

*David Irving*

# CHURCHILL'S WAR

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I — *The Struggle for Power*

Part 2 of 4  
*Chapters 19–34*

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FOCAL POINT

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# Contents

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19: Nobody Questions the Victor	228
20: Tit for Tat	242
21: Completely Outwitted	256
22: Hence Prime Minister	274
23: Rogue Elephant	287
24: An Avoidable Disaster	306
25: We Shall Fight in the Hills	327
26: Breakneck	344
27: The Diehard	357
28: A Misunderstanding between Friends	370
29: Gangster Methods	384
30: The Eagle Never Landed	403
31: In a Single Gulp	419
32: The One Sinless Man	428
33: Good Ol' Winnie	440
34: The Fixer	458

## 19: *Nobody Questions the Victor*

A SAVAGE WINTER locked all Europe in an unwanted embrace. The Rhine traffic was paralysed in its glacial grip, the lakes and canals congealed, the railroads halted.

A similar paralysis gripped Allied planning as the British and French argued out their own strategic beliefs – whether to mine the Rhine, invade Narvik, seize other Norwegian ports, or intervene in Finland’s far north at Petsamö. At staff talks at the end of January 1940 the French high command showed that they believed they had time: that Finland would not collapse under Soviet attack, and that Hitler would not attack on the west for many months – perhaps even until 1941.<sup>1</sup>

On February 2 the British cabinet agreed to ask the French to abandon their Petsamö plan. That day Churchill invited Scandinavian journalists to lunch; Ribbentrop would later claim that Churchill blurted out a number of ‘incautious remarks’ about Norway, and that these shortly reached Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

A Supreme War Council was convened in Paris to resolve the strategic controversy, and Chamberlain invited Churchill to attend. Wearing what one notable described as ‘a strange, spurious naval costume’ and clasping a red Lord High Admiral’s flag, Churchill took the cabinet party by special train to a destroyer at Dover. Lord Halifax eyed Winston’s nautical garb with amusement: ‘He was in grand form,’ he dictated later, ‘and I have never seen anyone so pleased at being in a party.’ On the train down, Chamberlain showed him telegrams concerning a peace mission being undertaken by the American under-secretary of state Sumner Welles in European capitals; in his telegram of reply Chamberlain had urged caution upon Washington lest Welles be exploited by Nazi propaganda.

Winston [noted one diarist] after a second sherry, read them through and, with tears in his eyes, said ‘I’m proud to follow you!’

‘So *that* was alright,’ concluded the diarist, Sir Alec Cadogan. Churchill had evidently chosen the flattery with care, because he referred to the very words ten years later when writing his memoirs, and Lord Halifax

also quoted 'Winston's immediate comment' in his diary, adding, 'An interesting specimen of his quick generosity.'

They stayed at the British embassy in the Rue Saint-Honoré. The French cabinet came to dinner, 'less [General Maurice] Gamelin,' as Halifax remarked, 'who has [taken] a vow not to dine anywhere in war.' The next morning Churchill woke early, breezed into Halifax's room at 7:30 A.M. in a dressing-gown, and staggered the sleepy foreign secretary with a two-hour harangue about the war in general. The speech seems to have exhausted him, and neither the British nor the French text shows Winston uttering a word during the entire Supreme War Council at the war ministry. 'I have just seen a miracle,' gasped Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, to Oliver Stanley: 'I have just attended a meeting for three hours without Winston making a speech.'

This silence was not only unChurchillian but regrettable: had he insisted on going straight for Narvik and Gällivare much evil might have been averted. But a determined Soviet offensive had now begun in Finland, and there were fears of an early collapse. Daladier approved all of Chamberlain's proposals except for the total abandonment of the Petsamö plan, which was now to be exploited if Norway and Sweden refused to cooperate with the large plan aimed at seizing Gällivare. Daladier and Chamberlain agreed that a total of three or four divisions should be sent across Norway and Sweden to Finland by mid-April, which seems further proof that no German offensive was expected that spring.<sup>3</sup>

There were obvious snags. Lord Gort's expeditionary force had taken a month to move the few miles to France; this new army would have to cover a far greater distance before the Finns collapsed. But the party that trooped back aboard Winston's destroyer behind their prime minister – Halifax, Oliver Stanley and Kingsley Wood – were satisfied. They looked to one observer like happy-go-lucky schoolchildren following a popular master on a Sunday outing; the First Lord, he noticed, trudged up the gangplank by himself, while General Ironside was clutching a kilogram of French butter. Halifax had slept badly, disturbed by 'Winston's snores [from] next door' aboard the train to Boulogne; he went below. A hot soup was carried up to Chamberlain on the bridge.

The First Lord had his unusual red flag run up the halyards, lit a cigar, and descended to the wardroom. Here he warmed body and soul with a decanter of port and pages of scantily-clad ladies in *Blighty*, respectively.<sup>4</sup> As their destroyer ran into Dover, his flag attracted a signal from an ignorant – nay, foolhardy – destroyer captain: 'Why the Red Ensign?'

THE CROSSING had not been without hazard.

When *Sunday Pictorial* editor Cecil King came to lunch on the following day with the Churchills at Admiralty House, Winston told him that they had encountered several mines and had hit one with a shell. Instead of exploding, the top flipped into the air and came hurtling down toward them. 'Ch[urchill] said it was rather frightening, as it weighed fully fifty pounds and they couldn't tell quite where it would fall.'<sup>5</sup>

The newspaperman found Clementine good-looking but dry and nervy. Winston himself had come in wearing zipper-sided black boots but looking puffy and old. A rather loud American lady who had joined them handed him a bottle of brandy, but he set it aside: 'I'm giving it up for a while,' he said, and drank port and beer alternately during the meal.

They talked of Hore-Belisha. Recently, Churchill had told this journalist that the man was one of Chamberlain's best ministers. Now he disparaged the ex-minister ruthlessly. The editor correctly divined that the new war minister, Stanley, was a social friend of the Churchills; he suspected that Winston had dislodged Hore-Belisha to make place for him. As for the P.M., Churchill went out of his way to praise him – he was tough and belligerent.

King replied that Chamberlain was old and dreary; the country regarded Churchill as their leader, he said.

Churchill refused to be drawn. No. 10, he observed modestly, was not much of a prize these days anyway. 'I would take it only if offered by common consent.' He was amused to hear that the public opinion polls showed that a clear majority wanted him to succeed Chamberlain, followed by Eden.

When the talk turned to the shipping war, King was sceptical: Winston's complacent figure of 140,000 tons sunk ignored neutral shipping completely. 'The story Ch[urchill] seemed to believe,' the editor wrote in his diary, 'is the one he puts over in his radio speeches.'

The only thing he said he was afraid of was the effect of unrestrained aeroplane warfare on our highly complex industrial organisation. I said I thought Hitler had done more harm to us by *not* bombing than he could have done by bombing.

Without air raids, Cecil King pointed out, the peace movement would thrive. Churchill feigned ignorance of this movement, but the editor warned that it embraced a third of the Labour Party. Churchill replied that when organised labour realised they were earning more than in peacetime it would stabilise public opinion in favour of war. The editor bridled at this 'harping on money,' but confined his distaste to his diary.

Ch[urchill] took a poor view of the Labour leaders and said they wanted to win the war and then give away our colonies.

Before the ladies withdrew, the newspaperman suggested bringing the battle-scarred cruiser *Exeter* – coming home for repairs after the *Graf Spee* battle – up the Thames into the very heart of London.

'What's the good of that?' asked Churchill dismissively. 'It could only come up to the Pool. People couldn't go on board.'

King replied that the Pool was the centre of London ('though not,' he reflected, contemplating the well-lunched Mr Churchill, 'of *his* London'). People could go up one gangway, along the deck and down another. Churchill's youngest daughter Mary, a 'real winner' with generous eyes and mouth, excitedly suggested a City dinner for the sailors; Clementine chimed in, '– in the Guildhall!' If *Exeter's* sailors paraded to the Guildhall, said King, all London would pour into the streets.

Churchill betrayed not a flicker of acceptance. Perhaps he was remote from public feeling; perhaps he disliked the lower deck; perhaps his mind was elsewhere – on the political struggle for absolute power. It was three-fifteen and time for his siesta.

HE WAS certainly up to something, probably in cahoots with the French field commander General Georges, and probably to the discomfiture of Edouard Daladier. He had loathed Daladier since Munich; nor had the French prime minister cut an impressive figure at the recent War Council – his game leg in plaster, his face blotched with alcohol. Now, on February 10, Winston flew his friend Spears over to Paris on an extended hole-and-corner mission that might last as long as a month. The general wrote secretly in his diary:

I had a special and very confidential mission given me by Winston which I was able to carry out satisfactorily though it was quite on the tapis that I might have had to go back to London, in which case he offered me a plane or a destroyer as the case might be; this turned out not to be necessary.

Although the entry continues, 'I sent him a report which he told me on my return was quite perfect and he so informed the P.M. and Halifax,' this may well have been a smokescreen. Why else should he have noted next to this passage, when he marked the diary up years later for publication, '*Not in?*'<sup>6</sup>



One of those Events for which Churchill was always waiting now occurred. The fifteen-thousand-ton supply ship *Altmark*, which had ministered to the late *Graf Spee*, had nearly completed her long trek home from the South Atlantic. Below decks he knew she was carrying three hundred sorrowing prisoners, the seamen taken from victims of the pocket battleship.

After weeks of radio silence, on February 14 she signalled (in a cypher which the British could not yet read) that she was about to enter the Leads, the rocky Norwegian coastal waters. She was entitled to use this channel, being an unarmed merchant vessel.<sup>7</sup>

Churchill followed the ship's progress closely. Meanwhile he took the night train to Plymouth for the homecoming of *Exeter* – 'A most moving and impressive sight,' the chancellor, Sir John Simon, recorded in his notes. 'The captain conducted us over her and traced the course of various enemy shells. . . One eleven-inch shell landed between the two forward turrets and ricocheted above the bridge where the captain was standing. . . Everyone there, twelve or fourteen in all, were instantly killed or wounded except the captain himself.'

On the fifteenth the admiralty heard rumours that *Altmark* was off the Norwegian coast. The Germans shortly deciphered a British admiralty signal notifying the cruiser *Glasgow* and three submarines that Tromsø had sighted a German tanker. Since *Altmark* was now in neutral waters, the Germans were not as yet unduly perturbed.<sup>8</sup> Later that day a British reconnaissance plane sighted the ship. On the sixteenth Churchill recommended Admiral Pound to send warships to 'sweep northwards' up the coast 'not hesitating to arrest *Altmark* in territorial waters should she be found.'

At 4:30 P.M. the destroyer *Cossack* (Captain Philip Vian) found her. The German ship had fled into the ice-packed Jössing Fjord. There was one nasty complication – two Norwegian torpedo boats were holding off the British destroyers, claiming to have searched the German and seen no prisoners.

'Can we sink 'em if they interfere?' pondered Captain Ralph Edwards, Churchill's deputy director of operations, in his diary. Churchill himself provided the answer. He tramped down to the War Room – a dingy hole in the old admiralty building's basement – accompanied by his secretary and the vice chief of naval staff, Tom Phillips. At 5:25 P.M. he dictated a signal to Captain Vian: *Cossack* was to board the *Altmark*, which had now



run aground, and liberate the prisoners, opening fire if necessary on the Norwegians.

'Get that cyphered up,' he barked to the duty signal officer, 'and be quick about it. I've told the secretary of state that those orders are going at a quarter to six unless we hear to the contrary.'

For a few minutes he walked up and down, flapping his coattails and chewing his cigar. Then he turned to the duty captain: 'I can't wait,' he said, 'Get me Lord Halifax.'

He sat in the green armchair next to the desk and took the telephone.

Halifax suggested adding a sentence to the effect that Vian should notify the Norwegian officers that to submit to force majeure was no derogation of their sovereignty (the wording of which, perhaps, Hitler himself would have approved).

'Now get that off at once,' Churchill told his staff, and lounged off toward the stairs. At the door he turned and remarked to the assembled officers, 'That was *big* of Halifax.'

For the rest of that night, there was silence. *Cossack* did not bother to report. Later, Admiral Pound would invite Captain Vian to picture the scene: 'the First Lord and myself sitting in the Upper War Room at three o'clock in the morning, wondering what was happening.'

Adrenalin pumping, Winston's imagination ran riot. Had anything gone wrong? Was Vian trying to refloat the *Altmark*? It was an anxious night before the admiralty received Vian's 'very full' report.<sup>9</sup>

He had executed the boarding with great dash. What Mr Churchill would term a 'hand-to-hand fight' had followed. According to the German captain's report of proceedings, the boarding party fired blindly on his unarmed crew and machine-gunned the seamen fleeing across the ice (a point that upset Norwegian opinion). Six were killed; the survivors were looted at gun-point; the captives – 303 all told – were liberated. 'Winston rang me up at seven o'clock in the morning,' dictated Lord Halifax, 'to tell me that they had got the *Altmark* prisoners and from his point of view all was well; my fun would, no doubt, begin. . . I have no doubt at all,' reflected Halifax, 'that the general public will be delighted and won't trouble too much about the niceties of international law.'

In fact the *Altmark* incident was such a flagrant violation of international law that it attracted grudging admiration from Herr Hitler, no dullard in this respect. 'History,' he pointed out at a ceremonial luncheon for new corps commanders the next day, 'judges by success or failure, that alone. Nobody questions the victor if he was in the right or wrong.'<sup>10</sup>

Churchill's in-laws echoed this attitude. 'It's comforting to know we can be ferocious,' wrote Pamela after watching *Cossack* disembark the rescued prisoners at Leith in Scotland.

Mr Churchill would write that both this and the *Graf Spee* episode strengthened his hand as well as the prestige of the admiralty. He ordered maximum publicity for the arrival of the rescued seamen, and ordered newspaper photographers up to Scotland to obtain pictures of starving, emaciated seamen; but they had all been well cared for aboard the supply ship, and he imposed censorship on the resulting photographs instead.

In little things, it might be added, his honesty was absolute. Learning later of the looting, he rebuked his admirals: 'Anything of this kind must be stopped.' To which he added his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the Hague Rules for Warfare: 'Personal property of enemies may be confiscated by the state' – it can't – 'but never by individuals.'<sup>11</sup>

Hitler drew far-reaching conclusions from the episode. Evidently the British were equally disposed to thumb their nose at neutrality; but a Norway in Allied hands would be a disaster for Germany. He called one of his most capable generals, Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, to the Reich Chancellery and ordered him to draw up a plan of attack.<sup>12</sup> Mr Churchill's spectacular coup would shortly lead to the whole of Norway falling under the Nazi yoke, at a tragic cost in Allied lives.



