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SCANDINAVIA AND BALTIC STATES.

CONFIDENTIAL.

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March 27, 1940.

SECTION 1.

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Viscount Halifax to Sir C. Dormer (Oslo).

(No. 157.)

Foreign Office, March 27, 1940.

Sir,

THE Norwegian Minister asked to see me to-day on his return from his short visit to Oslo. He told me that while there had not been many people in Oslo he had seen the Prime Minister and M. Koht besides other officials at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. As a result of these conversations, although he had little to add on the subject of the various questions pending between our two Governments, he felt that he had a considerably better understanding of Norwegian opinion. M. Koht had not yet made up his mind as to whether or not to reply to His Majesty's Government's note of the 15th March on the *Altmark* case, but the Minister thought that he would probably send an answer. He had the feeling that M. Koht was equally hesitant on the majority of questions now at issue in Norwegian politics, such as Finland, and he had on the latter subject added nothing to his broadcast explanations of Norwegian policy. M. Colban said that he had had similar lengthy discussions with the Prime Minister, and these also had not led to any very definite results, although M. Koht had been good enough to express satisfaction with his work in London.

2. M. Colban then turned to more practical matters, and, saying that he was not returning to them on the instructions of his Government, referred to the two notes which he had left with Mr. Collier on the previous day (copies of which will be sent to you in due course), complaining of small infringements of Norwegian territory by aircraft and warships. He realised that these were due to inadvertence, but he begged me to impress on the responsible authorities the need for greater care by the individuals concerned. He had just been informed that morning of the torpedoing of a large Norwegian ship, the *Cometa*, and it was unfortunate that the Germans should have any handle with which to reply to Norwegian protests in such cases. British infringements were small in themselves, but they looked bad in the mass.

3. In reply I told the Minister that I had only just returned to London and had not seen the two notes to which he referred. While I was sure that it must have been valuable for him to have had an opportunity of learning his Government's point of view at first hand, I much hoped that he had been able to interpret our own feelings in London. I would enquire into the alleged violations of Norwegian territorial waters by British warships, although I was surprised to hear of them. I would not, however, disguise from him that, while I naturally must take note of the Norwegian point of view, certain facts must be recognised. On the one side, there were violations of Norwegian neutrality involving repeated and cruel losses of Norwegian life and property, and all these violations were undeniably part of a deliberate and shameless policy. On the other side, if there were any infringements, which I must not be taken to admit, they were of completely minor kind, they entailed no loss of life, and yet all the time the Royal Navy were obliged to watch vital supplies for Germany passing up and down the protected corridor inside Norwegian waters. I hoped, therefore, that the Minister would not fail to appreciate our point of view in this matter. The Minister said that he would try to do so, but some of the British infractions had been worse than others, and, indeed, in one instance a warning shot from a British destroyer had actually landed on Norwegian soil. Moreover, in another note which he had addressed to the Foreign Office that day, complaint was made of no less than fourteen separate violations of Norwegian territory by aircraft, which seemed almost too great a number to be entirely accidental.

4. M. Colban then turned to the question of exports of iron-ore from Narvik, regarding which he said that he had spoken to Mr. Collier the day before. Exports to Germany had fallen off, while those to Great Britain had been maintained, and, moreover, the war trade agreements with both Sweden and

Affairs Committee of the Storting, however, some division of opinion was apparent; and it was not until the 19th May, when the Storting itself had given its approval in secret session, that the rejection of the German offer was publicly announced.

4. The Norwegian Government soon began to repent themselves of their temerity, however, and went out of their way to inform the German Government that they would welcome the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Germany and Denmark. In Norway, alone of all the Scandinavian countries, there was no public criticism of the Danish action in accepting the German offer; and M. Koht asserted that the Norwegian refusal had offended the Germans less than the more robust replies of the Swedish and Finnish Governments. In April the head of the Scandinavian section of the German Propaganda Bureau, in congratulating the notoriously Germanophil Berlin correspondent of the *Aftenposten* on Norway's neutral attitude during the Czech crisis, had added ominously that Germany had good bombers, but did not wish to use them on Oslo. Such threats, coupled with an intensive propaganda, had left their mark on Norwegian public opinion.

War Period.

