British Politics and Society

SIR ORME SARGENT AND BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS EUROPE, 1926–1949

Adam Richardson

Sir Orme Sargent and British Policy Towards Europe, 1926–1949

This book examines the career of Sir Orme Sargent, one of the most important and distinguished British diplomats of the twentieth century.

For almost a quarter of a century, Sargent helped shape British policy towards Europe. Covering the period from 1926 to 1949, this study explores Sargent and Foreign Office responses during a tumultuous period which included the collapse of Weimar Germany, the rise of Fascism, the Second World War, Anglo-Soviet relations and the dawn of the Cold War. In doing so, it sheds light on an important but largely neglected historical figure in the study of twentieth century British foreign policy.

The book will be of use and interest to scholars, students and general researchers in the fields of twentieth century foreign policy, British history, diplomatic relations and Britain's relationship with Europe.

Adam Richardson is a twentieth century international historian. His research focuses on the British Foreign Office, British diplomats and international relations in the first half of the twentieth century.

British Politics and Society

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Adam Richardson

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To my parents

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Introduction

'Who is that strange, lanky man called Sargent whom you have at the F.O.? Curious bird, isn't he?'[1] Winston Churchill's enquiry about the then Deputy Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office is one that still confronts historians when dealing with Sir Orme Sargent. One of the most important and distinguished figures in the British Foreign Office during the twentieth century, for almost a quarter of a century Sargent was at the centre of British foreign policy decision-making towards Europe. When he entered the Foreign Office at the start of the twentieth century, the British Empire was arguably at its strongest. In Europe, Britain was in rough alignment with France and Russia while an increasingly ambitious Germany posed the greatest threat to continental stability. By the time of Sargent's retirement in 1949, Britain was the weakest of the three big powers, exhausted and financially crippled following the Second World War. Britain still had power, but it was much reduced in comparison with the turn of the century. Orme Sargent had witnessed Europe being ravaged by war, rebuilt, ravaged by war again and in the process of being rebuilt again. Who then was this 'curious bird', as Churchill put it, who watched all of these events unfold and helped shape the British response to them?

Sir Harold Orme Garton Sargent was born on 31 October 1884 at 2 Elvaston Place, Kensington, London. The only child of Harry Garton Sargent, a man of independent means, and Henrietta Sarah Finnis Stud Mackinnon, whose sister married the 15th Duke of Somerset, Sargent's childhood was unhappy. According to his friend and colleague Gladwyn Jebb, Sargent's parents were 'rather possessive and exacting',[2] while Lady Seymour recalled Sargent's father requiring a letter from his son every day.[3] Like many of his future Foreign Office colleagues, Sargent was educated at public school. In the three years he spent at Radley College, Sargent was an active member of the Debating Society and even performed in drama productions.[4] In one such production, he played the role of a ghost in torment – an apt part for a future civil servant.[5] While Sargent was also unhappy at Radley, those years were clearly important to him as for the rest of his life he remained a steadfast supporter of the institution that educated him. He often donated money to the school and was one of the

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high-profile guests for the visit of Princess Elizabeth to the school in 1947. After leaving Radley in 1901, Sargent did not go to University. Instead, he spent time abroad – as was usual at the time for those aspiring to apply for the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service – to improve his language skills. Being able to speak another language was a core component of the entrance examination, so his time spent in Switzerland was designed to give him the best possible chance of gaining entry into the elite institution. However, like many, he failed on his first attempt to gain entry to the service. Rather strikingly given his future career, he failed to pass the obligatory papers in French and the History of Europe.[6] Nevertheless, he persevered and passed the entrance examination in January 1906 with the top overall mark.[7]

