means of pressure on Germany.² Being in a tight squeeze, Khor Belisha showed his commitment to the principles and clearly outlined his position, recalling that they were affecting not only the future of the UK international prestige or peace in Europe, but the struggle against tyranny and the defense of democracy.³ Chamberlain, however, managed to maintain support for the cabinet and achieve a peaceful resolution of the crisis through a personal meeting with Hitler and pressing on Prague. The Munich conference results were generally greeted with relief. At the same time the general approval of the cabinet caused concern, behind which it could be seen a clear demand - to direct all possible resources to revitalize rearmament program. The stormy debate in parliament showing a change in political mood resulted in the firm conviction that it was inadmissible to have a situation similar to that which had occurred in September 1938. Even Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax felt that the doctrine of "limited function" should be rejected, while Chamberlain naively hoped for a resumption of the disarmament conference.⁴ And on the 17th of October Chief of the Imperial General Staff Lord Gort pro-

posed to concentrate on the rearmament of regular and territorial army.

By the end of 1938 there had been practically no hopes for "peace for our generation" in Great Britain. Polish Ambassador E. Raczynski noted a gradual loss of authority of the Prime Minister and growing fears about the British defense capabilities [God krizisa: 1990, C.150-152]. In January 1939 Hore-Belisha sent a memorandum on the role of the army to the Cabinet in which he returned to the discussion of Chamberlain and Duff Cooper in winter 1936-1937 about the justification of the continental strategy.⁵ Halifax agreed with the War Secretary, considering that the German leader was disappointed with Munich because he expected a quick victorious war with Czechoslovakia for strengthening his regime [Shay: 1977, P.236]. Under pressure of his colleagues on the 22nd of February 1939 Chamberlain was forced to admit inadequacy of "limited function" concept and to endorse a return to continental strategy.⁶ The experience of the Great War of 1914-1918 showed that the restriction on minor land forces, which Chamberlain hoped to replace by the air force and economic strength, was impossible under new circumstances.

By mid-March 1939 despite fears of German plans rising in social and political circles Chamberlain did not intend to make substantial changes in his foreign policy. Only after the activity of Germany and Italy in the second half of March 1939 made the international crisis deepen, the British leadership decided to revisit the strategy in the coming conflict. On the 29th of March 1939 Chamberlain announced a series of measures which were intended to show the willingness for decisive action.⁷ The Cabinet agreed, firstly, to focus on Warsaw as a strategic partner; secondly, to guarantee obligations to help to Poland; thirdly, to double the number of territorial units to 26 divisions and start a discussion on compulsory military service. Thus, if in 1938 Chamberlain did not want to hear about the potential involvement of the Army in the war on the continent, then a year later he came to preparing the expeditionary force of 32 divisions [Barnett: 1970, P. 419-421]. In April 1939 in order to accelerate the expeditionary corps formation, Hore-Belisha forced Chamberlain to introduce a partial compulsory military service as well as form the Ministry of Supply responsible for military production.

¹ PRO, CAB 23/92. Vol. 58. L. 367-372. C.C. 12/13(38)3. 14 march 1938.

² PRO, CAB 23/95. Vol. 61. L. 184. C.C. 42(38). Conclusions of the Cabinet, 24 September, 1938.

³ PRO, CAB 23/95. Vol. 61. L. 217. C.C. 43(38). Conclusions of the Cabinet, 25 September, 1938

⁴ PRO, CAB 23/96. Vol. 62. L. 11. C.C. 49(38)5. Conclusions of the Cabinet, 19 October, 1938.

⁵ PRO, CAB 24/282 C.P. 27(39) The State of Preparedness of the Army in Relation to its Role. Memorandum by the Mr. Hore-Belisha", 27 of January 1939.

⁶ PRO, CAB 23/97. Vol. 63. L1. 306-14. C.C. 8(39)6. Conclusions of the Cabinet, 22 February, 1939.

⁷ PRO, CAB 23/98. Vol. 64. L1. 131. C.C. 15(39)5. Conclusions of the Cabinet, 29 March, 1939.