5. The announcement of the Russo-German Pact at the end of August came as a double shock to Norway, heralding as it did not only the imminent outbreak of war in the West, but also—what was of almost equal importance to the Scandinavian countries—the reappearance of Russia as an active and aggressive force in North-Eastern Europe. In accordance with precedent, a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Scandinavian States was held at Oslo to discuss the situation, but nothing of importance emerged beyond a reaffirmation of the policy of neutrality. When, on the 1st September, the German army marched into Poland, the Norwegian Government immediately issued a declaration of neutrality, and this was extended two days later to cover the war which had by then broken out between the Allies and Germany. While the British and French Governments accepted these declarations without comment, the German Government, with an eye to propaganda, at once informed the Norwegian Government of their intention to respect Norwegian neutrality. This action produced the desired result: certain sections of the Norwegian press began to comment on the absence of a similar assurance from the Allies, and to demand that an explanation be sought of their intentions. Spurred on by the press, the Norwegian Government asked the British and French Governments to give guarantees similar to that already given by Germany. These guarantees were at once forthcoming, although both were made contingent on Germany's continuing to respect Norwegian neutrality.

6. The events of the first month of the war tended on the whole to enhance Germany's prestige in Norwegian eyes, and with it the fear which she inspired. The triumph of the German arms in Poland, which speedily brought about that country's erasure from the map; the early exploits of German submarines, in particular the sinking of H.M.S. *Royal Oak*, which only a year before had brought back to Norway the mortal remains of Queen Maud, and our apparent inability at the moment to take effective counter-measures; the German trade drive in Scandinavia; and, above all, the frequent sinkings by German submarines of neutral ships—all these successes, exaggerated and driven home by an active German propaganda, exercised a depressing effect on Norwegian public opinion. Norwegian fears were increased by the Soviet negotiations with Finland, and even more, of course, by the outbreak of the Soviet-Finnish war; and the Germans did not fail to exploit these fears for their own ends. A German broadcast in December was careful to emphasise that Finland had only herself to thank for her plight, since she had rejected the proffered hand of Germany; while in the same month a high German official told the Berlin correspondent of the *Aftenposten* that Norway would soon have to make up her mind which side she favoured. In these circumstances it is not surprising that Norwegians not only laid increasing emphasis on their absolute neutrality, but, fearing that even this device might not save them in the long run, any more than it had saved Finland, turned their minds to thoughts of peace. Typical of Norwegian opinion at this time was an appeal which M. Mowinkel published in the *Dagblad*, calling on the League of Nations to invite Italy and the United States to summon a peace conference.

7. In her attempt to strangle all neutral trade with the Allies, Germany used all her resources of terrorism, blackmail and brutality. She threatened to treat all neutral ships sailing in Allied convoys as enemy vessels, and to sink them at sight. Masters of neutral ships calling at German ports in the Baltic were only permitted to leave on giving a written guarantee that they would refrain from trading with Great Britain and France for the duration of the war. Neutral and Allied ships alike fell victims to the indiscriminate German use of mines and to submarine warfare, and it was estimated that by the end of October nine Norwegian vessels had already been lost in this way. In three cases at least—those of the British ships *Thomas Walton* and *Deptford* and of the Greek ship *Garoufalia*—German submarines were suspected of having entered Norwegian waters in order to sink their victims; but the Norwegian Government made no protest, on the ground that there was no positive proof of how the sinkings had occurred. In the case of the American ship *City of Flint* the Norwegian Government acted with greater vigour in the defence of their neutrality. This ship, with a German prize crew on board, paid two visits to Norwegian waters. On the first occasion the authorities contented themselves with removing the British prisoners and letting the ship proceed to Murmansk. When, however, she returned a fortnight later and anchored without permission at Haugesund, they released the ship and cargo and interned the German crew.

8. The Norwegian Government's attitude towards the Allied contraband control was dictated by different considerations. Having less to fear from the Allies than from Germany, they stood firmly on their neutral rights, protesting successively against our requirement that all Norwegian ships should put in at Kirkwall, our examination of neutral mails, and our decision to seize all German exports. The Norwegian Government were asked whether they would agree to the establishment of a regular British naval convoy across the North Sea with facilities for the assembly of the convoy at Bergen. Although the shipowners were from the first in favour of this scheme, the Government were reluctant to commit themselves to anything which might conceivably be construed as a breach of their neutrality. They accordingly decided to leave our formal request unanswered, and to allow the shipowners discretion to use the convoy or not, as they pleased. At the same time they authorised the Norwegian naval authorities to co-operate in the scheme provided that everything were done as unobtrusively as possible and that His Majesty's ships did not enter Norwegian territorial waters.