As he entered his heavy black limousine to drive to the City – he had put to his staff the bright idea of inviting HMS *Exeter* right up the Thames to the Pool; her sailors would parade through cheering crowds held back by bobbies, and be entertained at the Guildhall – two other problems were on his mind. These shall illustrate the extraneous stresses to which this remarkable First Lord was often subjected during months in which the navy was the only force seriously engaging the enemy.

The first plague upon him was inflicted by those merchants of joy, the legal profession. No stranger to the libel courts himself, he found himself being sued for libel in New York. The anti-British publisher of the *Sunday Enquirer*, one Griffin, was claiming that Churchill had once told him that if America had not made the 'horrible mistake' of joining in the World War Britain could have made peace in 1917, saving a million lives; that Winston, then a hard-up writer, had used these words in August 1936 when trying to peddle ten articles for \$5,000; and that, when questioned on the eve of Hitler's war by a Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* reporter, Winston had called Griffin a liar and denied having heard of him; wherein lay the libel. Griffin was claiming £200,000 damages.

Since the courts had allowed Griffin to attach all Winston's earnings from New York publishers, he could not let it go by default.<sup>13</sup> He called upon his New York lawyer, J. Arthur Leve, whom it will be recalled he had hired to discredit Vic Oliver in 1936. That legal gentleman's advice boiled down to getting the F.B.I. to hound the plaintiff. Winston received it on the eve of the *Altmark* crisis, and asked the F.O. to act accordingly through the state department. 'There is no doubt in my mind,' he minuted, 'that this man Griffin is set on by German agents, which would fully explain his malignity against this country.'

The British ambassador in Washington disabused him of this notion; there was no foreign money behind Griffin. But Lord Lothian also warned that Leve had an unsavoury reputation as the law partner of one Louis Levy, an attorney barred from federal courts in connection with the bribing of a New York judge. 'I am advised,' he added furthermore, 'that Leve is not a very sound lawyer and would be likely to overcharge.'<sup>14</sup>

Like all litigation, the case lasted a long time; in justice, let us see it rapidly to its conclusion. The British embassy instructed new lawyers. In September 1940, as aircraft whirled across the skies of England, Leve submitted his account to Mr Churchill (whose new lawyers deemed it indeed 'excessive'). Two years later, when towns as yet unheard of filled the headlines, like Stalingrad and Alamein, the New York courts awarded him judgement with \$20 against Griffin. By that time America would again be in a World War and the *Enquirer* under indictment for lowering the morale of U.S. armed forces.<sup>15</sup>

The second plague upon him was Palestine. The Zionists had used the interval since May 1939 to buy up land to pre-empt the White Paper's provisions, while their political agents in London fought a delaying action against it. On February 13, 1940 – the day he received Leve's advice to use the F.B.I. – Winston was defeated in cabinet by Macdonald over the White Paper.<sup>16</sup> On the day of the *Exeter* parade he received from New York a distressed telegram from Chaim Weizmann bristling with threats about rousing American opinion. 'Am informed introduction [of White Paper] land measures likely almost immediately,' cabled Weizmann. 'Sentiment here in general friendly to Allies, but highly sensitive. Am deeply convinced this measure would have most deplorable reactions not alone in Jewish circles.' He hoped 'most earnestly' that Winston could persuade the prime minister to delay the Palestine land measures until Weizmann saw him in person.<sup>17</sup>



The various plans to intervene in Scandinavia were mired in difficulties. Under German pressure Stockholm was now refusing to hear of Allied troops crossing to Finland. The Finns themselves had begun secret armistice talks in Moscow. Both Paris and London urged them to fight on, and Daladier offered fifty thousand troops by the end of March, perhaps realising that the pledge would never have to be honoured.<sup>18</sup> Helsinki stalled for time in Moscow, while asking Chamberlain and Daladier to rush aircraft and troops to Finland immediately.

Churchill was inclined to write off Finland. He voiced relief, telling his colleagues that it would have been an unprofitable diversion. The enemy was Germany, and Britain should not send aircraft or troops to a theatre where Germans could not be engaged.

But the direct assault on Narvik remained his obsession. He told Admiral Pound on March 6 that Britain should not be deflected from that purpose just because Sweden had got cold feet. Once in Narvik, he reminded the First Sea Lord, 'we have got our foot in the door.'<sup>19</sup>

The Finnish tragedy drew to its close amidst haggling over legal technicalities that seem quite incomprehensible now. London and Paris begged Helsinki to make a formal appeal for aid, since under League of Nations rules they could then apply pressure on Sweden and Norway to allow transit. The Finns played for time.<sup>20</sup> Under the circumstances, Chamberlain delayed sending off the fifty precious Blenheim bombers he had earmarked for Finland until the appeal actually arrived.

Window-dressing now, aware that his own political position was become shaky, Daladier dictated a long telegram on March 9 to the Finnish government, voicing puzzlement that the appeal was still not forthcoming. 'We are ready to come to your assistance immediately. The aeroplanes are ready, the expeditionary force is ready to start.' The sting of Daladier's message was in the next sentence: 'If Finland will not now make an appeal to the Western powers, it is evident that these cannot take any responsibility at the end of the war for the final arrangement of Finnish territory.'<sup>21</sup>

PEACE INITIATIVES had borne down on London from several directions. One came through the pacifist Lord Tavistock, who had ascertained Hitler's peace proposals through the German legation in Dublin on January 18; Lord Halifax ridiculed them after they were leaked in the press.<sup>22</sup>

Ambassador Joseph Kennedy loathed the European war and lingered in the United States until the eve of the Sumner Welles mission to London. He searched for ways of ending the madness. In February the British authorities intercepted a telegram from him to Grosvenor-square asking

urgently for samples of 'pacifist literature.'<sup>23</sup> Arriving at London's airport, Kennedy emphasised to waiting reporters that isolationist feeling was growing in America.

Sumner Welles arrived at the same airport on March 10. The second ranking official in the state department, he was touring European capitals in a search for peace. Kennedy briefed him on the attitude of Chamberlain and Halifax to peace, but Welles knew where the obstacle would lie. 'What about Churchill,' he asked. 'When's he going to supplant Chamberlain?'

'Chamberlain,' replied the ambassador, 'is convinced that he can handle him.'

He doesn't think Churchill is conspiring against him. Of course, Churchill is always bringing in a lot of plans that Chamberlain has got to turn down, but Chamberlain thinks he takes all that in good grace. In fact, Chamberlain told me he thinks Churchill feels free to advocate some pretty wild ones because of the certainty that they *will* be turned down.<sup>24</sup>

Invited to tea at Buckingham Palace on Monday the eleventh, Welles mentioned Ivan Maisky. The king misheard the name as Mosley: wrongly assuming that Kennedy was privy to certain transatlantic arrangements he reminded him of 'our agreement that the United States could do something – if the Mosleys don't take over.'<sup>25</sup> (Sir Oswald Mosley was leader of Britain's Italian-financed fascist party.) Sumner Welles cocked a quizzical eye at Kennedy; the ambassador was as baffled as he was, and never cleared up the mystery.

IN LONDON the chiefs of staff decided on that Monday, March 11, to go ahead with PLAN R3, the expedition to seize Stavanger, Bergen and Trondheim, as well as Narvik.<sup>26</sup> 'A bit late I'm afraid,' Captain Edwards regretted in his diary, 'though we are only just ready.'

Simultaneously the first awful rumours arrived that Finland was about to stop fighting. This would remove the pretext for Allied intervention altogether. On the request of the Finnish legation, Chamberlain announced – in reply to a planted question by Attlee – that the British government was prepared 'in response to an appeal' to help Finland 'using all available resources.'

Winston meanwhile hurried over to Paris. He had originally intended to fly over about another matter: London had now authorised his Rhine mining operation (ROYAL MARINE), but Paris was now unexpectedly with-

holding approval – General Gamelin was said to be expressing concern about possible enemy reprisals. In Paris he tackled Gamelin in person, but the general would not go beyond agreeing in principle. Over dinner with Daladier and L  ger he met the same response. They blamed their air minister Guy la Chambre; he was asking, they said, for three weeks to move the three hundred aircraft assembled on Villacoublay airfield to safety from any reprisals.

While in Paris, scene of many of his old intrigues, Churchill evidently had a rendezvous with his old conspirator Paul Reynaud, Daladier's rival and minister of finance. 'I share, as you know,' he would write to Reynaud ten days later, 'all the anxieties you expressed to me the other night about the general course of the war, and the need for strenuous and drastic measures.'<sup>27</sup>

Churchill persuaded Reynaud to turn the screw on Finland. She must not sign any armistice – not just yet. On the Tuesday morning after seeing Winston, the Frenchman spoke with the Finnish envoy, Harri Holma. Holma telegraphed to Helsinki at three-thirty p.m. that Mr Churchill had assured Reynaud that an Allied expeditionary corps was about to sail for Norway – in fact it would sail, he said, on March the fifteenth – provided that Finland sent an immediate appeal for aid. Britain and France would then 'notify' Oslo and break off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

It was a fatal indiscretion. Either Holma's cypher telegram to Helsinki or his confirmatory telephone call at four p.m. to his foreign minister V  in   Tanner in Helsinki was intercepted by Hitler's Intelligence service (the landlines crossed German soil).<sup>29</sup> Acutely concerned, Hitler accelerated his own invasion preparations still further. As he would later say, 'If Churchill and Reynaud had kept a still tongue in their heads, I might well not have tackled Norway.'<sup>30</sup>

CONVOYS OF war material were now bound for Scapa Flow on route for Norway; warships were about to embark the British invasion troops. But would the Finns collapse first? Uncertainty led to hesitation in London. Upon his return to the admiralty that Tuesday, March 12, Mr Churchill found that the war cabinet had wavered once again, deciding now to go for Narvik first, to be followed only if successful by a second landing at Trondheim.

Small wonder that Sumner Welles had told Kennedy the day before that he was not impressed by the leaders he had so far seen. Attlee, he said, had lectured him about teaching the Germans that force would not

prevail. ('You mean,' Welles had queried, 'German force?' and smiled a cherubic smile.) Sinclair had spoken only platitudes.

All the greater was the curiosity with which Sumner Welles presented himself with Ambassador Kennedy at five P.M. on the twelfth at Churchill's famous office at the admiralty. They found the First Lord sitting in a big chair at an open fireplace reading an evening paper; there was a highball at his elbow and he was smoking what seemed to Welles like a 'twenty-four inch' cigar. 'He offered us a drink,' recalled Kennedy, 'but we declined.' In fact, as Welles wrote chattily in his secret report to the president, 'It was quite obvious that he had consumed a good many whiskeys before I arrived.'<sup>31</sup> \*

Winston launched easily into a brilliant cascade of oratory and wit which would have impressed Welles more had he not recently boned up on the First Lord by reading his volume *Step by Step*; it contained the original version of this familiar address – how he had warned against Germany but nobody had heeded him. He gestured as though speaking to an audience of thousands.

'Russia, to him,' observed Welles, 'offered no real menace and no real problem.' The Nazi government was 'a monster born of hatred and of fear.' There could be no peace without the total destruction of Germany. 'All this will cost us dear,' Churchill admitted, 'but we will of course win the war and that is the only hope for civilisation.'

Welles said sombrely that when the real fighting started it would bring devastation and ruin for everybody.

'I am not so sure of that,' replied Churchill. 'The last war did not bring about conditions of that type.'

His monologue lasted one hour and fifty minutes – 'in the course of which he became quite sober,' as Welles observed. Then the First Lord unfurled charts showing Britain's purported shipping losses: 'What we have lost on balance,' he assured the American, 'is not significant.' Of a total of eighteen million tons, the net loss was about 220,000 tons – that is, sinkings over new construction. The magnetic mine had been defeated; forty-three enemy submarines, he claimed, had been sunk.

Afterward he led the Americans to the War Room to see the Intelligence maps about convoys and shipping movements. Churchill had made his mark on Welles, who asked the F.O. that he be so informed; Sir Alec Cadogan decided not to do so, taking comfort, as he minuted, from the

\* The author's text is from the original report in Roosevelt's files. A doctored version was published in the official *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1940, vol. i, omitting offensive remarks about Churchill.

fact that Mr Churchill would already have that conviction – ‘so nothing is lost.’

BY THE time Winston ushered the Americans out into Whitehall – as a special parting gift he had pressed upon the distinguished visitor an autographed copy of *Step by Step* – the B.B.C. correspondent in Helsinki had reported the signing in Moscow of a Soviet-Finnish armistice.

Once again, Winston’s Narvik project seemed to have been spiked.

The government [Captain Edwards recorded the next day] has decided to mark time with PLAN R3. Why they don’t cancel [it] now I can’t imagine. Convoys ordered to Scapa & ships about to sail or embark troops turned over to their own duties again. Much work. . . Late in the evening PLAN R3 was cancelled.

The prime minister invited Sumner Welles to dine with his colleagues at No. 10 and seated him next to the First Lord.

The mood was fluid. Some were relieved that Britain had avoided the odium of invading a neutral country and opening fire on them (even if ‘in self defence’); others seethed with angry disappointment. Kennedy’s meagre reservoir of tact was now bone-dry: ‘If you can show me one Englishman that’s *tougher* than you are Winston,’ he crowed at the crestfallen First Lord, ‘I’ll eat my hat.’<sup>32</sup>

As the evening proceeded, many inhibitions were dissolved. Sam Hoare paraded his hostility to Churchill openly.\* ‘Of course,’ he scoffed, jerking a thumb at him, ‘*he* would be willing to fight for a hundred years.’ Later, Welles urged Churchill to announce that Britain would in future respect the three-hundred-mile Panama Congress zone. ‘Don’t let Winston do the talking,’ interrupted Hoare. ‘America is too *afraid* of him!’ Encouraged by the laughter, as the pink of Churchill’s complexion deepened, Kennedy revealed how he had warned Cordell Hull not to declare war on Germany if the *Manhattan* blew up mysteriously, as he would not put it past Winston to put a bomb aboard.

‘Not I,’ retorted Churchill, adding gravely, ‘I am certain that the United States will come in later anyway.’<sup>34</sup>

\* This was mutual. Cecil King had asked Churchill whether he ought not to get out of the admiralty while he still could: any naval disaster of sufficient gravity to dislodge Chamberlain would unhorse him too. Churchill replied that he was no coward like Hoare – who ‘ran away’ from the admiralty because it was politically dangerous, and then while at the Home Office refused to implement air raid precautions because that, too, was dynamite.<sup>33</sup>



Afterward, Chamberlain took Welles aside, into the room where he kept souvenirs of his famous father. 'I hope your mission will make it possible for the president to succeed in his desire to avert this calamity,' he said, now that they were out of earshot, 'and to help the world to save itself.' As they passed through rooms hung with portraits of earlier first ministers, the American visitor noticed only one photograph – a signed portrait of Benito Mussolini.

Empire hostility to the war went deeper than he had first expected. Stanley Bruce, the Australian high commissioner in London, assured Sumner Welles that the Dominions had no desire to annihilate Germany.