Sargent joined the service in spring 1906 and was appointed a Junior Clerk in the Foreign Office. Thus began a career that would take him through to retirement in 1949. His first roles were as a Clerk in various Foreign Office departments. He began in the American Department[8] before being transferred to the Commercial and Sanitary Department.[9] While working in the latter, he was appointed an Acting Third Secretary in the Diplomatic Service in order to be sent abroad as Secretary to the British delegation at the International Sanitary Conference in Paris in late 1911. The commercial aspect of his work continued during the First World War as Sargent worked in the Contraband Department of the Foreign Office, under the supervision of future Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS) Sir Eyre Crowe and alongside another future PUS, Robert Vansittart. Later in the war he was transferred to Berne as an Acting Second Secretary and was promoted to First Secretary in April 1919. Sargent remained in Berne until July 1919 when he was seconded to the Peace Delegation at Paris. Following the end of the peace talks Sargent remained in the French capital, attached to the British Embassy for the work of the Conference of Ambassadors which was entrusted with the execution of the peace treaties. Sargent continued in Paris until late 1925, during which time he gained experience in the work of multinational bodies, became steeped in the intricacies of the peace treaties and dealt with territorial disputes on the continent. Just as important as the knowledge and experience he gained in Paris, however, were the people he met. Sargent met and worked alongside future senior Foreign Office colleagues – such as Gladwyn Jebb, Eric Phipps and Ralph Wigram – many of whom became close colleagues during his career. A clear sign of these budding relationships was Phipps' recommendation that Sargent be awarded the CMG in 1923.[10] In November 1925, after just over six years in the French capital, Sargent returned to the Foreign Office to work as First Secretary in the Central Department which oversaw relations with Germany and Italy, amongst other nations. Following this return to Whitehall, Sargent never again left for a post abroad, spending the remaining twenty-four years of his career within the Foreign Office at the heart of British policy-making towards Europe.[11]

The Foreign Office

Since its formation, the role of the Foreign Office has been to help shape Britain's foreign policy. It was not the only voice in foreign policy, but it was the department through which papers were collated and examined. Established in 1782, the Foreign Office was originally a small department that consisted of just a few individuals: the Foreign Secretary, two Under-Secretaries, a Chief Clerk and seven other clerks, two Chamber Keepers and their Deputy, and the 'necessary woman'. The small scale of the department was clear as over one-third of the department's running costs were the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs' salary.[12] At this time, the Secretary of State used to read all correspondence and the role of the civil servants in the department was purely administrative. However, by the end of the nineteenth century there was a need for change. Not only had the office swelled in number, but the volume of despatches received by the Foreign Office had also increased substantially, from 6,000 in 1829 to 110,000 in 1905.[13] This made it impossible for the Foreign Secretary to read all incoming correspondence. The role of senior officials therefore began to change as they increasingly began to offer advice to the swamped Minister, mirroring similar shifts in other government departments.[14] This new advisory role of the Foreign Office officials was cemented in 1905 with the implementation of a new registry system. This arrangement meant that by the time the Foreign Secretary received a correspondence, there was also a summary of its contents and a sheet of paper recording the views of the officials attached. Even the most junior clerks saw their role change from copying and record-keeping to actually being involved – in a small way – in policymaking as they were allowed to write short minutes. Thus, in the years before 1914, the Foreign Office and its officials had assumed, as Zara Steiner put it, an 'integral part in the policy of formulating foreign policy'.[15]

The Foreign Office Orme Sargent entered in 1906 had thus secured its position in the decision-making process and the hierarchal structure it worked upon remained essentially the same for his entire working life. Its structure can best be equated to that of a pyramid. At the top was the Permanent Under-Secretary, who was the Foreign Secretary's chief advisor but also dealt with the administration of the office. Below him were the Deputy Under-Secretaries and the Assistant Under-Secretaries, with the former the marginal superior of the latter. These Under-Secretaries would each have a group of Foreign Office departments to supervise and may also have sat on special committees. Beneath them were the Heads of Department who supervised the junior secretaries within their department and formulated policy or lines of action alongside their supervising Under-Secretary. Below the Heads of Department were the Secretaries, the lowest rank in the administrative mechanism, who were sorted by the rank of first, second and third secretary. While the Heads of Department and their principal assistant (usually a First Secretary) sat in their own rooms, the

juniors all sat in one big room, affectionately known in the Foreign Office as the Third Room. It was in the Third Room that the advisory function of the Foreign Office began. The junior secretaries would receive a despatch from a mission abroad, place it in a jacket and then offer the first comments on it. These comments, written on the despatches' jacket, are known as minutes. At this stage, a sieving system came into action as the paper made its way up the pyramid. The most important papers would go to the Head of Department who would make a further filtration and the most pressing papers would then be sent to the supervising Under-Secretary. If the paper was important enough, it would go to the Permanent Under-Secretary. Finally, if the PUS believed the paper to be crucial, he would send it on to the Foreign Secretary.[16]