9. In the last week of September a Norwegian official delegation arrived in London to discuss the terms on which Norwegian ships should be chartered for the use of the Allies. The delegation had no full powers, and after some preliminary discussions it was compelled to return to Norway to seek instructions. This needless delay provoked a firm protest to the Norwegian Minister in London, and eventually a new delegation, under the leadership of M. Thomas Fearnley, K.B.E., was despatched by the Association of Norwegian Shipowners and with the concurrence of the Norwegian Government. At first the negotiations proceeded slowly, owing to Norwegian insistence on excessively high rates for charter and war-risk insurance and to differences of opinion on the war zones in which the ships might be used. Eventually, however, these difficulties were resolved, and an agreement was initialled in London on the 11th November and ratified on the 20th November. The agreement was to come into force at once, but the Norwegian Government reserved to themselves the right to suspend it wholly if the negotiations for a war trade agreement were unduly prolonged or broke down. The agreement provided for the chartering by the Allies of approximately 150 tankers and 700,000 tons of tramp tonnage for the duration of the war; but events showed that neither the Norwegian Government nor the Shipowners' Association had any intention of allowing it to be fully implemented until the war trade agreement was concluded. After some heated discussions as to where and when the negotiations for the latter should take place, the Ministry of Economic Warfare decided to send a representative, in the person of Lord Glenconner, to Oslo. In the course of the ensuing conversations the Norwegians showed a genuine willingness to negotiate, but they were so pre-occupied by their fears of Germany and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and by their determination not to be bullied into sacrificing their trade to Allied war requirements on the other, that the discussions dragged on very slowly. Nevertheless, these preliminary conversations cleared the way for the more official negotia-

tions which began in London in December and finally resulted in agreement in March 1940.

10. The revival of Russian imperialism, foreshadowed by the Soviet-German Pact, became an accomplished fact with the Soviet invasion of Poland. The full scope of Soviet intentions, however, was only revealed when this initial success was followed up by the conclusion of pacts of mutual assistance—setting up protectorates in all but name—with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and by the opening of the negotiations with Finland. In private conversation M. Koht gave it as his opinion that Finland would unquestionably fight rather than submit to Russian demands incompatible with her sovereign status, and he explained that in this event Norway would do what she could to help, although she would not be able to send active military assistance. As regards the Soviet menace to Norway, he said that any demands inconsistent with Norwegian territorial integrity would be met by a categorical refusal. On the 11th October the Norwegian Government joined with the Governments of Sweden and Denmark in expressing to the Soviet Government the hope that no demands would be made on Finland which might be prejudicial to her independence. Shortly afterwards, on the 18th October, the King of Norway, accompanied by M. Koht, attended a meeting of the heads of the Scandinavian States at Stockholm to discuss the position of Finland. In a communiqué issued at the close of the meeting stress was laid on the solidarity and community of interests between the Scandinavian nations; but, in reality, this was no more than a last attempt to cover up with a show of unity the gaping cracks which had long been showing in the façade of Scandinavian solidarity. Finland was, in effect, to be left to her fate; and the process which had begun with the Danish acceptance of a non-aggression pact with Germany was to be completed by the Norwegian and Swedish denial of military help to Finland.

11. When the Soviet forces invaded Finland early in December, M. Koht, in a conversation with Lord Glenconner, urged that the time had come to make peace with Germany, who, he knew from the German Minister, was not co-operating whole-heartedly with her Russian ally, and would certainly not view with indifference a Russian attack on Norway. This idea that Germany was ready to protect Norway against the evil designs of Russia was sedulously spread by the Germans, and was successful not only in enlisting Norway on the side of the would-be peacemakers, but also in persuading her that her interests would be best served by remaining neutral and leaving Finland to her fate.

12. The insistence with which the Norwegian public demanded the despatch of volunteers to Finland obliged the Government to give their blessing to the formation of a Scandinavian brigade to which Norway was to contribute 2,000 men (though in the end only some three to four hundred came forward). They insisted, indeed, that no serving officers should enrol, and that all the arrangements should be kept secret; but on this latter point they were later compelled to yield to the extent of permitting advertisements to appear in the press. They also agreed to the despatch by the Allies of volunteers and war material across Norwegian territory on condition that the volunteers travelled individually or in small groups. When, however, at the end of the year, the British and French Governments tentatively proposed that they should guarantee Norway against a possible attack, hoping thereby to encourage Norway to take a more active part in the defence of Finland, the Norwegian Government failed altogether to respond. Their declared policy was once again publicly reaffirmed by M. Koht in a broadcast speech on the 27th December: "It is a new discovery that one country can attack another and not call it war. But when nations resort to arms against each other, then we must claim the right to stick to the old terminology and to say that it is war: and in war Norway has her old policy, that of neutrality. She can have no other."