But few men in Whitehall wanted peace in 1940. 'The old men who run the government,' Joseph Kennedy pondered, after Sumner Welles had left, 'are all so near the grave that they run the war as if there were no generations to follow them.' The younger looked upon it as a vocation: they loved it, and they would not give it up. 'There seems no real fire anywhere, no genius, no sense of the shambles that are to come.'<sup>35</sup>

20: *Tit for Tat*

THERE WAS a side-result of the Sumner Welles meeting with Churchill that did great harm: Welles put it about official Washington that the famous Englishman was an alcoholic. He told Ickes that Churchill was a ‘drunken bum’;<sup>1</sup> he told Berle he had found the First Lord ‘quite drunk’;<sup>2</sup> he was explicit about it in his report to Roosevelt.

The latter passed it around North America. He regretted to the visiting prime minister of Canada that Winston ‘seemed to be drinking too much.’ He amplified this a few days later to the remark that ‘Churchill is tight most of the time.’ ‘This is shameful,’ wrote Prime Minister Mackenzie King, scandalised, in his diary, ‘that he should have been in this condition when Sumner Welles went to see him. It is that arrogance and the assumed superiority that some Englishmen have that have made so many nations their enemies today.’<sup>3</sup>

By any standards Churchill was not a modest drinker. When he was a young subaltern in the South African war, the water was unfit to drink, he would say: ‘We had to put a bit of whisky in it. By diligent effort I learned to like it.’<sup>4</sup> ‘Alcohol,’ he would aphorise, ‘can be your master or your slave. For many long and anxious hours it has sustained me and I have used it for my own purpose.’<sup>5</sup> According to Lady Canard’s butler, Ronald Perkins, Winston would arrive at dinner parties equipped with his own brandy or Black Label, which his driver would hand over to the butler. Alec Bishop, a clerk at the cabinet offices, noticed that Churchill was regularly served three or four small whiskies when working each evening.<sup>6</sup>

Such being the ambivalence of the times, both family and public liked him the more for it; drinking had always been projected as a sign of bonhomie and sophistication. ‘There he goes, off to his bloody brandy – and good luck to him!’ was a typical wartime by-stander’s remark, quoted by a biographer. His colleagues smiled indulgently. ‘Some discussion of tea ration,’ recorded one bemused civil servant after a war cabinet meeting, adding: ‘And a discussion of this topic between Winston and A[rthur] Greenwood [an inveterate lush] can be *quite* dispassionate!’<sup>7</sup>

Why did he drink? Probably for the usual reasons – to mask stress or suppress inhibitions, or to feel more capable. But there is a rising price to pay for such blessings. Alcohol also anæsthetises the brain centres, affecting judgement, knowledge, and social controls. In extreme cases it can cause the permanent loss of higher mental functions. Under the stress of war, people were readier than usual to accept this price. Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart later remarked upon how many ministers resorted to alcohol.

Drinking was important to Churchill – one of the classic symptoms of the alcoholic. He camouflaged his craving behind good humour, but it remained a craving all the same. Travelling in Prohibition-era America in the Twenties, he had gone to some lengths to camouflage and conceal the liquor in his luggage; in non-Prohibition England, the balloon of vintage Hine or Remy Martin had become as much part of the Churchill image as the Havana cigar.

Talking with Bruce Lockhart, Beaverbrook expressed concern about what he frankly called Winston's 'alcoholism.' There are clues that, clinically speaking, this word was not too strong. Churchill suffered pneumonia and certain infectious diseases to which alcoholics are particularly prone. A more specific list of symptoms would include his drinking alone, his drinking before noon, his drinking to build up self-confidence or drown sorrows, his getting angry when people mentioned the drinking, and his turning down invitations if drinks were not to be served.

Although our narrative has paused momentarily at March 1940, we can isolate specific, and in any other circumstances trivial, episodes. For example, when Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt dined with Churchill and Their Majesties in October 1942, she commented in her unpublished diary that Churchill had seemingly imbibed 'too much champagne,' because 'he repeated the same thing to me two or three times.'<sup>8</sup> Another minor incident occurred at Casablanca in 1943. Officials found Churchill 'in the vilest of humours' because there was no liquor at a dinner given by Roosevelt for a local Moorish potentate, the Moors being abstemious.<sup>9</sup> As a second version of the same episode had it, Churchill became 'very grumpy because there was nothing to drink.'<sup>10</sup> In whatever spirit the president may have kept relating this to his colleagues – and he did – it did not redound to Mr Churchill's credit.

His alcoholism was a family heirloom. His father had been an alcoholic; there was the same problem in Clementine's family, and it was an affliction inherited in turn by their offspring. It would lead to Sarah's arrest for disorderly conduct in California and to her remand in a women's prison in London.<sup>11</sup> It plagued Randolph all his life. An F.B.I. agent informed J. Edgar Hoover in July 1942 that 'Randolph Churchill was in "El

Morocco" until four A.M. today [and] . . . was tight. A pretty picture."<sup>12</sup> Randolph stormed out of a New York television interview when questioned about his drinking. When Winston's grandson was only three – so Beaverbrook tut-tutted to the little boy's mother – he ran down the hall 'to ask me to have a cocktail with him.'<sup>13</sup>

Churchill settled his substantial London liquor bills with Hatch Mansfield, his wine merchants, on the morning he became prime minister. 'One bill he would never pay, however,' recalled Ralph Mansfield to the *Daily Telegraph*, 'was his wife's gin bill.' Clementine always had to settle that herself.

The family made light of this curse. Writing to her mother about a raging toothache, Sarah would add humorously, 'So far, the only relief has been obtained by an old-fashioned treatment of which Papa will approve! Holding neat whisky in my mouth. Oh delicious anæsthesia! Local, then total!'<sup>14</sup>

Winston would quaff '28 and '34 Pol Roger champagne throughout a meal rather than any wine, and he made light of that as well.<sup>15</sup> Several times he called upon the Prof. to compute his total consumption assuming he had drunk half a bottle a day for the last half century. The Prof. made the slide-rule calculation once on the way over for the Atlantic meeting with Roosevelt in 1941 and gave him the result in liquid tons of champagne. Churchill was disgruntled to find that it would not even half fill the dining saloon.<sup>16</sup> Ten years later Churchill was still inquiring the total.

At dinner [wrote Dean Acheson] he made [Lord] Cherwell get out his slide rule and compute the depth of the inundation which would take place in the dining room if all the champagne Mr Churchill had drunk in his life were poured into it. The results were very disappointing to the Old Man. He had expected that we would all be swimming like goldfish in a bowl whereas it would hardly come up to our knees.<sup>17</sup>

Starchier statesmen were irritated by it all. Mackenzie King had primly forsworn liquor for the duration of the war and was the butt of much Churchillian mockery in consequence; he lectured the Englishman on the virtues of abstaining – he would find himself better in 'health and judgement.' Churchill chortled that he felt no less well for the stimulants he took, and Mackenzie King replied that much depended on 'the habits a man had from youth,' adding charitably: 'If you were to give up completely it would probably kill you.'<sup>18</sup>

At least once, as the Canadian prime minister's papers suggest, Churchill's little problem had nearly pushed Britain into war. Lord Greenwood revealed to him – under the Privy Councillor's oath of secrecy – his inside knowledge of the Chanak Crisis of 1922 (Greenwood had been in the cabinet during the very heated debate). 'As a matter of fact,' Mackenzie King dictated afterward, 'Churchill, Lord Birkenhead and Lloyd George had all been out dining pretty well that evening [September 15] and the decision to fight the Turks and to send out the appeal [drafted by Churchill] to the Dominions to aid in preventing the advance of the Turks was made under those conditions.' Greenwood remarked that when national leaders were under the influence of alcohol it put entire nations 'into the peril of their lives.'<sup>19</sup>

The secret reports filed by Ambassador Kennedy and Sumner Welles about Churchill's inebriation – although excised from the published texts – damaged Britain's cause. On the day that Churchill finally comes to power we shall see Roosevelt dismiss him in an aside to his colleagues as a drunken bum.<sup>20</sup> The private diaries of his staff – Alanbrooke, Cunningham, Edwards, and others – are peppered with exasperated references to his drunken incapacitation. But so it would go on. In January 1945 Roosevelt was informed by his special emissary, who shared the P.M.'s sense of fun, that despite the unfavourable location of Yalta 'Churchill . . . feels that he can survive it by bringing an adequate supply of whisky.'<sup>21</sup>

Such supplies were not always easy to come by. Upon arrival at Fulton, Missouri, a year later to deliver his 'Iron Curtain' speech, he demanded a whisky. Fulton was a dry town, and it took the president's military aide some time to locate a pint of the golden liquor, an ice bucket, and a pitcher of water. 'Well, general,' croaked Churchill when the aide reappeared. 'Am I glad to see you. I didn't know whether I was in Fulton, Missouri or Fulton, Sahara.'<sup>22</sup>



This was the position in Mr Churchill's political affairs that we had left in March 1940. In Norway, even the pro-British had been disturbed by the *Altmark* affair – indeed, outraged that the violation of neutrality had been rewarded with Britain's highest medal for gallantry.<sup>23</sup> In Germany, Hitler had been alerted by intercepts and had ordered General von Falkenhorst on March 12 to include an *emergency* invasion of Scandinavia among his more prosaic calculations. But now that Finland had collapsed he eased this pressure, directing that planning continue 'without excessive haste and without endangering secrecy.'<sup>24</sup>

To Churchill, the Finnish collapse was 'a major disaster' for the Allies. Rightly, he wanted to press on with the seizure of Narvik: the decision would be 'unpleasant,' he argued, but the subsequent capture of the Swedish ore-field would save casualties on the western front in the long run. His argument was unimpeachable. Deeply concerned about the leisurely course the war was taking, he wrote at length to Lord Halifax pleading for Britain to take an initiative now. 'The days are full of absorbing work,' he admitted, 'but they cost six millions each. Never was less result seen for money.'

There never was any chance of giving effective help to Finland; but this hope – or rather illusion – might have been the means of enabling us to get to Gällivare. All that has now fallen to the ground; because so cumbrous are our processes that we were too late. Now the ice will melt; & the Germans are the masters of the North. Can we suppose they have not been thinking about what to do? Surely they have a plan. We have none.

Events, he feared, were taking an increasingly adverse turn. 'In spite of all their brutality the Germans are making more headway with the neutrals than we with all our scruples.' It was not enough for ministers merely to discharge their duty faithfully: 'We have to contrive & compel victory.' The Germans were now more at their ease than ever before: 'Whether they have some positive plan of their own wh[ich] will open upon us I cannot tell. It wd seem to me astonishing if they have not.'<sup>25</sup> He repeated this robust line at that day's war cabinet: Britain's 'real objective' was still Gällivare. True, she had lost Finland as a 'lever,' but she could always take the line that her national interests were directly threatened by 'the possibility of Russia making her way through Scandinavia to the Atlantic.'

Since the war began, his restless brain had spawned extraordinary offensive projects, of which CATHERINE, ROYAL MARINE, WILFRED and CULTIVATOR NO. 6 were only four. The last-named was an immense armoured machine weighing hundreds of tons but capable of burrowing a man-high trench straight through enemy lines. A prototype was built and tested, but events overtook it before it could be introduced in France. After lunching with him on the twentieth, Eden afterward told a friend that Churchill was 'full of ideas – not all good – but how could they be with a man who had so many?'<sup>26</sup>

Chamberlain just survived the Finland fiasco, although he was given a rough ride by Sinclair, Dalton and Macmillan when he delivered to the House an over-conceited account of Britain's assistance to the Finns.

When Ambassador Kennedy visited the First Lord after the debate – to protest the continued harassment of American shipping by the British navy – Churchill showed concern at the prospect that Welles might succeed in his mission; he hoped that Roosevelt would not be so misguided as to offer a peace plan. ‘It would just embarrass us,’ he told the ambassador, ‘for we won’t accept it. In fact I would fight Chamberlain if he proposed to accept it.’<sup>27</sup>

IN PARIS, the effect of the Finnish débâcle was more dramatic than in London. Daladier effectively lost a vote of confidence and resigned as prime minister on March 21. Suddenly Winston’s old friend and fellow campaigner Paul Reynaud was prime minister. His tenure of office was fraught with unexpected problems. Daladier remained minister of defence; a former peasant – with all the bad qualities of that class, as the British ambassador shortly warned – he was a dedicated foe of Reynaud. For the next months France’s two leading politicians fought like tomcats, distraught by rivalry for a certain lady’s favours.

Winston was exhilarated by the appointment of his *confère*. ‘I rejoice that you are at the helm,’ he wrote to Reynaud on March 22, ‘and that Mandel is with you.’ Mandel was to remain minister for the colonies, and Winston asked to be remembered to him. ‘We have thought so much alike during the last three or four years,’ he added encouragingly, ‘that I am most hopeful that the closest understanding will prevail.’<sup>28</sup>

These two musketeers met a few days later at No. 10. Reynaud had come over with Gamelin and airforce commander Joseph Vuillemin for a Supreme War Council being held in Downing-street to decide the next move against Hitler. Daladier did not come: he had ducked out at the last moment, pleading his damaged leg.<sup>29</sup>

From the first moment there were arguments. The British wanted to mine the Rhine and cut off Hitler’s iron ore; the French were more interested in attacking his oil, and they contemplated even more desperate measures. Second on the British agenda was, ‘The case for going to war against Russia.’ France had developed a long-range bombing project against Stalin’s oilfields at Baku and Batum, to deny Hitler further oil supplies and paralyse the Soviet economy, and during the winter the French had begun preparing a major campaign against the Soviet Union. At French airforce headquarters a secret wall map showed two large arrows plunging into Russia and meeting to the east of Moscow. One arrow began from Finland, the other from Syria and Lebanon via Baku.<sup>30</sup> On March 19 Churchill had hinted to Kennedy that a major event might take place in July, which Kennedy later deduced was a reference to an attack on Baku.<sup>31</sup>

There were some reservations against fighting Russia; a note on Chamberlain's file for this War Council meeting warned that 'Socialist opinion' in Britain and France might find it difficult to swallow. For want of anything better, he now adopted Churchill's two projects – WILFRED, for mining Norwegian waters, and ROYAL MARINE, mining the Rhine.<sup>32</sup>

Churchill was again curiously taciturn. Of fifteen thousand words on the record, barely forty were spoken by him – to say that Britain saw ROYAL MARINE 'as a reprisal for German attacks on our merchant shipping and other illegal acts of war'; and that mining other rivers by air would have to wait for the full moon in mid-April.

The French were unenthusiastic about these projects. Reynaud wanted to bomb Baku; he did not think the result would be war with Russia – given the peculiar Russian mentality it might even encourage them to brush up their relations with the Allies. He had reason to believe that Turkey would tolerate overflights by Allied bombers operating from Syria or Northern Iraq. He wanted the necessary ammunition despatched immediately to Syria. Chamberlain, however, feared that this would drive Stalin further into the arms of Germany.