The man at the very top of this pyramid was the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. This was one of the great offices of state, and for many years the Foreign Secretary was the undoubted number two in the British Cabinet. Donald Cameron Watt described two competing interpretations of the role of the Foreign Secretary in the formulation of foreign policy. One was as a conduit through which the professional advisors in the Foreign Office could make their advice known to the Cabinet; the other was that the Foreign Secretary was the originator of policy and more prominent as a spokesperson.[17] Sargent worked for every Foreign Secretary from 1906 to 1949 and saw men who matched both interpretations. For those that fit into the latter category, Sargent worked for two of arguably the greatest Foreign Secretaries of the twentieth century – Austen Chamberlain and Ernest Bevin. These men bookend the period of Sargent's career this study examines. Chamberlain, particularly in his first years as Foreign Secretary, was heavily involved in the formulation of foreign policy. He was not succeeded in this vein until Bevin in 1945. Both men had clear ideas of their policy and in particular the role Britain could play in Europe. Nonetheless, given the amount of correspondence that the Foreign Office received, both men relied heavily upon their officials. Therefore, while these men had a clear conception of the direction for their policy and built relationships with key statesmen, the advice given to them by their officials was often influential.

The Prime Minister's interest in foreign policy and his relationship with the Foreign Secretary also impacted the role and influence of the Foreign Office. When men such as Chamberlain and Bevin were at the Foreign Office, the Prime Minister trusted them and left control of foreign policy to them. This gave the Foreign Office, with a prominent and active minister at the helm, a great deal of influence and autonomy. However, when the Prime Minister took an active interest in foreign policy this was often to the detriment of the Foreign Office as the Premier took decisions and often centralised decision-making. The interwar period is bookended by two Prime Ministers who took the lead in foreign affairs: David Lloyd George and Neville Chamberlain. At the Versailles Peace Conference, Lloyd George

conducted negotiations above the head of his Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon and used his own advisors instead of those from the Foreign Office. Alan Sharp described this as leading to the eclipse of the Foreign Office.[18] More pertinent, however, was the premiership of Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain had longed to take hold of foreign policy and offer a clear lead, noting a couple of months into his tenure that he was 'not too happy about the F.O. who seem to me to have no imagination & no courage'.[19] The Prime Minister implemented his own ideas regarding the dictators and relied upon his own pool of advisors. This led to the marginalisation of the Foreign Office and advisors such as Sargent as – to quote one of his colleagues – Chamberlain turned 'for counsel to the congenial company of people whose ignorance of foreign affairs was equal to his own'.[20]

Yet Foreign Secretaries and Prime Ministers only have a finite amount of time in power. In contrast, by virtue of their status as permanent officials, the Foreign Office civil servants were not subject to the same tides as their political masters. This meant that these men could stay in office for years, potentially even in the same post. Thus, they could become experts on policy and precedents which made them invaluable in the decision-making process. While some have criticised diplomatic history for being simply what one clerk said to another, study into the individuals who formed the foreign policymaking elite is critical to understanding ideas, policy and decisions made in international relations. Just because these men made up an elite does not make them any less worthy of investigation. Like any human being, they are actors in History. As Raymond Smith put it, 'far from being unfeeling and faceless bureaucrats', these men were 'very often sophisticated, dedicated and hard-working analysts and observers of the world scene'.[21] However, it was not until the 1960s that the role of the individual in the foreign policy decision-making process became clear following pioneering works by Watt and Steiner. Watt argued that there was a specific policymaking elite who were central to the formulation of British foreign policy. Diplomats were included within this elite.[22] For Watt, the policies of states could not be fully removed from the role of individuals in this elite. Steiner, in her seminal work *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898-1914*, advanced this approach by arguing that the traditional views held of the Foreign Office were incorrect. She successfully argued that rather than simply showing what one clerk wrote to another, the Foreign Office papers demonstrated that by the outbreak of the First World War civil servants had a 'permanent place in the conception of British foreign affairs'.[23] More recently, she called on historians to identify the individuals in foreign policy. It is these individuals, she argues, who are 'at the centre of the black box' of international history.[24] Thus it becomes important to consider, and study, these individuals. For Steiner, while historians continue to speak about nations as if each country was united in one view, these shorthand terms denigrate the role of the individual.[25] Therefore, it is inappropriate to talk of foreign ministries or organisations. The British Foreign Office is no different. To speak

