THE ORGANISATION OF THE BRITISH FOREIGN SERVICE

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In the middle of the Second World War, as had happened in the middle of the First, the British Government decided upon a reform of the British Foreign Service. This term, British Foreign Service, was not in common use before the Second World War. There were the Diplomatic and Consular Services, with at kind of mixture of them both, called the Commercial Diplomatic Service. But all those services which deal with the relations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland with foreign countries outside the Commonwealth were, by the second of the two reforms I have mentioned, unified, and now there is one British Foreign Service. Its members have, of course, different duties; they may be assigned to posts which are mostly concerned with politics, or to posts which deal chiefly with questions of trade and commerce, or again to what are still called consular duties, the protection and assistance of British citizens abroad, the interests of British shipping and British seamen, with all the mass of legal work that that means in almost any foreign port. Within the service, too, there are of course, several different grades, which I shall describe later in this essay. But there is now no longer that almost complete division between the Diplomatic and Consular Services. The abolition of this division was one of the main alterations brought about by what are known as the »Eden reforms« — for the whole re-organisation was supervised by Sir Anthony Eden when he was, during the war, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the National Government. Both political parties approved of the re-organisation, and it is the chief purpose of this article to give an account of the present structure and recruitment of the British Foreign Service, as worked out under the »Eden reforms«, which were presented to the British Parliament in a White Paper¹ in January 1943 and approved early that same year and at once carried into legal effect, though naturally much of the practical re-organisation had to wait until the end of the War.

¹ Proposals for the Reform of the Foreign Service Miscellaneous No 2 (1943) Comm 6420 Published by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London
Before coming to details of this change, I may say something of the previous reform, that decided in the First World War. Having been a member of the Diplomatic Service, and then of the Foreign Service, for about thirty years, and so having personal experience of both reforms, I may, perhaps be permitted to speak from my own experience. The British Diplomatic Service before 1914 was a highly skilled body of men; they could only enter after passing an extremely difficult examination and this was usually the culmination of a thorough training at Oxford or Cambridge, but the career, which young men entered for life, with the ambition of ending as Ambassadors or Ministers, was an expensive one and therefore tended to be recruited from the comfortably-off families. To learn the foreign languages required was costly, as it meant travelling and living abroad, and when the candidate passed and started he had such heavy expenditure that it was considered advisable that all diplomats, before commencing their duties, should be able to rely on the possession of a regular private income of not less than £400 a year. The Government did not pay for the transport of the diplomat's furniture; if he had a wife or children, he had to pay for their travelling, and the salary given would hardly pay for the maintenance of a single man, still less allow him to marry and raise a family and do the entertaining which was considered fitting for his rank. In this British diplomacy was not different from any other; there was a kind of international brotherhood of diplomats, on familiar social terms with one another, and with their attention almost entirely centred on the ruling few — for foreign policy, in those days, was not as a rule a subject on which there was any popular opinion regularly expressed, and even countries with full and responsible parliamentary government were, except in the occasional crises, which grew more frequent as the fateful year 1914 drew nearer, content to leave foreign relations to the professional diplomats and the guidance of those diplomats to the Foreign Minister. It was not the diplomats' fault if they were so often out of any direct touch with public opinion. Moreover, in the British Service, in those days, not only were the diplomatic and consular careers distinct, but the successful candidates for the Diplomatic Service were given the choice of serving abroad all the time, or remaining in the Foreign Office. There were brilliant exceptions, but the general effect, of course, was that the diplomats abroad lost touch with their own country, while the »clerks« in the Foreign Office — except perhaps on holiday — never saw the countries with whose affairs they had to deal.