The upshot was that this highest Allied authority gave conditional approval to WILFRED and ROYAL MARINE, and a timetable was drawn up. Formal protest notes would now go to Oslo and Stockholm about the German abuse of their territorial waters; the Allies would mine the Rhine on April 4 and the Norwegian waters on the fifth. The British agreed to study Baku, while a joint committee examined the broader question of whether to declare war on the Soviet Union. The meeting concluded with a formal declaration of Allied solidarity: Britain and France would 'neither negotiate nor conclude an armistice or treaty of peace except by mutual agreement.'<sup>33</sup>

The strategic decisions were controversial. At the admiralty, Captain Edwards called the decision to lay mines in Norwegian territorial waters 'a vast mistake.'<sup>34</sup> Since a German riposte was inevitable against Norway, Admiral Darlan pleaded with Daladier to prepare the necessary means immediately to convey French troops to Norway.<sup>35</sup>

Intelligence was now arriving through Sweden indicating that Hitler was preparing his own move. Admiral Phillips urged that this was a 'last opportunity' to execute R3, the plan to seize Gällivare. Churchill gained cabinet approval to load British troops for an immediate expedition to seize Narvik the moment Hitler invaded southern Norway in revenge for WILFRED. R3 was resurrected, and by the last day of March battalions of infantry were being loaded aboard cruisers in Scotland, equipped with



winter clothing and the kind of light equipment they would need for an unopposed landing in Narvik and other Norwegian ports.

AT THIS juncture an extraordinary change of mind occurred in Paris and London: a flurry of jealous intrigue between Reynaud, Daladier, Churchill and Chamberlain led to the loss of four vital days.

The Supreme War Council had made its agreement to the launching of ROYAL MARINE conditional on French cabinet approval. On March 30 Daladier blocked it. He talked of the fear of German reprisals, but his real motive may have been to spite Reynaud.

It was a remarkable and unnecessary stalemate. France supported the expedition to Norway, but not the mining of the Rhine. The former, a major venture, needed the British fleet; the latter, minor, operation required France's permission. Britain should have swallowed her pride and proceeded immediately with the Norwegian venture. But when the French ambassador came to No. 10 to explain that Daladier was the culprit, Chamberlain ruled quite simply: 'No mines – no Narvik!'<sup>36</sup>

The records throw no light on the reason for Chamberlain's stubborn loyalty to Winston's river-mining scheme. The petulant decision caused division and chaos in the Allied military staffs. Distraught, Admiral Darlan asked Gamelin on April 2 to specify how many transport ships would be necessary for the French to transport men to Narvik.<sup>37</sup>

Churchill remained preoccupied with his now-orphaned ROYAL MARINE. Listening to Oliver Stanley talk at the war cabinet on April 3 of a 'somewhat garbled' report that Hitler was massing troops in a Baltic port, he stated that every preparation had now been made to stage an Allied landing in Norway if necessary. 'But,' he added dismissively, 'I personally doubt whether the Germans will land a force in Scandinavia.'

He suggested flying over to Paris to tackle Daladier in person about ROYAL MARINE, and Chamberlain agreed.

AS PART of a general rearrangement of his cabinet, Chamberlain had just elevated Churchill to a position of considerable importance, effectively that of a defence minister: he gave to him the military co-ordination committee of service ministers and chiefs of staff. Lord Chatfield resigned as chairman on the third, and Chamberlain announced Churchill's appointment on the fourth. 'We are on the eve of great events,' wrote Sir John Simon in a diary note that reflected the eager anticipation at cabinet level that day, 'and the refurbishing of the cabinet is merely the prologue.'

Hitherto Chamberlain had shared the widespread doubts as to Churchill's stability. He had once remarked that Baldwin would never risk

making him foreign secretary – he ‘would dread to find himself waking up at nights with a cold sweat at the thought of Winston’s indiscretions.’<sup>38</sup>

He had told Churchill of the new appointment on the day before the Supreme War Council. The First Lord told a mutual friend it was ‘the best talk with the P.M. he ever had,’ although Chamberlain turned down both of his ‘pet suggestions’ for taking Sinclair and Beaverbrook into the government. While Winston had evidently said nothing in Anthony Eden’s behalf, Churchill would assure this junior minister when they met afterward that he had urged Chamberlain to give him the air ministry. The P.M. gave it back to Sam Hoare, however, no friend of either of them. There would be more chances, ‘many more,’ Churchill encouraged Eden, ‘on this rough voyage.’<sup>39</sup>

Privately he truckled to the prime minister. ‘It is a very good thing that Sam has come up to the scratch in good form,’ he wrote to Chamberlain, and added: ‘I value highly the confidence which you are showing in me; and I will try my best to deserve it.’<sup>40</sup>

So Churchill seemed to have turned over a new leaf, and it touched Chamberlain deeply. For all his violence and impulsiveness, he commented to his sister, Winston was very responsive to a sympathetic handling. ‘To me personally he is absolutely loyal and I am continually hearing from others of the admiration he expresses for the P.M.’

The new appointment as acting chairman of the military committee attracted applause and relief from the press – where Churchill’s experience from the Great War was still highly rated – and a pleasing reaction from Bath, where his daughter was on the stage. ‘Darling Papa,’ wrote Sarah,

There was such a lovely picture of you on the Newsreel the other day, and the buzz and excitement that swept through the theatre suddenly made me feel so inordinately proud that I was your daughter, and it suddenly occurred to me that I had never really told you, through shyness and inarticulateness – *how much* I love you, and how much I will try to make this career that I have chosen – with some pain to the people I love, and not a little to myself – worthy of your name – one day. . .<sup>41</sup>

AS THE rumblings from the Baltic increased, Churchill yanked his friend Spears away from lunch at the Ritz on April 4, picked up a final plea that Chamberlain had written to Daladier, and made the boneshaking flight over the Channel to Paris in an elderly government Flamingo.

He was on a ticklish mission. With some experience of Anglo–French diplomacy, Spears advised him to call briefly on Reynaud, then to telephone Daladier at once as his opposite number, saying he had come over to see *him*. Churchill ignored the advice and invited both Reynaud and Daladier to dinner at the embassy. Daladier inevitably made some petty excuse; only now did Churchill realise that there was such bad blood between the two men. ‘What will centuries to come say,’ he burst out, mortified, to Spears, ‘if we lose this war through lack of understanding?’

He decided to dine alone with Reynaud. The new French P.M. told him he had tried for three hours to talk Daladier round; but, he pleaded, he could hardly overrule his own minister of defence on strategy. To Daladier, Churchill’s fluvial mine was just a ‘dangerous toy.’

To his chagrin, Spears was confined to locating General Georges and arranging luncheon the next day with Winston. ‘To go over with Winston,’ he grieved in his diary, ‘and not be included in his dinner with Reynaud was to diminish my own value and importance.’

Smarting, he telephoned Churchill the next morning and huffed that he was going back to London. Winston smoothed his ruffled feathers and went off to see Daladier. Daladier, somehow, talked him round. He emphasised the vulnerability of his aircraft factories to German reprisal. As for operation ROYAL MARINE, he did promise a firm date later – three months later – and Churchill expressed himself satisfied with that.

Before driving off to Laperouse for a gourmet luncheon with Generals Spears and Georges, Churchill passed Daladier’s final decision by telephone to Downing-street: it would indeed be an error, he now suggested, to twist French arms any further over ROYAL MARINE.<sup>42</sup> At No. 10, Chamberlain greeted Winston’s *volte face* with derision – it was like the story of the pious parrot, purchased to teach manners to a parrot which used bad language. ‘It ended,’ he scoffed, ‘by learning to swear itself!’<sup>43</sup>

In the First Lord’s absence Chamberlain broke the logjam in Allied strategy. He recommended the cabinet to forget Winston’s ROYAL MARINE and to proceed with WILFRED (the operation to mine Norwegian waters) in four days’ time – on April the eighth. Hitler would react in southern Norway, and Britain would then spring R4 on him – the seizure of Narvik and capture of Gällivare.

The naval staff viewed it with mixed emotions. ‘The more I think about [WILFRED],’ wrote the acting director of operations on the fifth, ‘the more convinced I am that it’s a political blunder of the highest order.’

It’s against our principles and it cannot in my opinion achieve the results its protagonists claim. We deliberately infringe neutral waters & therefore the Law – I thought we were fighting for Law

& Order. Another blunder to the account of Mr Winston Churchill – curse him.

The leisurely pace continued. As the main minelaying force for WILFRED sailed that evening at 6:45 P.M., it occurred to Reynaud to notify General Gamelin that Narvik was going ahead. The general in turn notified Admiral Darlan, and the fleet commander requisitioned the transport ships he needed.<sup>44</sup> Even so, the preceding four-day ‘tit-for-tat’ delay had serious consequences for the timetable. The first British troops could not now sail before the eighth; this in turn would delay French embarkation until the sixteenth, as there was a limit to how many ships even the friendliest Norwegian ports could handle.

While Churchill had lingered in France, significant messages had piled up on his admiralty desk. The Danish government had passed to the American minister in Copenhagen a message from a German traitor about Hitler’s intentions. The British envoy had telegraphed the details to London soon after midnight. Hitler had issued ‘definite orders to send one division in ten ships moving unostentatiously at night to land at Narvik on 8 April occupying Jutland on the same day.’

The foreign office flatly disbelieved it. That afternoon an even more alarming message had arrived from Britain’s Copenhagen envoy: ‘Troops actually embarked 4 April.’ Churchill read these reports when he arrived back from Paris an hour before midnight. Alerted by these ominous ‘mutterings,’ Captain Edwards had warned that a move against Norway was imminent; he found he was considered an alarmist. Mr Churchill sat down to pen a note to Chamberlain, but concerned himself only with ROYAL MARINE and Daladier’s objections.<sup>45</sup>

Daladier had handed to him an unyielding reply to carry back to No. 10. While ROYAL MARINE might impede Rhine traffic, the Frenchman’s letter conceded, his *comité de guerre* could not ignore the risk, of which they had been warned by air minister Guy la Chambre on March 11 and by his successor on the thirtieth, of enemy reprisals against the aircraft factories. Likening the air industry to a snake changing its skin, Daladier observed, ‘The snake must not be touched while performing this operation.’ Daladier’s advice was to concentrate on Germany’s iron ore and oil supplies. ‘As I said to Mr Churchill this morning, in any case it is only a postponement and not outright cancellation.’<sup>46</sup>

‘It is vy long winded,’ Churchill apologised, forwarding this to the P.M., ‘but they are serious in their alarm about their aviation; and it wd be dangerous to press them against their judgement.’<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, Captain Edwards had sent out spotter planes, and at nine A.M. on Sunday morning a Coastal Command Hudson sighted a German

cruiser and six destroyers north of Heligoland. The First Lord refused to take them seriously, and debased a useful signal to the Home Fleet summarising the Intelligence evidence on Hitler's intentions with the unhelpful words: 'All these reports are of doubtful value and may well be only a further move in the war of nerves.'<sup>48</sup>

At 4:45 P.M. that afternoon a belated message reached the admiralty reporting that Bomber Command had sighted a German battle-cruiser, two cruisers, and a large number of destroyers steering north or north-west at high speed off Jutland Bank. Edwards noted this in his diary, adding: 'I wanted and tried hard to get WILFRED cancelled.' The First Lord would not agree. At 5:27 P.M. he ordered the fleet to raise steam.

Not for one moment did Churchill consider that Hitler was about to invade Norway. To him, it looked as though the enemy battle-cruisers were attempting a breakout into the Atlantic. The dispositions he now ordered are explicable only on this assumption, since they left the central North Sea uncovered. He gravitated to the operational Intelligence centre in the multi-storey bunker, from which naval operations were directed, to take personal command.

Forgetful of the recriminations after the *Goeben* incident and the Dardanelles, he intervened that day and the next. His imprint is unmistakably upon many of the imperious signals that now issued, even when they bore, as his post-1915 prudence dictated, Admiral Pound's name as originator. He did not bother to consult the First Sea Lord – a senile admiral, gnawed by osteo-arthritis and a brain tumour, who drooled and fell asleep during staff meetings. Pound's hair was snow white, his face lined and pallid, a marked distortion in one eye. The admiral would have been no match for this thrusting politician even if he had been in London that Sunday, April 7. But he was not; he had gone salmon fishing on the Mountbatten estate near Romsey. When he returned, late that evening, Captain Edwards found him 'dead beat,' his deputy Tom Phillips equally tired, and the First Lord perceptibly well dined.<sup>49</sup>

On this particular evening Churchill had eaten substantially with the outgoing air minister Kingsley Wood, and was inevitably in no shape for taking decisions. Trashing WILFRED, R4, and all his own predictions about Hitler's moves against Norway, ignoring the puny size of Hitler's navy when compared with Britain's, Winston Churchill could only think that the enemy Grand Fleet was emerging, that Hitler was endeavouring to pass his battle-cruisers through one of the northern exits to the Atlantic. Visions of Jutland danced in his head.