of a 'Foreign Office view' is therefore misleading: These civil servants often held opposing views for which they argued passionately in official minutes. Yet relatively little has been written about these men.

The neglect of the role of civil servants has a long history. William Medlicott famously commented on former Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon's autobiography that 'he mentions Vansittart once, misspells Wigram's name, and omits Sargent altogether'.[26] Simon's memoir, written before the works of Steiner and Watt, highlights the seeming disregard for the significance of Foreign Office officials in foreign policy decision-making and propounds the traditional view that it was the Foreign Secretary who orchestrated foreign policy. The exception to this historiographical *lacuna* is Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary from 1930 to 1937, who has become something of a historical industry.[27] Vansittart has arguably stood out due to his seeming opposition to appeasement and the political machinations behind his 'promotion' to the anomalous post of Chief Diplomatic Advisor in 1938. Beyond Vansittart, however, works on other members of the Foreign Office whose daily task it was to analyse what was going on inside other countries are few in number as the majority of officials have remained untouched by historians.[28] Instead, historians have often preferred to study British officials who worked abroad. There has been considerable work on British Ambassadors,[29] particularly those who worked in Germany during the interwar period.[30]

Orme Sargent

Sir Orme Sargent is an individual many have heard of, but know little about. Despite being one of the most distinguished British diplomats of the twentieth century, our lack of understanding of him and the policies he advocated reflects the state of the discipline. In much of the existing work which mentions Sargent, the overriding impression of him is as an anti-appeaser within the Foreign Office. He was cemented in this by Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott in their work *The Appeasers* in which they documented the nicknames by which Sargent was known: 'Moley' and 'the good Sargent'.[31] 'Moley' is something that contemporaries called Sargent in letters, and, although anti-appeasers have latched onto it as denoting his burrowing against appeasement, he was known as 'Moley' long before the advent of Chamberlain's appeasement. It derived from his father's lament that he had sacrificed everything to him, hence Moloch.[32] Yet the traditional understanding of these nicknames reinforces that Sargent has been viewed almost solely within the paradigm of British appeasement policy of the 1930s. More recently, the role Sargent played in Anglo-Soviet relations during the Second World War has emerged.[33] Nevertheless, what we do know of Sargent often relates to his personality as opposed to the policy he pursued. Even Sargent's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*

says little about his views. Despite the short works that have examined Sargent, there is a need to situate this influential official more fully within the context of his career.[34]

Orme Sargent was a typical Foreign Office recruit of the period, embodying the characteristic Edwardian entrant into the elite institution. The young recruits who entered the service were from wealthy – often aristocratic – backgrounds, were privately – though not necessarily University – educated and spent time abroad preparing for the examination. In fulfilling all of these categories, the new recruit would in theory be able to integrate seamlessly into the Office and its environment. The men who joined the Foreign Office were thus from a social elite, often with similar life experiences and similar conceptions of the world. Between 1898 and 1907, over half of the new staff recruited into the Foreign Office were from the aristocracy and gentry.[35] Given his upbringing – his father was a man of independent means and his mother's sister was married to the Duke of Somerset, he was privately educated and spent time abroad in Switzerland – Sargent was the typical Foreign Office entrant who could fit neatly into this socially homogeneous group. Yet despite this privileged upbringing, the work of the new recruits was initially that of a lowly administrator. A contemporary of Sargent recalled that it was all done 'in the same sort of clothes as would be worn for an afternoon call in Belgravia'.[36] This was an elite institution, and Sargent fit in well.