The fact that the “limited function” doctrine was recognized as ineffective showed only one side of changes that took place in the British military strategy. By this time the strategic priority had definitively shifted to the national defense and the participation of British troops in the fighting on the European continent. The Imperial General Staff took into consideration the interdependence of possible theaters of war: “If the Allied Powers defeated the West, their total defeat in the Far East would follow automatically” [Batler: 1959, S.53]. The directive to ensure the “second front” as a prerequisite for successful opposition to rapidly increasing German power manifested an important element of continental doctrine. The Chiefs of Staff Committee gave a low score to the capabilities of the Red Army.¹ However, the military and diplomats acknowledged that ignoring the Soviet side in the diplomatic maneuvers could result in the risk of its rapprochement with Germany.²

At the same time, influenced by the opposition, the attitude toward the Soviet Union started changing. Not denying the possibility of the agreement with Germany, Chamberlain agreed to conduct talks with Moscow to increase pressure on Germany and avoid Soviet-German rapprochement. The British delegation in Moscow aimed at winning time and not achieving specific agreements. Chamberlain still did

not believe in the possibility of reaching an agreement with the Soviet Union, or in the military potential of the Red Army, and was hoping to use the talks only as a means of pressure on Hitler, and as a consequence there were fully tightened negotiations [Shirer: 1980, C.504].

Chamberlain’s half-hearted inconsistent actions and hesitancy between making a formal decision and real actions did not allow the UK to influence the worsening international situation and strengthen its strategic position during the spring-summer of 1939. Chamberlain’s policy soon became one of the reasons of acute crisis. Not abandoning hope for diplomacy, the Prime Minister reluctantly went to military measures. Even having agreed to them, he lingered with their actual implementation. The belated change of strategic guidelines was not followed by changing foreign policy. As a result August 1939 revealed a diplomatic failure – the United Kingdom could not come to any agreement with Germany or the Soviet Union, and at the same time they did not have time to complete the training of their armed forces for war.

Chamberlain could not deviate from the chosen course in foreign policy of the second half of the 1930s even after the outbreak of hostilities. Taken with such objective factors as internal political, socio-economic and imperial ones, this course led Britain to a severe military and political defeat in the beginning of World War II.

¹ PRO, CAB 27/624. P. 319.

² PRO, CAB 27/627. P. 273- 282.

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Сведения об авторе

Ражев Александр Викторович – кандидат исторических наук, доцент кафедры общественных и художественно-эстетических дисциплин Челябинского института переподготовки и повышения квалификации работников образования, ул. Красноармейская, 88, Челябинск, (351)263-89-35, guibert@mail.ru.

Razhev Aleksandr Viktorovich - Candidate of Historical Sciences, Docent, Department of Social and Artistic and Aesthetical Disciplines of Chelyabinsk Institute of Personnel Development and Continuing Education, st. Krasnoarmejskaja, 88, Cheljabinsk, (351)263-89-35, guibert@mail.ru.

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БРИТАНСКАЯ АРМИЯ В 1935-1939 ГГ.: МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЯ СТРАТЕГИИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПОЛИТИКИ УМИРОТВОРЕНИЯ

А. В. Ражев

Челябинский институт переподготовки и повышения квалификации работников образования, Челябинск, Россия.

Статья посвящена трансформации взглядов высших военно-политических кругов Великобритании на проблемы перевооружения сухопутной армии и определения стратегической роли в контексте внешнеполитического курса С. Болдуина и Н. Чемберлена во второй половине 1930-х гг. Основное внимание уделено трём основным аспектам модернизации. Во-первых, анализируются ключевые проблемы развития британских сухопутных сил в межвоенный период, а также основные направления модернизации этого вида войск в контексте общего состояния вооруженных сил Великобритании. Во-вторых, рассматриваются основные взгляды канцлера казначейства, а затем премьер-министра Н. Чемберлена на проблемы финансирования оборонных программ, а также на ограничение стратегической роли сухопутных сил в рамках курса на умиротворение. Разбираются основные концепции стратегии сухопутной армии. В-третьих, процесс трансформации армейской стратегии в меняющихся условиях международной ситуации и внешнеполитического курса британского правительства 1939 г. В заключении делается вывод, что отсутствие единого взгляда относительно общих принципов военно-политической стратегии Великобритании не позволило определить роль армии в надвигавшейся войне и наметить программу ее модернизации.

Ключевые слова: *Великобритания, межвоенный период, британская армия, континентальная стратегия, стратегия «ограниченных функций», политика умиротворения, Н. Чемберлен, Л. Хор-Белиша.*

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