At eight-thirty P.M. Admiral Sir Charles Forbes led the Home Fleet out of Scapa in the battleship *Rodney*, with *Valiant*, *Repulse*, two cruisers

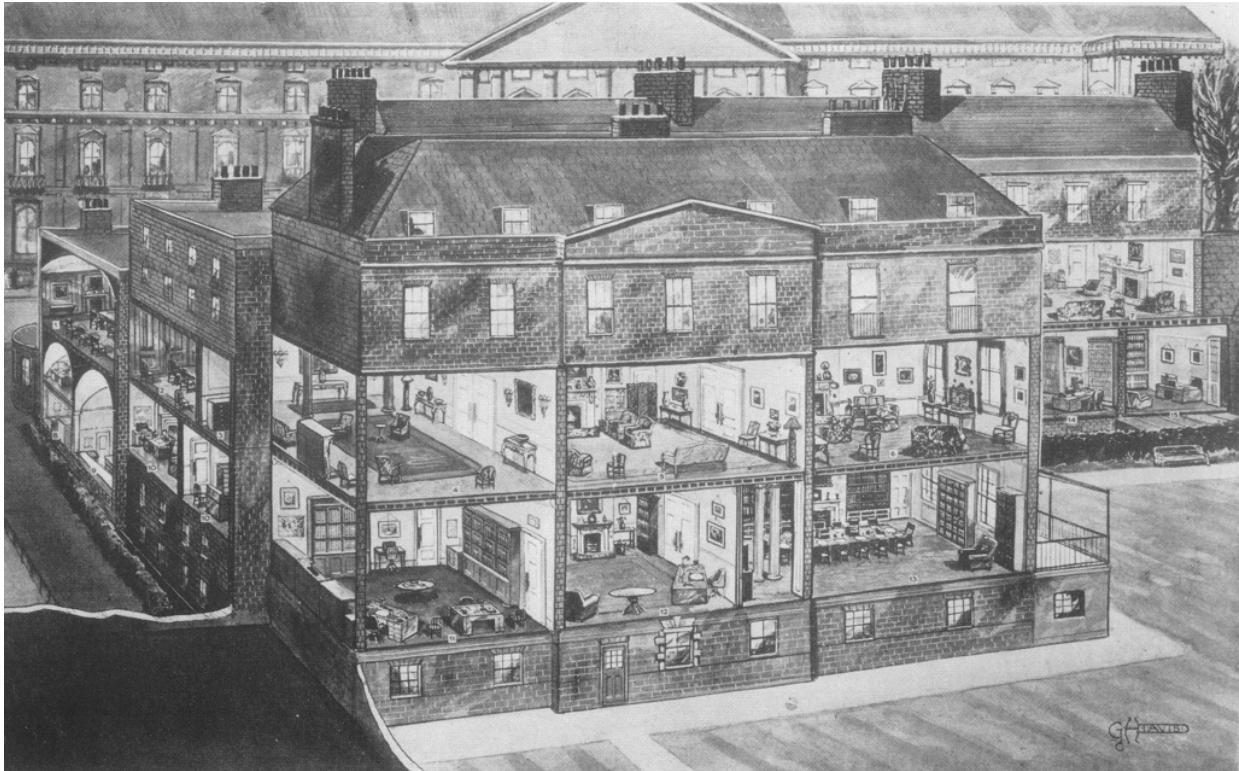
and ten destroyers. Poor Forbes! He had earned the sobriquet 'Wrong Way Charlie' in previous naval operations when his warships had repeatedly found themselves heading away from the enemy. Now, at the behest of his First Lord, he took Britain's fleet out at high speed to the north-east, followed at ten P.M. by the cruisers *Galatea* and *Arethusa* from the Clyde.

During this day, troops for R4 – the seizure of Stavanger and Bergen – had been loaded aboard the cruisers *Devonshire*, *Berwick*, *York*, and *Glasgow* at Rosyth. But now that Admiral Pound returned that night, enfeebled from his fishing outing, Churchill prevailed upon him to order the troops ashore and sail the cruiser squadron into battle without them. The decision to dump Plan R4 was taken without reference to Forbes, to the chiefs of staff, or to the war cabinet, let alone to the Supreme War Council; in the early hours it was telephoned to Admiral J. H. D. Cunningham at Rosyth. At one hour's notice, the bewildered troops were turfed out onto the dockside and watched the cruisers proceed to sea with their bags and baggage still aboard. Years after the blunder became apparent, Churchill nudged the blame onto the commander-in-chief: he claimed in his memoirs to have concerted 'all these decisive steps' with Admiral Forbes. But his memory was at fault: the admiral was with his fleet on the high seas, maintaining radio silence. It was Churchill's decision alone.

Plan R4 [penned Captain Edwards in his diary] had to go by the board . . . so as to supply enough destroyers. . . Winston taking a great personal interest. He wants to interfere & I'm sure he's wrong. An astonishing man.<sup>50</sup>

THAT NIGHT the opening moves were made in perhaps the most catastrophic week of the naval war, silent as the shifting of chessmen on a board. In the jaws of a filthy gale, the destroyers of the WILFRED force, their decks slimy with ice, laid the first mines off West Fjord at 4:32 A.M. on the eighth. An hour later the job was done. A few hours after that a destroyer of the covering force, *Glowworm*, vanished without a trace into the darkness off the Norwegian coast. We now know that the luckless craft had been trampled down by the northward march of Hitler's entire battle fleet: her captain had bravely hurled his warship against the cruiser *Hipper*, blowing up a few moments after the ramming.

What had gone wrong? The Nazis had been reading the admiralty signals; they knew of Mr Churchill's plans. Now Hitler had taken the biggest gamble of the war. Within twenty-four hours he was going to bring the entire Norwegian coastline under his control in the biggest naval gamble in history.



Churchill's driving ambition for sixty years was to move into No. 10 Downing-street, for two centuries the official residence of prime ministers. Pictured is an artist's postwar impression of its rarely-seen interior.

## 21: *Completely Outwitted*

6 GIVEN THE total lack of discretion as to the plans discussed at the Allied conferences,' Admiral Darlan wrote as the awful disaster unfurled, 'the German high command could scarcely have failed to know of our decision.'<sup>1</sup>

The indiscretions were legion. Churchill's nephew Giles Romilly, a Beaverbrook reporter, had been sent ahead to Narvik – a treason, Hitler called it, 'typical of his American-Jewish journalistic character.'<sup>2</sup> Late in March 1940 German agents had eavesdropped on the French prime minister assuring a foreign diplomat that 'in the next few days the Allies would be triggering decisive and momentous events in Northern Europe.'<sup>3</sup> On the thirtieth Mr Churchill had broadcast that Britain would no longer tolerate pro-German interpretations of neutrality – the Allies would fight the war wherever they had to, however little their desire to extend it to other theatres.<sup>4</sup> Alerted by these and other indiscretions, on April 2 Hitler had ordered Norway invaded in the darkness before dawn on the ninth.

Disturbed by the apparent failure of his secret service, Mr Chamberlain set up an immediate inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Lord Hankey grilled Colonel Stewart Menzies, the mild-mannered, aristocratic head of the Secret Intelligence Service, and reported that he had alerted at least the admiralty in good time: as early as May 1939 his predecessor had sent to naval Intelligence a German book claimed (correctly) to be Hitler's 'sea gospel' – Admiral Wegener's *Die Seestrategie des Weltkrieges*. This volume argued that Norway must be seized before any future assault on England.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, Hankey found, the S.I.S. had sent over to Mr Churchill's admiralty, since this was a purely naval affair, the accumulating evidence that since December a German expedition to Norway had been prepared, exercised, trained and loaded in north German ports. They had reported alleged predictions by Grand Admiral Raeder that he would



'smash the British blockade' by operating from Norway, and described two O.K.W. and inter-service conferences held during March. Hankey exonerated the S.I.S. 'But,' he reminded Chamberlain, 'we did not get any warnings as far as I can recollect from the admiralty.'

Reading this damning report even as the catastrophe began, Chamberlain's adviser Horace Wilson felt that things might look clearer now in retrospect – and in justice to Mr Churchill this should be emphasised – but he suggested a further investigation into whether this Intelligence 'ought to have led to a different disposition of our naval forces than was, in fact, ordered.'<sup>7</sup>

THE LACK of boldness and vision that Mr Churchill displayed in these dispositions throughout April was humanly understandable: until the last moment, the axe of political oblivion hung over him. On April 8 we find the diary of Captain Edwards remarking upon 'a lack of firm decision' in the admiralty; he could have made that entry each day of the campaign.

It was a legacy of 1915. Wary of being wrongfooted in this, his home-run to power, the First Lord stumbled and fumbled throughout the Norwegian campaign. His new chairmanship of the military co-ordination committee acted like a Dead Man's Handle on all the other control panels of military authority. Within a very few days, loud cries of protest were raised in the war office about the 'serious strategical mistakes.' Winston's committee, the deputy C.I.G.S. protested, was usurping the functions of the war cabinet, the chiefs of staff, and all the expert planners.<sup>8</sup>

It was a campaign without much point now anyway: not enough that Germany was dependent on neither Narvik nor the Swedish ores\* (her steelworks were fed to a significant degree on scrap iron); not enough that by April the snows were melting anyway, and Luleå would soon reopen. By mid-April the campaign had become a war for its own sake, a spectacular military diversion, a smashing of china in foreign shops. The Norwegian public showed little enthusiasm to join in on either side.



On the eve of Hitler's move, Monday April 8, the admiralty was still labouring under the after-effects of Winston's heavy evening. 'All the S.O.s [senior officers] very tired,' observed Edwards, adding: 'The fleet is still steaming madly to the north!'

\* On April 13 Hitler himself signalled General Dietl that he must defend Narvik at all costs: 'If necessary destroy ore railroad through mountains beyond repair.'<sup>9</sup>

Convinced that Hitler was slipping his battle-cruisers out into the Atlantic and that all else was a diversion, Churchill had tossed ashore the two infantry battalions loaded for Bergen and Stavanger, and despatched their cruisers post-haste to the north. Still convinced that he was right, he now abandoned the other section of Plan R4, Trondheim and Narvik, and ordered the cruiser *Aurora* to 'proceed with all despatch without troops on board, repeat, without troops on board' to join Admiral Sir Charles Forbes with the fleet.<sup>10</sup>

Conscious of the historic hour, at eleven A.M. he presented himself in the board room to the lens of society photographer Cecil Beaton. Half an hour later he announced to the war cabinet that the WILFRED minefield had been laid off Narvik and that 'all our fleets were at sea.' Lord Halifax, informed that the minelaying in Norwegian waters had gone smoothly, dictated this comment in his diary:

So now we shall wait for the wails and protests of the neutrals and the fury of Germany. Winston rang me at breakfast to tell me that it had all gone without a hitch, and my first anxiety that we might find ourselves in Norwegian bloodletting is therefore so far removed.

'Winston,' he continued, 'reported to the cabinet that a considerable force of German ships was out in the North Sea, which the government were taking appropriate steps to deal with. He seemed optimistic. I hope he is right.'

Some of his colleagues felt that Hitler might even have ordered his troops to seize Narvik, but Mr Churchill scoffed at the idea. 'It might also be the intention,' he suggested dismissively, 'when the force had been landed, to send the *Gneisenau* out into the oceans as a raider. In any case the whole operation seemed to be a most hazardous venture.'

Forbes had sent a Sunderland flying boat ahead of his fleet and at two P.M. it sighted warships 220 miles south-west of West Fjord – but steering unmistakably west. This provided further support for Mr Churchill's break-out hypothesis and encouraged him to ignore the gathering signs of a major German invasion operation. In fact it was the *Hipper* group, cruising in random patterns before going in to Trondheim.

Shortly, the secret service telephoned his Intelligence division to warn that a hundred German ships were heading northward past Denmark. At eight P.M. Forbes reversed his fleet's north-westerly course to meet them.

By this time Mr Churchill had left to dine with Hoare and Stanley. The incoming telegrams piled up in his absence; among them a Reuter's agency

message from Oslo reporting that a German freighter torpedoed off southern Norway had spewed forth troops, and that these were claiming to be bound for Bergen to protect it against the Allies. Several hours passed before the First Lord even forwarded this to Forbes.

The feast with his two ministerial colleagues infused him with fresh spirit. 'Winston,' wrote Hoare that night, '[was] very optimistic, delighted with mine laying, and sure he had scored off the Germans.'<sup>11</sup> Significantly, the First Lord said nothing of any invasion threat.

For a while his optimism fizzed like champagne.

When he teetered back into his operational Intelligence centre it was nearly eleven P.M. and the bad news was stacking up. At seven P.M. a submarine had spotted three enemy cruisers and a destroyer heading north past the Skaw.<sup>12</sup> Later that night, his mousy private secretary Eric Seal stammered to a newcomer, 'The entire German navy seems to be heading for Norway.'

By five A.M. the fizz had gone flat. Hitler had invaded Norway. Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger were under his warships' guns. At eight-thirty German transport planes were already debouching troops on Oslo's Fornebu airfield. The war cabinet, meeting at that hour, heard that no German ships had been reported at Narvik, but a hung-over Churchill, unable to conceive even now the scale of Hitler's coup, suggested that all this might well be just a prelude to an offensive against France – an assessment which overlooked the inability of Hitler to commit his airforce to two theatres at once.

Churchill reported that destroyers were standing by 'to stop enemy transports entering Narvik.' But then the teletype brought incredible press reports that the Germans were already there too. Two clear hours earlier the Austrian Major-General Eduard Dietl had hoisted the swastika over Narvik. 'Winston,' recorded Lord Halifax, charitably reflecting that it was difficult to assess the navy's problems from only a small-scale map, 'again is sanguine that at Narvik anyhow the Germans ought to be what he calls "cut like flowers."'

These events were nonetheless a cruel shock.

'Germany,' Winston suggested to his colleagues, still fiercely optimistic, 'has made a major strategic mistake.'<sup>13</sup> This was not the view of the naval staff. 'What a chance we've missed,' wrote Edwards.

ADMIRAL FORBES ploughed a southward furrow through rising seas during the night, looking for the enemy fleet. Joined early on the ninth by nine cruisers and thirteen destroyers, he had a considerable force with which he could have caught the Germans in mid-disembarkation in several places.

At six-twenty A.M. he found himself closest to Bergen and detached four cruisers and seven destroyers for the assault, willing to run the risk that Bergen's coastal batteries were in enemy hands and working (they weren't). He would have caught *Köln*, *Königsberg*, and *Bremse* in harbour there.

But upon his return to the operational Intelligence centre after the war cabinet the First Lord vacillated. On balance, he had already decided against invading Trondheim: two German warships were known to have entered that fjord. Now, under pressure from the First Sea Lord, he also intervened to forbid the attack on Bergen; which done, he went off to lunch.

It was an 'ill-judged' intervention.<sup>14</sup> 'Pure cold feet,' was the appreciation of his acting director of operations in a diary whose tone toward the admiralty's political master was clearly deteriorating.

Winston ratted & so did 1st S.L. – never win like this. Blast & damn them. Winston is an infernal menace, and may well lose the war for us. We should go to Trondheim too. It's the key – Bergen isn't.

A vastly more ominous development was the scale of the German air attack that now developed on the Home Fleet in these waters. By noon, Forbes had had to turn away to the north, having lost a destroyer and taken a heavy bomb on his own battle-cruiser. Some of his ships expended forty per cent of their flak ammunition – a taste of what would have happened to Churchill's *CATHERINE*. Air cover was not available: in the hurry to put to sea, the carrier *Furious* had not embarked her fighter squadron.

AFTER LUNCH Churchill had retired to bed for two hours, taking Nelson the admiralty cat. Both were in need of consolation, Nelson having just been doctored to put an end to his amorous affairs.

The First Lord propped himself up with pillows and pawed the maps of Scandinavia. He was sure Hitler was only bluffing in Norway. How could the German navy do otherwise under the noses of the mightiest navy in the world? But what was he really up to? An Atlantic breakout, or war in the west? General Pownall, Gort's chief of staff, summoned back from Gort's headquarters to the war office during the day, learned that the fateful plan to send to Scandinavia three or four of the ten B.E.F. divisions was 'definitely off,' unless 'the Crazy Gang' (as Winston's military co-ordination committee was termed in Whitehall) disposed otherwise again. 'With Winston as chairman,' reflected Pownall in his diary, 'they are like-

ly to be extremely volatile. . . What a struggle and a mess up it has been – a full seven weeks delay in formations alone.’