Orme Sargent was a man of his generation. He was a product of the Edwardian world and of the Foreign Office of the period. This informed his view of the world, Britain's place in it and influenced the policies he advocated. Sargent, like everyone, was shaped by the context of his formative years. Like many young recruits of the period, he was powerfully influenced by Eyre Crowe's 1907 memorandum on France and Germany. This exemplar exponent of Foreign Office policy advocated a balance of power policy in Europe. Crowe was a keen believer in this approach and returned to it during his time as Permanent Under-Secretary in the 1920s.[37] As a relative newcomer in the office and as someone who later worked in a department supervised by Crowe, Sargent could not have been but influenced by this. Furthermore, Sargent's views were also shaped by the Edwardian Foreign Office idea that interests not sentiments were a guiding principle of British foreign policy.[38] As a world power whose strength lay in economics and the avoidance of war, this was a simple yet powerful mantra. The long-term impact of this principle can be seen in Vansittart's defence of his own policy in the 1930s when he wrote: 'It is a question of our policy, the one that suits us best, not of pro-this or anti-that'.[39] The hold and formative influence of Edwardian principles on those who later controlled foreign-policy decision-making is clearly evident. Based on these generational considerations, Sargent held three critical ideas in his thinking throughout his career. Firstly, he considered Britain to be a Great Power; secondly, the policy he advocated

was always based on what he considered to be in Britain's interests; and thirdly, the idea of a balance of power in Europe often comprised a core conceptual framework to his thinking. Yet it was not just in terms of policy that Sargent was a product of his time. As Zara Steiner has shown, the Foreign Office on the outbreak of the First World War was at the height of its power and influence. It stood unparalleled in policymaking.[40] For Sargent, this was a key part of the Foreign Office's identity. During and after the First World War, other departments challenged the Foreign Office's monopoly on decision-making in this sphere. Sargent believed that the Foreign Office should have control of foreign policy and throughout his career he held a disdain for other departments that, as he saw it, interfered in foreign policy.

Yet if Sargent was a typical Edwardian entrant into the Foreign Office, his term of service was not. After returning from Paris in 1925, he never left Whitehall again for a posting overseas. This almost twenty-four-year unbroken period in the Foreign Office was untypical and makes Sargent something of an anomaly. His senior colleagues often spent time at a posting abroad during their career, while many of his predecessors as Permanent Under-Secretary concluded their careers overseas, usually as an ambassador.[41] Due to this extraordinary length of time spent in the Foreign Office itself, Sargent's constant presence offers a unique angle from which to examine policy and the Office. Continuity and change within the Office and Britain's policy emerge, as well as the principles upon which Sargent based his advice. Through him there is also the opportunity for a wider study of official thinking in the Foreign Office, comparing and contrasting staff opinion as well as changes in staff opinion throughout the period. It shows that Foreign Office opinion was hardly homogeneous, as officials argued passionately for the course they believed was best. Sargent also facilitates examination of contentious areas of British policy such as appeasement and the reconstruction of the world order after World War Two, as well as the level of Foreign Office influence on Ministers.

Equally unusual were the successive appointments which kept Sargent involved in European affairs for that entire period. The office usually moved its officials around in order to broaden their knowledge base. Yet Sargent's briefs throughout the period were focussed on Europe, and he was frequently working on areas where a crisis or key event was likely to occur. That Sargent was in charge of the more prestigious departments highlights not only his seniority with the Foreign Office, but also the esteem in which he was held. Thus, Sargent's career between 1926 and 1949 tells us much about British foreign policy towards Europe and the choices open to Britain. Whilst Head of the Central Department between 1926 and 1933, Sargent ran a section which dealt with Germany, Italy, the Balkan countries and Franco-German relations. As Assistant Under-Secretary between 1933 and 1939, he supervised the Central and Southern Departments, overseeing