At four P.M. Churchill went over to No. 10 for an emergency meeting with the French leaders. Their *comité de guerre* that morning had decided to rush troops to Norway. But now each ally had a rude shock for the other. Reynaud had learned from Gamelin that the French expeditionary division was still in the Jura mountains, to avoid espionage. And Oliver Stanley had to apologise to the French, who included Admiral Darlan, that the five British battalions embarked for Plan R4 had been put back on dry land, since Mr Churchill had sailed their cruisers; moreover, all their equipment was still on board.

As for the press report about Narvik, Mr Chamberlain now suggested it must be a mistake for Larvik in southern Norway, while Mr Churchill still hoped to occupy Narvik before the Germans. ‘The actual operation of clearing any Germans out of Narvik should not present great difficulty,’ he said, according to the French record. ‘At this moment,’ however, he admitted, ‘the admiralty hasn’t the slightest idea what is going on at Narvik. We don’t even know if there are any Germans at all there.’<sup>15</sup> He was sending destroyers into West Fjord to find out.

Playing his hunch about the west, he suggested they invade neutral Belgium immediately to forestall Hitler there. Once again he ran into Daladier’s opposition. It was unwise, said the French minister, to antagonise the Belgians – they could be very sensitive. ‘Too right they are,’ snorted Churchill. ‘They just have no desire to get into a war!’<sup>16</sup> \*

Trying to clear up the confusion, that evening he invited his fleet commander to break wireless silence and explain what he was doing and why. ‘I consider,’ he added, in blithe reassurance, ‘Germans have made strategic error in incurring commitments on Norwegian coast which we can probably wipe out in a short time.’ He repeated his conviction that the western front would soon begin.<sup>17</sup>

There would be two Narvik task force commanders, Major-General ‘Pat’ Mackesy and Churchill’s elderly but offensive-minded World War naval friend Lord Cork and Orrery. Cork had not been to sea for years, but as an admiral of the fleet he outranked both Pound and Forbes.

Late on the ninth Churchill and Pound briefed the two task force commanders separately, verbally and wholly inadequately. They would sail in different cruisers, and they were not introduced: Mackesy believed that his naval counterpart was still Admiral Sir Edward Evans, whom Churchill had in fact sent to Stockholm. While Field Marshal Ironside did

\* Thus the French record in Reynaud’s papers. On April 10 the Belgians moved more forces against the French frontier.

give Mackesy explicit written orders,<sup>18</sup> Churchill endowed Cork only with a private cypher and a secret line of communication to him behind the backs of his admiralty colleagues.\* At 9:30 P.M. he invited the admiral to attend his military committee; he also invited him to drive down Whitehall the next day to the House, to the plaudits of the onlookers. But several days would pass before the reassembled task force sailed.

By the time the 'Crazy Gang' met, late on the ninth, Churchill knew the worst: Hitler had packed ten destroyers and several thousand mountain troops into Narvik. Five British destroyers were patrolling off West Fjord and their commander, Captain B. A. W. Warburton-Lee, bravely signalled London: 'Intend attacking at dawn high water.' Cruiser reinforcements were readily at hand, but instead of telling him to await these, Churchill replied at ten P.M. – by-passing both Forbes and the cruiser squadron commander – giving discretion to attack: 'We shall support whatever decision you take.'<sup>20</sup> In the resulting gallant but unequal action two destroyers were lost and Warburton-Lee killed. By that time, however, Mr Churchill had long been manoeuvred into his cot by Eric Seal.

THE MORNING signals were brought into his bedroom. Hitler was now unquestioned master of Norway and Denmark. 'Although we have been completely outwitted,' he dictated to Pound in a fit of candour, 'there is no reason to suppose that prolonged and serious fighting in this area will not impose a greater drain on the enemy than on ourselves.'<sup>21</sup>

The naval staff were anxious to attack, and scathing about the absence of decision. 'The Germans,' wrote Edwards that day, 'can't have constituted satisfactory defences yet.'

Edwards tried to have the 32,000-ton battle-cruiser *Repulse* sent in to 'clean up the mess' at Narvik. But an important reputation was at stake: from within his panelled board room Churchill sensed the distant crowing not just of Hitler but of his Whitehall rivals too. To Anthony Eden, visiting that evening, he spewed venom about air minister Sam Hoare, calling him 'a snake' and incapable of inspiring the airforce at times like this – as though that were at the root of the affair.<sup>22</sup>

The enforced inaction gnawed at him. As he drove to the House that Thursday morning, newspapers headlined rumours that British troops had already liberated Trondheim, that their navy was inside Oslo fjord and had issued an ultimatum to the Germans. The *Star's* placards proclaimed:

\* The naval staff did not find this out for twelve days. It is borne out by a signal on May 9 from Cork to Churchill that he had sent a signal on the seventh 'by S.P. 02328 [the naval cypher (N) held by Lord Cork] which I believed ensured private communication with yourself.'<sup>19</sup>

'BERGEN CAPTURED – OFFICIAL.' It would fall to Winston to reveal that the British troops were still in Britain.

Pallid and unwell, he took refuge in vague, euphonious language and stumbling gibes. He muddled his notes, clipped the wrong spectacles to his nose, confused Denmark with Sweden. He tried to persuade the House that Hitler had made a 'vast strategic error.' Confining his own profound scepticism to his diary, Sir John Simon observed that, on the contrary, Hitler 'has certainly achieved for the moment a vast tactical success.' In answer to a question, the prime minister confirmed that Winston had been chairing the military committee since April 4.

He lingered in the bar, then drowned his surviving sorrows at the admiralty. At a staff conference that evening Churchill was visibly the worse for drink; Edwards jotted an angry description in his diary of 'a very long meeting with W.C., who was half tight.'<sup>23</sup> They wrangled until midnight, then he staggered across Whitehall to the war office to arouse Field Marshal Ironside and tussle with him. 'Winston,' wrote Edwards, 'lost his temper just when everything looked like being settled.'<sup>24</sup>

That evening the British expedition finally sailed for Norway – three days late. The recapture of Narvik might yet restore the First Lord's fame, and for the next seven weeks it would become his guiding star.



On the twelfth the war cabinet began glancing at alternatives to this remote northern port. Eyeing Sweden, Lord Halifax murmured that an attack on Trondheim offered greater political effect. But Mr Churchill predicted a 'bloody repulse' there, and a memorandum written that day for the joint planners showed he contemplated only staging a 'menace' to Trondheim, since a full-scale landing could not be undertaken in the present month. Groping for the word 'inspired,' but finding only 'dispirited,' he dictated: 'The Norwegian resistance will be *inspired* by British landings.' His secretary dutifully took down the nonsense word as dictated.<sup>25</sup> The cabinet dissolved in mutual recrimination, with Churchill trying to score off the foreign secretary because the British envoy at Copenhagen, Howard Smith, had fallen into Nazi hands.

'You have no right to talk,' retorted Lord Halifax, 'as your communist nephew [Giles Romilly] was captured at Narvik.'

'That causes me no concern at all,' sniffed the First Lord. 'The Nazis are welcome to him.'

The naval staff blamed him for their misfortune. 'Winston,' wrote an indignant Captain Edwards, 'is at the bottom of it all.'

He will try & be a strategist and run the naval side of the war. Nothing is yet settled on the question of where the other landings are to take place. However at last they ordered C-in-C [Forbes] to send in a force to attack the enemy ships at Narvik with a B.S.

On Saturday the thirteenth Churchill showed a closer interest in Trondheim after all. Writing to the French leaders about events at Narvik ('We are to-day attacking with the fleet'), he predicted that the important British forces arriving 'in the neighbourhood' on Monday or Tuesday would 'settle the matter' before the arrival of the French contingent on April 21.

Therefore we must consider extreme importance and urgency of operations against Trondheim.<sup>26</sup>

He was further swayed in that direction when the 31,000-ton battleship *Warspite* charged into Narvik's fjord with nine destroyer consorts and sank all seven surviving German destroyers. Viewed from the battleship, the half-drowned seamen struggling up the snow-covered slopes were taken for a rout. Admiral Whitworth recommended that Narvik be occupied without delay by 'the main landing force.' But the cruisers with their battalions were no longer on hand, and reports of a rout were greatly exaggerated. Winston's five P.M. military committee talked of landing small parties of troops near Trondheim. He decided to go further and send a note to Stanley urging him to stiffen this improvised force with regular troops.<sup>27</sup>

The renewed shift of emphasis appalled his naval colleagues. 'Indecision reigns supreme,' sighed Edwards; the muddle was 'indescribable.' Angered by Churchill's overriding of chiefs of staff, cabinet and planners, the deputy C.I.G.S. sent a formal complaint to Ironside about the chaotic conduct of deliberations. 'Meetings,' he complained, 'have been held continuously until all hours of the night without adequate time for thought.' Everybody was exhausted – 'None of the staff can work under these conditions and give of their best.'

With the recent boozy wrangling still in vivid memory, Field Marshal Ironside fervently agreed. He wrote to Stanley pleading that the chiefs of staff be relied on for military advice; Winston's 'military co-ordination committee' could always screen it before it went to the cabinet. But the M.C.C. must not get bogged down in details.



That has been fatal. Personally, I think that the M.C.C. should be used for long term projects. It cannot be used as a species of 'supergeneralissimo' in being.<sup>28</sup>

Overnight, Winston's Trondheim plan took shape. By telephone he persuaded his friend Reynaud to allow the French contingent to be switched to Trondheim. By wireless, without consulting higher authority, he diverted two of the five British troopships to Namsos, near Trondheim. 'It will be an operation of much difficulty and risk,' Winston admitted in a letter to the king, 'but we must not fail to profit by success and speed.'

The confusion was now complete. The 146th infantry brigade was switched to Namsos, while its commander, Brigadier Phillips, was on a ship continuing to Narvik. Troops were separated from equipment, gunners from guns, guns from ammunition. Norway was mantled in snow deeper than the British troops had ever seen; they had no snow clothing, let alone skis.

Thus they landed at Harstad, some sixty miles from Narvik, first *Southampton* with General Mackesy and two rifle companies, followed on the fifteenth by *Aurora* with Admiral Lord Cork and the remaining troopships. Mackesy was left with about 1,800 troops all told. (Mr Churchill, masking the consequences of the diversion, would write of 'four thousand' in his memoirs.) Arrayed against him were two thousand elite, if poorly provisioned, Austrian mountain troops, to which were now joined over two thousand sailors from the sunken destroyers. Well might Mr Churchill call it 'this ramshackle campaign.'

The newspaper billboards read 'B.E.F. IN NORWAY — OFFICIAL.'

But at three A.M. that Monday, April 15, the admiralty received disquieting word from a small naval party landed at Namsos: the little port was totally unsuited for troopships and was exposed to air attack.

This was a serious complication. Worse was to come. As Mr Churchill waited confidently for word that Mackesy and Cork had clubbed their way into the abandoned streets of Narvik, he learned that their ships had come under determined machine-gun fire. They had decided not to attack.

The expedition had not been equipped for an opposed landing. Both he and Field Marshal Ironside had banked heavily on the Norwegians, but the latter showed an almost treasonable unwillingness either to assist the Allies or to resist the enemy.<sup>29</sup> Churchill postponed HAMMER, the assault on Trondheim, until the twenty-second.

Naked revolt now stirred against him. When he chaired his military committee as usual that evening, Sir Edward Bridges, the cabinet secretary, caught the growing 'uneasiness' over Winston's conduct of its affairs.

The First Lord had continuously called upon the chiefs of staff for advice without letting them confer; he had squeezed out the planning staffs altogether; and now there was to be yet another postponement. 'Air marshal afraid of air menace,' commented Edwards after that day's meetings; 'sea admiral afraid of S/Ms [submarines], field marshal afraid of everything.'<sup>30</sup>

In the dead of night Churchill sent a pained inquiry by his private link to Admiral Lord Cork: 'All our plans for urgent operations to the southward [Trondheim] depend upon our knowing at earliest what you propose and what you do at Narvik. . . Cabinet desire to know by A.M. to-day, Tuesday, what you decided and did, yesterday, Monday.'

TEMPERS WERE fraying at both ends of the chain of communication. On Tuesday the sixteenth, after reading an 'awful' reply by Forbes to a signal made by Churchill, Captain Edwards mused in his diary: 'Why they don't relieve him I can't imagine. W.C. asked him to reconsider attack on Trondheim. It is vital to the Allied cause. Forbes simply sticks his toes [in] etc. & won't play.'

That day a second expedition sailed, destined for Åndalsnes south of Trondheim. It had been delayed by a storm. There was growing impatience at the delays. Simon, Kingsley Wood and Hankey voiced anger at the postponement of HAMMER, and there was restlessness that Churchill was dictating war policy without even token reference to the cabinet. These operations were likely to be hazardous, yet they had seen none of the customary written appreciations from the chiefs of staff.<sup>31</sup>

Partly in an attempt to 'clamp together the various & changing plans wh[ic]h are now afoot,' but also to secure Chamberlain's backing, Churchill sent him a memorandum that day promising that Narvik would be disposed of by the twentieth, and that he could then use the regular brigade from there to invade Trondheim two or three days later. He described how the batteries would be quelled, the fjord forced, the airfield silenced by naval bombardment, the enemy at Trondheim distracted by subsidiary operations at Namsos and Åndalsnes. But in the scribbled covering note he clearly foresaw trouble closer at home: 'In the event of difficulties arising w[ith] the committee I shall have to invite yr assistance.'<sup>32</sup>

Those difficulties had already arisen. His disagreement with the chiefs of staff over HAMMER was so vocal that General Sir Hastings Ismay, his staff officer, visited Bridges during the morning to warn of 'a first class row' if Churchill took the chair at the military co-ordination committee again.<sup>33</sup>

To the relief of its members – the service ministers and chiefs of staff – when the committee met at mid-day Chamberlain himself took the chair; and he convened it at No. 10, not the admiralty.

Since Bridges had also adjured Ironside, Newall and Pound to keep their tempers, and since Chamberlain for all his faults was a much better committee chairman than the loquacious First Lord, the committee began to hum.<sup>34</sup>

If Chamberlain was surprised that even Winston expressed his gratification at this, there was more to come: the First Lord invited the P.M. to continue to take the chair – ‘At any rate while the present affair was in progress.’<sup>35</sup>

That he so willingly abdicated his most coveted office, effectively that of a defence minister, deserves comment. Probably he had witnessed too many military disasters from high office in the Great War not to recognise the outlines of one in embryo now. He did not want to be midwife to yet another. But was there more to it than that? In his entourage there were some who suspected him of wicked disloyalty in these weeks. ‘I’m quite certain,’ Edwards would write, as the Norway fiasco finally emerged in all its ugliness from the womb of war, ‘he’s played the whole of the last eight months to become P.M., often at the expense of helping to win the war.’<sup>36</sup> \*

In private he made no bones of his seminal responsibility for the fiasco. Years later, a mere author once again, grappling with the shifting command structures of these weeks, and picking Ismay’s brains, he would write wryly: ‘I certainly bore an exceptional measure of responsibility for the brief and disastrous Norwegian campaign – if campaign it can be called.’<sup>37</sup>



We now know that on April 17 Hitler had an unseemly breakdown, lost his nerve, and ordered Narvik evacuated, and that General Alfred Jodl refused to forward this order. † Victory at Narvik was that close.

But General Mackesy had postponed his advance there until the snows melted. Churchill found the news ‘unexpected and disagreeable,’ choked on it far into the night, then wrote to the committee on the seventeenth: ‘One of the best regular brigades in the army will be wasting away, losing men by sickness and playing no part.’<sup>38</sup> Using his secret cypher link he dropped a broad hint that Lord Cork ask for Mackesy’s recall.

\* Quoted in full in the next chapter.

† *Hitler’s War*, page 101.

Should you consider that situation is being mishandled it is your duty to report either to me personally or to admiralty on it, and what you would do yourself.

Cork endorsed Mackesy's view, however, and added that any naval action to wear down the enemy garrison at Narvik would destroy the town and kill Norwegians. Besides which they lacked the proper ammunition for a naval bombardment. 'Short of a direct order,' he informed the First Lord, 'soldiers refuse to entertain idea of assault.' In a further message that began with the conciliatory words, 'Very well we will do what we can,' Mackesy set out his troops' deficiencies: they had not one field gun or anti-aircraft gun between them, and practically no mortar ammunition.

Confronted with this stalemate at Narvik, and with Admiral Forbes's shortage of flak ammunition, the chiefs of staff shelved the frontal assault on Trondheim. They would beef up the attacks from Åndalsnes and Namsos instead. Churchill willingly abandoned *HAMMER* – it would release the *Warspite* and troop reinforcements for Narvik, the town on which he saw his reputation depending. 'We move,' he estimated, relieved, 'from a more hazardous to a less hazardous operation.'

BY APRIL 19 both Hitler and Churchill, for different reasons, had developed an unbecoming callousness toward the Norwegians. Hitler on that day ordered his airforce to destroy any towns reported by the British as occupied, and particularly Namsos and Åndalsnes, 'without regard for the civilian population.'

Churchill, angered at the supineness of the Norwegian population, ordered Narvik destroyed for much the same reason. 'Of course,' he notified Lord Cork that day, 'the less the town is knocked about the better for our own accommodation, but we must get in to Narvik or its ruins as soon as possible.' Later that Friday evening he explained his urgency in a personal message on their private link: 'Once this is achieved,' he told Cork, 'we have the trophy at which all Europe is looking, we have a bridge-head for further landings, and our men sleep under such shelter as may be left, while the enemy sleep in the snow.'

Getting his way again, on the twentieth he persuaded the war office to subordinate the dissident general Mackesy to Lord Cork. ('I gather,' wrote Captain Edwards, 'that general & admiral are growling.') Churchill warned the admiral not to expect any reinforcements for a fortnight, and emphasised the political reasons why Narvik must be captured without

delay. His plan was for a saturation naval bombardment followed by an amphibious assault. That afternoon he received assurances from Cork that he had prepared a plan closely following these suggestions. 'Starting harassing fire to-day Saturday 20th April.'

It soon became plain to the naval staff that Mackesy was unimpressed by the plan, considered any seaborne assault impossible and would rather resign than attempt it. 'It appears that there's a first class row brewing or in progress between Cork & Mackesy,' wrote Edwards. 'The 1st Lord has taken a hand in the game.' After a personal reconnaissance, Mackesy reported to London that an amphibious assault from open boats would lead to the slaughter of his troops. He doubted that Lord Cork's naval bombardment would dislodge the defenders. 'Those of us,' he signalled, 'who have seen and experienced far heavier and better directed bombardment . . . must know only too well that British and German troops are not so demoralised and that machine gun detachments always come up when bombardment ceases.'

In a stinging message, he reminded Lord Cork and Churchill that there were five thousand Norwegians in Narvik; that killing them would prejudice future operations in Norway; and that such a bombardment would violate the instructions\* which he, Mackesy, had received from the cabinet. 'I submit that it should only be undertaken on a direct order from the cabinet.'

This rebuff created a muffled sensation. At the admiralty many already felt that the First Lord's proposal was 'very wrong.' But Mackesy, seeing his military career at an end, made a renewed protest, couched in terms of even more heroic candour, which he specifically asked Lord Cork to convey to the government. 'Before proposed action against Narvik commences,' this read, 'I have the honour to inform you that . . . there is not one officer or man under my command who will not feel shame for himself and his country, if thousands of Norwegian men, women and children in Narvik are subject to bombardment proposed.' Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork, no fool he, appended to Mackesy's signal, 'I have no remarks.'<sup>39</sup>

Churchill was under pressure to show results. Encouraged by his utterances, Chamberlain had written in private on the twentieth, 'I shall be very disappointed if we haven't practically captured Trondheim before the week is out.' But they had reckoned without Hitler's ruthless air attacks on the two positions flanking Trondheim. Those on Namsos were so vio-

\* These bear quoting: 'It is clearly illegal to bombard a populated area in the hope of hitting a legitimate target which is known to be in the area but which cannot be precisely located and identified.'

lent that the French mountain troops could not land, and the British commander Carton de Wiart talked of taking to the ships. Edwards's only comment was the forbidden phrase, 'Shades of Gallipoli!'

Under this lowering sky Churchill foamed at Mackesy in a secret message to Lord Cork: 'If this officer appears to be spreading a bad spirit through the higher ranks of the land force, do not hesitate to relieve him or place him under arrest.' He repeated: he wanted Narvik rendered uninhabitable to the enemy – scorched earth. If Lord Cork concurred, he suggested six hours' notice to the townsfolk to get out, and then the naval bombardment.<sup>40</sup>

That signal sent, he flew with Chamberlain to Paris for a Supreme War Council. The long-suffering Lord Halifax found that his hotel room, next to Winston's, offered less than the repose he had prayed for:

We got to bed about eleven and about twelve Winston came up to bed in the next room to me and made as much noise as a moderate earthquake. At seven o'clock next morning I heard a knock on the communicating door which meant that he had had some brainwave which he wished to impart to me. I . . . pretended to be asleep thereby postponing his incursion 'till 7:30! 9:30 we began the Supreme War Council at the Quai d'Orsay.

It conferred for two days, but dwelt only briefly on Norway. In his own short contribution Churchill played down the significance of Trondheim. Looking ahead, Reynaud gloomily remarked that Britain had only ten divisions in France now and anticipated only twenty by the end of 1940, while Hitler might well raise three hundred. Again he suggested marching into Belgium now. When Chamberlain proposed bombing Hitler's refineries, the French showed the now-familiar nervousness about their aircraft factories and for their part raised again their plan to bomb Baku.<sup>41</sup>

THE NEWS ON Chamberlain's return to No. 10 was that the Namsos force had retreated to a small beachhead. Preparing him for the worst, Churchill drafted a note warning of 'a head-on smash' looming in Norway; but he scratched that out and wrote flummery instead: 'I am very grateful to you for having at my request taken over the day to day management of the Military Co-ordination Cte.'

On the twenty-fourth Lord Cork's ships bombarded Narvik but – as Mackesy had predicted – the Germans did not surrender. In London, energetic buck-passing began. The prime minister's secretary heard Bridges

call Winston 'maddening'; he was making the most unreasonable proposals.<sup>42</sup> He wanted to demand even wider powers, but before he could state them a letter arrived from Chamberlain – he wanted to discuss the 'rather unsatisfactory' Norwegian situation with him in private. Over at No. 10, Churchill demanded outright control of the chiefs of staff, blaming the 'hopeless muddle' on them. Chamberlain humoured him with a half solution – a military secretariat of his own headed by Ismay, who would also join the chiefs of staff committee.<sup>43</sup> It was a major concession, but Winston apparently blackmailed him with the threat that he would go to the House and disown all responsibility. Speaking of him a few hours later to Sir Alec Cadogan, the prime minister remarked: 'He's grand – when things are going right!'

The chiefs of staff now faced up to the possibility of abandoning southern Norway altogether. 'Position to be put before war cabinet,' wrote Edwards. 'If politically essential to hold on, we must attack Trondheim. Otherwise prepare to withdraw.' On April 26 the cabinet formally discarded Trondheim, and the naval staff began to talk seriously of evacuation – which would be, Edwards realised, a most difficult operation. 'If we scuttle out of Norway the political effect will be incalculable.' Chamberlain suggested they describe a successful evacuation of Namsos and Åndalsnes as a 'strategical triumph.' Churchill pointed out that Narvik had always been their real objective.

Among those stung by the decision was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes: he had led the Zeebrugge raid in 1918, and even now offered to command a naval assault on Trondheim. Churchill spiked the idea. The seniority problem alone would have been stupendous. Keyes refused to be fobbed off, and sent him a long critique of Admiral Pound, calling his conduct of the sea war 'deplorably pusillanimous and short-sighted.' 'This opinion,' Keyes wrote, 'is shared with bitter resentment by many naval officers [and] is pretty prevalent throughout the fleet.'<sup>44</sup> For several days Admiral Keyes, lively and brave beyond his years, lobbied ministers and fellow M.P.s. When they stonewalled him, he told anybody who would listen that if the navy had only moved faster this entire fiasco would never have occurred.<sup>45</sup>

The French government was equally unhappy about the evacuation plan. Reynaud appealed to Chamberlain that, quite apart from its effect on domestic prestige, such a setback would damage Allied morale with the neutrals, large and small.<sup>46</sup> On April 27 Reynaud came over for a Supreme War Council. His military adviser Lieutenant-Colonel Villelume recorded, 'The British are inclined to evacuate central Scandinavia; M le President [Reynaud] asks them to await the outcome of the imminent Nar-

vik operation before putting it into effect.’ The French believed that the British had agreed, but the British recorded the decisions as the immediate dropping of Trondheim and a realisation that the evacuation of Åndalsnes might at any time become necessary.<sup>47</sup> In fact, as soon as the French visitors had left London, the chiefs of staff gave orders for the evacuation of Åndalsnes on the last day of April. Two days passed before the French ambassador learned of this breach of faith.<sup>48</sup>

Thus only Narvik was still to be attempted. Chamberlain penned these private lines: ‘This has been one of the worst, if not the worst, week of the war. We hadn’t reckoned on the way in which the Germans had poured in reinforcements of men, guns, tanks, and aeroplanes. In particular this brief campaign has taught our people, many of whom were much in need of teaching, the importance of the air factor.’

The First Lord returned to his manuscripts, to chew over his *History* with Lord Birkenhead and historian F. W. Deakin. Elsewhere in the building, Edwards was writing in his pocket diary:

This is too awful, the way we’re going to scuttle out of Norway.  
Winston thinks we can save our face by holding Narvik.

Viewed from the operations division, this seemed ‘utter nonsense.’ Viewed by Churchill, however, it was not just saving face. He saw Narvik as a major base for a mighty Allied army. He began drafting a paper setting out its future defences: half the scale of Scapa’s in guns and searchlights; the airfield enlarged; the anti-submarine installations improved. For the time being, however, it was still in an Austrian general’s hands.

Among the messages that Captain Edwards saw on the twenty-eighth were ‘pertinent questions from Paris.’ Reynaud was baffled by what was going on. The French contingent at Namsos had their tails well up, he said, and on the twenty-ninth he cabled Ambassador Corbin to urge the British not to evacuate.<sup>49</sup>

On the last day of April, as the evacuation nonetheless began, Chamberlain circularised his colleagues about Winston’s new military secretariat. The First Lord accepted the new arrangements in a smug note: ‘I shall try my best to make all go smoothly.’<sup>50</sup>

He had decided that the assault on Narvik should continue. ‘To implement this decision (of the 1st Lord’s),’ as Captain Edwards now underlined in his diary, ‘we impose a terrible strain on the fleet.’

An enormous L[ine] of C[ommunications] across the enemy’s new front door. I am not clear why we want Narvik unless it’s to walk



into Sweden & seize the ore mines. We now have no national policy or no naval policy and we just muddle along. It's deplorable.

That night, Intelligence gave fresh warning that Hitler was about to attack Holland. Desperately tired, Edwards ran Churchill, Pound and his deputy to earth in the First Lord's room ('They were all talking about Narvik . . . all half asleep') and persuaded them to move minelayers to the south and warn the war office.

At about the same time Paul Reynaud got on the telephone to Chamberlain about the plan to bomb Stalin's oilfields. He said that General Maxime Weygand, French commander in the Middle East, could be ready by May the fifteenth. Chamberlain remarked on the delay. Reynaud explained that Turkey was raising 'steeper demands each day' for overflight permission.

A Gestapo agent in Paris obtained an illicit transcript of their conversation from his mistress, a French telephone operator. He rushed it to Berlin. With minor changes, Hitler would use it in the Reichstag in partial justification for the next outrage he was about to spring upon the world.<sup>51</sup>

## 22: Hence Prime Minister

**Y**EARS LATER, when Churchill wrote about Norway, he would tidy up the blunders and distemper over the shortcomings – the rash unloading of the troops, the reloading only for an unopposed landing; the incorrect weapons, the inadequate equipment, the inappropriate ammunition, the insufficient instructions; the bomber pilots equipped only with a 1912 Baedeker; the admiralty charts that showed no contours around Narvik; his own over-confident diversion of half of Mackesy's infantry and all of his snow-trained French mountain troops from Narvik to Namsos on April 14.

One thing was beyond dispute: his own role in the disaster had been central. A tide of dismay lapped around the government. Hore-Belisha, the former war minister, was seen lobbying Members about how Mr Churchill had landed guns in one fjord and gunners in another, and talking of other admiralty oversights. Ominously, he reminded those who would listen that there was a precedent for a Select Committee of Inquiry – after the Dardanelles disaster.<sup>1</sup>

As the cabinet privately rehearsed excuses for the fiasco, Anthony Eden wondered if Hitler conducted his councils in this manner.<sup>2</sup>\* 'The Tapers and Tadpoles are putting it around,' wrote one Tory, alluding to the two party fixers in Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Coningsby*, 'that the whole Norwegian episode is due to Winston.'<sup>4</sup> But his public esteem was too high to dismantle easily. Chamberlain sighed to Sir John Reith that somebody else would have to debunk him.<sup>5</sup>

The month ended with ugly allusions to Gallipoli in the columns of *The Times*, and the First Lord's prestige as low within the admiralty as it was without. Incoming signals of April 28 had seen the Admirals Forbes and Cork having 'their usual bicker,' as Captain Edwards called it in his extraordinary diary. 'Winston entered the fray & decided against the staffs

\* He did. Referring to Hitler's unforgivable nervous crisis on April 17, 1940 over Narvik, an O.K.W. officer wrote angrily a week later: 'The consequence was a string of orders which delved almost exclusively into details scarcely capable of being judged from Berlin, and which were often changed soon after.'<sup>3</sup>

decision – oh, the interference & we aren't strong enough to stand up to him. Scuttle from Norway goes on.'