areas that he was familiar with from running the Central Department (the Southern Department took over looking after Italy and the Balkans in 1934). On the outbreak of war in September 1939, Sargent was finally promoted to Deputy Under-Secretary with responsibility for the Northern and Southern Departments. This meant that he moved away from Germany with whom Britain was now at war and was involved in key areas such as Italian non-belligerency and relations with the Soviet Union. As Deputy Under-Secretary, he was number two in the Foreign Office which meant that he oversaw the Office when Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary, was away. Finally, as Permanent Under-Secretary from 1946 until 1949, Sargent dealt with post-war Europe, witnessing the origins of the Cold War. Therefore, for the historian, Sargent's positioning in the Foreign Office is intriguing. He oversaw the Central Department during the fall of the Weimar Republic; he supervised the Central and Southern Departments during Germany's resurgence under Hitler and the formation of the Axis; he oversaw the dilemma over Italian non-belligerency and Anglo-Soviet relations during the Second World War; and he was in charge of the Foreign Office as the Cold War materialised. Thus, between 1926 and 1949 Sir Orme Sargent was at the centre of Foreign Office thinking, especially towards Europe, at crucial junctures in British and international history.

Sargent's diplomatic career therefore tells us much about British foreign policy, its key interests and how these interests changed as the world situation altered. The world environment in which Sargent entered the Foreign Office in 1906 was very different from that upon his retirement in 1949. Sargent joined the Foreign Office when the British Empire was at its strongest. Continentally, Britain was in rough alignment with France and Russia, with whom agreements had been signed in 1904 and 1907. This alignment was maintained until the Russian Revolution in 1917. The greatest threat to Britain and the balance of power in Europe came from the recently unified Germany, whose growing ambitions disturbed the continent, particularly in the fractious realm of Franco-German relations. In 1926, at the time of Sargent's promotion to Head of the Central Department, Europe was on the face of it more stable than it had been since 1918. Anglo-French reconciliation following their immediate post-war disputes, the reintegration of Germany into the European community and the signature of the Locarno Treaties were positive steps forward. However, by the time Sargent retired from the Foreign Office in 1949 Britain was undoubtedly the weakest of the big three world powers. Exhausted following the Second World War and financially crippled with the Empire contracting, Britain still had power but it was much reduced in comparison with the turn of the century. Europe stood ruined after six years of war as Germany, mirroring the European continent as a whole, lay split between East and West as the Cold War began in earnest. Sargent's career runs in parallel to this period of monumental British and European transformation.

Finding Sargent

Traditionally, civil servants are portrayed using the memoirs or personal papers that they leave behind. Unfortunately, Sargent did not leave any memoirs or diaries. As one colleague lamented, this meant that Sargent's influence could 'only be appreciated by a study of the minutes and memoranda which he poured out'.[42] To construct a picture of Sir Orme Sargent, we are forced to rely, for the most part, on official papers. This means examining the minutes on despatches received from missions abroad and the internal Foreign Office memoranda which often reveal views on the direction of foreign policy. Sargent, a prolific written contributor to documents, left a plethora of official material. However, official correspondence only takes you so far when working on an individual. While it shows reactions to events and appreciations of situations, it is often understandably couched in professional language and courtesy. These documents do not show much of Sargent the person beyond official concepts and ideas. To supplement this, there are a small collection of private office papers relating to Sargent which are a combination of letters written to and by him on foreign policy matters. These often offer a further explanation to the correspondent on the line of policy taken, but are illuminating as to personal relationships, office gossip and opinions. Yet while Sargent did not leave any personal papers, he had a number of colleagues who did. Most notably, these include the papers of Sargent's once close friend Sir Eric Phipps, his one-time boss Sir Robert Vansittart and his friend Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart. These offer a valuable insight into his personality, making possible a construction of the human being behind the official documents.

The recollections of Sargent's contemporaries are critical in helping to paint a portrait of the man. Yet if Sargent remains an enigma to historians, his colleagues were no better informed. Indeed, when tasked with writing Sargent's entry for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Gladwyn Jebb had to write to former colleagues to try to ascertain information of Sargent's early life and career. Even the finished version had to be changed as Jebb got some of the details of Sargent's professional career incorrect.[43] Yet there is one characteristic that emerges from all remembrances of the man: his intelligence. Even those who criticised Sargent believed that he had one of the best brains in the Foreign Office,[44] as 'nobody could debunk some high-falutin' theory better than he'.[45] Owing to this intellect, Sargent encouraged others to debate ideas and thoughts on papers.[46] But even in his work the sense of Sargent the enigma was fostered by where his office was located. Instead of working off the ground floor of the building like everyone else, Sargent worked 'one floor above the rest of us, up a secluded flight of stairs, in a room where normally nothing disturbed the calm but the pitter-patter of Miss Marchant's typewriter in a corner'.[47] This adds an element of the intellectual recluse to Sargent. This sense of mystery around Sargent perhaps explains why there is no definitive reason

for why he refused to work or even travel abroad for work. Some believed that Sargent suffered from claustrophobia and suggested that he resisted all attempts to place him abroad.[48] While Sargent's occasional trips abroad were rare and undertaken without enthusiasm, he did not suffer from a lack of opportunities.[49] However, given his personality and preference for the written word, Sargent would not have made a great ambassador. Likewise, the absence of a wife and family would have made Embassy life difficult for him. Altogether, Sargent's colleagues found him as much of an enigma as historians have done.

However, one theme that comes across from the recollections of his contemporaries is that Sargent was not an easy colleague to work with. Alongside his undisputed intellect, Sargent's other defining characteristic was his pessimism. Many colleagues recall his gloomy outlook and his propensity to see things predominantly in black. This perhaps explains his dry, slightly dark sense of humour. One morning in 1940, following the gravelling of the parade to gain access to the Foreign Office, Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax joined Sargent as they both struggled to reach the Office. Sargent remarked that the explanation for this was Churchill's plan 'to train us to be better to fight on the beaches', alluding to the Prime Minister's famous speech.[50] Allied to this dark sense of humour was a man in permanently poor health. Lord Gladwyn sympathetically described it as Sargent's 'only defect', but it was something that plagued him throughout his career. In later years when Permanent Under-Secretary, Sargent had to carefully manage his time and appointments while his juniors strove to look after him.[51] Many of his peers commented that Sargent suffered from phlebitis, the inflammation of a vein, alongside general poor health. Sargent's well-being had an impact on others in the Foreign Office. This was most notable during the Second World War when he was Deputy Under-Secretary. Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary, commented many times in his diary of the difficulties he had with his second in command, and Sargent's ill health added to Cadogan's already overbearing workload. But this was not only what irritated Cadogan about Sargent. He resented Sargent's refusal to go abroad – which meant Cadogan himself had to make many of the overseas trips alongside Churchill and Eden – and also felt that Sargent did not train his junior members of staff correctly. He took umbrage at the fact that they seemingly did not filter out what to send to the chronically overworked Cadogan, and he was infuriated that they followed Sargent's tendency to write and write and write.[52] While Sargent had many qualities, he was clearly not an easy man to work alongside.

Together with his qualities and idiosyncrasies, Sargent can also be defined by the Foreign Office. As noted earlier, he was the archetypal Foreign Office recruit, and Sargent himself was a Foreign Office man through and through. He believed in its primacy in foreign affairs, he was proud of the Office and loyal to it. Like many of his generation, he strongly believed that the Foreign Office was the only branch of government that should deal with

foreign policy and should make the final decision in any situation. He also took immense pride in working in such a prestigious institution. This pride was noted by Robert Bruce Lockhart, a close friend, who wrote that while Sargent downplayed his promotion to Permanent Under-Secretary in 1946, he believed that 'he was secretly well pleased'.[53] Sargent was also loyal to his colleagues. He was close to various colleagues at different times, including the Ambassadors Sir Eric Phipps and Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, keeping them updated with office gossip and useful information. He was also loyal to his assistants, including his secretary Margaret Marchant to whom he left five hundred pounds in his will.[54] However, this pride meant that Sargent did not always see the bigger picture and the changing landscapes around him. His promotion to Permanent Under-Secretary did not receive universal approval. Charles Webster, who had worked in the Foreign Office during the Second World War, wrote in his diary that Sargent represented 'the F.O. of say 1910…He laughs at the United Nations as he did at the League, and the Southern and Northern Departments which with reconstruction are the kernel of the F.O. take their lead from him. He may not last long but he may do infinite harm'.[55] Sargent was a figure of the Edwardian world and the Edwardian Foreign Office; by the time he reached the pinnacle of his profession, he held different views from those of his younger subordinates. Despite being Permanent Under-Secretary during the implementation of the Eden reforms after the Second World War, many felt that Sargent was more of a traditional Foreign Office figure. It was perceived that he 'would sooner have the biggest F.O. "dud" than the best outsider', expressing a preference for men of the Foreign Office type.[56] Sargent was a steadfast defender of the Foreign Office and believed the system and ideas he had learned as a young man still worked even in a changed world.

Arguably the most well-known reflection on Sargent was written by Sir Robert Vansittart, who quipped: 'Orme Sargent was a philosopher strayed into Whitehall. He knew all the answers; when politicians did not want them he went out to lunch'.[57] Sargent was a traditionalist in how he saw the role of the civil servant. To him, a civil servant was an anonymous servant to the state. It is apt then that it is Vansittart who offered that quip on Sargent, for it is in comparison with his former colleague and principal that Sargent's conception of the silent, anonymous civil servant becomes clear. Unlike Vansittart who was a crusader for his own opinions – both within Whitehall and outside – Sargent viewed his role as more of the traditional civil servant – he offered his recommendation and it was up to his political masters whether it was taken or not. He might have been unhappy when it was not taken and used later opportunities to show the value of his original advice, but he drew a line in how far he offered his counsel. Moreover, Sargent was a believer in the anonymity of civil servants. Following the Second World War, Anthony Eden's decision to grant Vansittart permission to print memoranda written during his time in the Foreign Office was reversed. In relaying this decision, Sargent counselled that it was in line

with standard practice and that to deviate from it in his case would make it difficult to refuse future requests. He ended his letter with the line: 'For all that, whether we like it or not, the final verdict of History on those who have taken a prominent part in world affairs can seldom be written in their life-time!'[58] In retirement Sargent remained unswerving in his approach, refusing to become publicly involved in the row between Vansittart and Walford Selby about the conduct of foreign affairs in the 1930s in Selby's memoirs, instead declaring it 'more dignified to remain silent'.[59] It was this view of the silent civil servant that led Sargent to congratulate not lament Vansittart's leaving the Foreign Office during the Second World War as it gave the latter 'emancipation' to tackle the politicians.[60] Sargent was, as a junior later recalled, 'an absolute model of a civil servant: quiet; orderly; calm; meticulous; thoughtful; fair-minded and expeditious'.[61]

This study of Orme Sargent begins in 1926. This point of departure was chosen for it was when Sargent took up his first senior position within the Foreign Office as Head of the Central Department. With this role, Sargent took on increased responsibility in managing a department and became part of the foreign policymaking elite, actively beginning to shape Britain's foreign policy. Prior to 1926, he had only been a junior secretary within the Foreign Office or had worked abroad. Thus, it makes sense to begin when Sargent was in a position of relative influence. Beginning in 1926 is also logical from the point of view of international events. When Sargent took over as Head of Department, the nations of Western Europe had not long signed the Locarno Treaties and this was a time of relative calm during the interwar period. Despite this, it was a busy period when Sargent worked to promote peace and stability on the continent. The Locarno Treaties thus dovetail nicely with Sargent's promotion to Head of Department. The end point for the study is equally logical, as it ends with Sargent's retirement in early 1949. Despite ending his career as Permanent Under-Secretary with responsibility for the entire Foreign Office and British policy worldwide, the study will focus on Sargent's views on Europe as, for most of his career, Sargent's focus was on European affairs and this was where his expertise lay. In all of his positions of responsibility after 1926, Sargent was looking at the continent and advising on Britain's policy towards it.

This study adopts a chronological approach. Such an arrangement is important when looking at an individual, especially when trying to highlight the personal nature of the decision-making process. A chronological approach thus enables the development of Sargent's views over time to be charted, but moreover it shows the repetition or continuity of his views over time. This means that Sargent's chief characteristics are reinforced throughout the study. By the same token, it means that any deviations in outlook are clearly noticeable. When thinking about an individual biographically, details such as this are critical. Within this chronological framework, chapters are demarcated by the position Sargent held in the Foreign Office or, during periods of increased significance, by a change in the international