LET US NOW return to his political friends, of whom we heard little during the excitement of the military campaign.

As April 1940 ended, fierce political manoeuvring began. The bitter plight of the troops at Narvik, the perils of the evacuation, the imminence of the western campaign – all were set aside, and it was not only the English politicians who saw their chance to profit from Britain's misfortune. Unsurprisingly, at the Zionist office there was talk of using the Norway crisis to show 'how ill the Allies can do without Jews if war spreads,' and to warn of the 'risk of bloodshed in [the] Holy Land if present policy continues.'<sup>6</sup>

To people like Beaverbrook and Bracken, Churchill's career seemed in danger of eclipse. 'Brendan,' recorded a witness of one conversation between them, 'made defence of Winston, said it was untrue that he lost his nerve.'<sup>7</sup>

If Mr Churchill was to mend his fences, he could do so only in the lobbies of the House. 'Politics,' Lord Roseberry had once said, 'is an evil smelling bog,' and shortly the First Lord was mired in that bog right up to his chin. Everybody knew what Winston was about. Visiting No. 10 on the first evening in May, as an unseasonably cold gust of wind rafted the leaves and litter across Horse Guards Parade, he commented, 'If I were the First of May, I should be ashamed of myself.' The P.M.'s secretary reflected: 'Personally I think *Churchill* ought to be ashamed of himself.'<sup>8</sup>

It was close-hauled, the struggle that now began. The older hands recognised that for Chamberlain this was the end-game. By inviting Churchill to chair the military co-ordination committee on April 4, he had fed out a few more inches of hangman's rope to him. But whose head would now be in the noose? And if Chamberlain fell, who could succeed him? Halifax? Eden? Few thought seriously of Churchill. He was the only obvious successor, reflected Ironside in private, only to dismiss that thought from his mind – perhaps recollecting the First Lord's 'half tight' visit to his office on the eleventh. 'He is too unstable.'<sup>9</sup>

Lord Davies urged Beaverbrook to 'plump for Winston' and topple Chamberlain as once he had brought down Asquith.<sup>10</sup> The press lord returned an impassive reply. His daily newspaper published an article playing down the Norway fiasco, but in private his views were uncompromising. 'Churchill?' – he expostulated to an associate – 'He's the man who let the Germans into Norway.'<sup>11</sup>

In the event other heads would roll – those of Forbes and Mackesy, and finally of the prime minister himself. As the government crashed in flames, Mr Churchill survived, and this portly phoenix would write with one suspects more than a trace of relish: ‘Failure at Trondheim! Stalemate at Narvik! . . . It was a marvel that I survived and maintained my position in public esteem and parliamentary confidence.’<sup>12</sup>

He survived because he and his friends had tilled the swampy ground of Parliament assiduously, and he could now watch his seedlings grow with seeming detachment. The P.M.’s secretary jotted down one government official’s assessment that, while Winston himself was remaining loyal to the prime minister, ‘his satellites’ – and here the names of Duff Cooper and Leo Amery were mentioned – ‘were doing all in their power to create mischief and ill-feeling.’<sup>13</sup>

This mischief-making had begun earlier in 1940. Duff Cooper told a Zionist assembly in Washington D.C. that, in the face of rising anti-Semitism, Britain must unambiguously side with the Jews, and that there were large areas elsewhere for the Arabs, ‘should they be reluctant to stay on in Palestine.’ ‘I feel that Churchill will take Chamberlain’s place,’ one London newspaper reported him as saying. ‘He is a great organiser, and has the confidence of the people.’<sup>14</sup>

‘Winston,’ observed one diarist M.P., ‘is being lauded by both the Socialist and Liberal oppositions, and being tempted to lead a revolt against the P.M.’ That evening, May 1, as the painful evacuation of six thousand troops from Namsos began, Members saw him drinking and roaring with laughter in the smoking room with the Liberal leader Archie Sinclair and Socialist A. V. Alexander – ‘The new shadow cabinet,’ as one witness prophetically recorded.<sup>15</sup>

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE heard rumblings like those preceding Norway – indications that Hitler’s next move was imminent. They were ignored. No naval steps were taken. On May 1 Captain Edwards found no forces available for the Channel front other than five destroyers at Dover. Everything else was tied down by Churchill’s ‘wildcat adventure up to Narvik,’ where Lord Cork was still drafting plans for his assault.

They’re ‘crackers’ on the project and I’m quite sure we shan’t be able to hold it without expending a disproportionate effect on doing so. Winston again – ye gods, he’s a menace.

The First Lord surfaced at the House on the following day, tired out, barely able to recite his speech before having to be literally led away.

Commented one Fleet-street veteran, 'It is in times like these that age and excessive brandy drinking tell.'<sup>16</sup>

Chamberlain was optimistic about the political crisis, writing to his sister on the fourth from Chequers, 'I don't think my enemies will get me down this time.' But as the post-mortem began on Norway – as the shot and shell began to fall around Chamberlain – Churchill edged away from him, perhaps doubting his own immortality. 'I had some very unhappy experiences in the last war,' he told A. V. Alexander, 'when my naval advisers, after the event, said they had differed from me all along.'<sup>17</sup> Alexander, repeating this to Hugh Dalton, added that some people were saying that Winston had lost his nerve, that he could not forget the Dardanelles, that he was acting now 'like a singed cat.' This saddened Winston's admirers in the Labour Party: they were setting store by him as their last hope of effecting a socialist revolution in England.

For a while Churchill wilted. The adrenaline had ceased to flow. At one committee meeting on the fourth, Ironside found him somnolent and listless. 'He took quietly what we said,' he wrote, puzzled, 'without demur.' The trouble was still Narvik: 'He wants it taken, and yet doesn't dare give any direct order to Cork.'<sup>18</sup>

On the sixth the latter admiral forwarded fresh objections from the generals. They lacked landing craft, information, suitable beaches, smoke shells, and any means of digging into the frozen, rocky ground.<sup>19</sup> Edwards called him 'a busted flush.' He saw that Cork's proposals would mean a protracted battle of problematic outcome – 'Not at all suited to Mr W.C.' The cabinet were doing their utmost to drive the admiral to action. Edwards commented, 'Political face saving is so necessary.'

IT WAS PARLIAMENT that lit the political powder keg when it met to consider Norway on the seventh. As Chamberlain entered there were ironic cries of 'missed the bus!' – his jibe at Hitler of the month before.

At first the debate proceeded smoothly. Both Labour and Liberals were still undecided whether to make it an issue of confidence. That afternoon the *Evening Standard* hinted at an early general election, but Labour had no desire for that: Hugh Dalton adjudged that Chamberlain would wipe the floor with them. Thus they trod a narrow plank between criticism and censure, willing to wound but afraid to destroy. Archie Sinclair spoke early, and did not spare Churchill for all their thirty years of friendship. 'Is it not a fact,' he challenged, 'that the prime minister and the First Lord have led the people to believe the impossible about this adventure, which was never thought out and which was never taken to the end?'

In the course of that day the prime minister made one odd mistake, which may have saved Mr Churchill's bacon: asked by Labour's Herbert Morrison when the arrangement had been made for Winston to chair the military co-ordination committee, Chamberlain in his reply gave mistakenly the date on which he had *confirmed* it to the House, April the eleventh. He should have said the fourth – five days before the Norwegian operation. But even when asked whether the appointment covered the period of the Norwegian operations, he replied: 'I appreciate the point. No, it was not before the Norwegian operation; it has only been made recently.'<sup>20</sup>

The injury to his administration after that first day's debate was grievous, but not fatal. Still angered about Trondheim, Admiral Keyes had entered in full uniform with six rows of medal ribbons, delivered a powerful attack on the naval staff, and sat down to thunderous applause. Captain Edwards recorded, 'Roger Keyes spilled the beans but ruined it all by saying W.S.C. was the genius we should trust. Nothing could be worse!'

Overnight, however, Fleet-street – itself partially to blame for having raised such false hopes early in the campaign – began braying for Chamberlain's blood. On the second day, May 8, Labour decided to risk a vote of confidence. Somehow Churchill rode out the storm in one of the most tortuous performances of his career. Kennedy attributed his salvation to the party organisation handled by Margesson the Chief Whip, 'like a cheer leader or like the Tammany bosses used to handle Tammany.' The American ambassador, watching from the distinguished persons' gallery, found himself wondering what would happen if Hitler now invaded Holland. Would the opposition temporarily abate?<sup>21</sup> He would shortly have his answer.

Rattled by the clamour, Chamberlain conceded that Britain had suffered a loss of prestige. Under attack by Keyes and Lloyd George, to Kennedy he looked in bad shape. Churchill played his hand magnificently – generous, protective, deprecatory, spirited, charitable, confessional. When Lloyd George flamboyantly insinuated that the First Lord had been let down by his admiralty colleagues, he jumped to his feet to declaim: 'I take full responsibility for everything that has been done at the admiralty.' Lloyd George retorted that Mr Churchill 'must not allow himself to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues.' Churchill murmured to Walter Elliott, 'Absolutely devastating.'

At ten P.M. he rose to conclude for the government, a masterpiece of debating skill – still insisting that it was Hitler who had blundered, that on balance the result rested with the Allies. This, he declared, was the time to set aside feuds and hatreds and conserve them for their common enemy.

His private staff, who crowded the official box, were uneasy about the scintillating performance: his secretary John Peck felt that 'somehow it did not ring entirely true.' Their master was enjoying himself more than was seemly – relishing, as Chips Channon also observed, the irony of defending a cause in which he did not believe.

The speech was full of fire, but it was the cold flame of artificial pyrotechnics, and lacked warmth. The vote was distasteful for Chamberlain. His majority was disastrously reduced: sixty Tories had abstained, thirty had voted against him; 281 had voted for his government, and two hundred against; the No lobby buzzed with speculation. While the chamber refilled, there rose a rhythmic stamping of feet on the wooden floor, and the opposition benches rang with the cry of 'resign.' Josiah Wedgwood started singing 'Rule Britannia,' drowned in turn by a chant of 'Go, go, go, go!'

As Chamberlain stalked out of the rowdy chamber, the Chief Whip signalled to his henchmen to rise and cheer; the prime minister was visibly pale and angry.<sup>22</sup>

In later private conversation Churchill would often hark back to that debate and the tactical mistakes that Chamberlain made. It had presented him with a wonderful opportunity: 'The stars in their courses fought at my side,' he reminisced. 'I was able to defend my chief to the utmost and win only esteem and support in so doing.' No one could say, he would add, that he had been disloyal: 'I never have done that sort of thing.'<sup>23</sup>

At the admiralty the officers were aghast at the distinct possibility that Churchill would profit from Chamberlain's humiliation.

The danger to my mind [wrote the acting director of operations that night] is that out of it will come . . . a Govn. headed by that arch-idiot Winston. I'm quite certain he's played the whole of this last eight months to become P.M., often at the expense of helping to win the war. As witness the way he never backed us against the Air.

To which uncharitable speculation he added, exasperated: 'The high ups . . . still insist on going on with the mad Narvik project.'

To maintain that operation, the admiralty was still committing to those waters one battleship, three aircraft carriers, seven cruisers and twenty-one destroyers.<sup>24</sup>



On the second day of this great debate the admiralty had sent a cautiously-phrased signal to Lord Cork, saying that according to 'our information' the German effort at Narvik was flagging.<sup>25</sup> In January the S.I.S. had made its first major break into the German airforce codes. More significantly, in mid-April they had manually solved the special code introduced five days earlier for the German airforce and army in Norway. These early intercepts have vanished from the files, but it would explain Mr Churchill's frustration with Lord Cork and General Mackesy if he had read echoes of the frantic signals from Berlin when Hitler lost his nerve and seemed about to abandon Narvik.



So wrapped up was Churchill in the political jockeying that he did not act upon the accumulating evidence that Hitler was on the point of attacking Holland and Belgium. On May 8 the Dutch naval staff notified Gerald Dickens, the British naval attaché at The Hague:

The same source in Berlin who predicted the attack on Denmark has telegraphed that an attack on Holland and Belgium and the western front will start to-morrow morning if flying conditions are good: if not, within a few days. . . The Dutch have also had warning of an early attack from a Vatican source.\*

The British attaché informed the French government direct. At five P.M. the Dutch cancelled all leave.

Independently of this, the headquarters of the British airforces in France (B.A.F.F.) – whose reconnaissance planes that day had sighted four hundred tanks massing in woods to the east of the Ardennes – warned units of the B.E.F. that an enemy attack on Belgium was 'likely within a few days.'<sup>26</sup>

Both in the B.E.F. and in Whitehall the warning was disbelieved. At I Corps some key personnel were still on leave. The war office announced that there was still no sign of imminent invasion of Belgium or France.<sup>27</sup> Over in the admiralty the politician who had so vehemently warned of Hitler's military ambitions was now preoccupied with the fulfilment of ambitions of his own.

\* The author found this warning in Reynaud's papers. Colonel Hans Oster, a traitor in the Abwehr, had tipped off the Dutch military attaché in Berlin, Major G. J. Sas; the German wiretap agency *Forschungsamt* heard Sas report it to The Hague. The Vatican's tip-off had come from Dr Joseph Müller, another Abwehr traitor.



Chamberlain had still not resigned, but all Whitehall was mooting his successor. Bracken confided to Kennedy that, while not objecting to a Halifax cabinet, Mr Churchill would not join it; which effectively squelched that.

Later that evening Kennedy strolled over to Beaverbrook: his diplomats had learned that Hitler would attack in the morning, and the newspaper owner recalled having telephoned Winston. The ambassador himself telephoned around Mr Churchill and the other notables. 'Everybody is mad,' he noted, after hours on the telephone. 'They all want to do something and go places; but nobody has the slightest idea of what should be done. Chamberlain, Halifax and Churchill are unquestionably tired men.'<sup>28</sup>

MAY THE ninth. The day had dawned clear and warm, tulips carpeted the London parks. Flying conditions could hardly be better. From naval Intelligence came word that Germany had suddenly sailed a minelaying force, had severed communications with Holland, had transmitted a string of radio signals to German merchant vessels such as had preceded Hitler's Norway coup.<sup>29</sup> At Admiralty House Churchill's mind was still elsewhere.

As he took his Valet safety razor he sent for Eden and told him – while shaving – that in his view a national government would have to be formed. Chamberlain would have to resign, since he would be unable to persuade Labour to come in.<sup>30</sup> They had already refused him in September.

Churchill and Eden met several times that day. Coming over to Admiralty House to explain the German fleet movements and the naval staff's hope of catching them, Captain Edwards found them both in a huddle with the Liberal leader Archie Sinclair too. 'Cabinet meeting?' Edwards mused sarcastically in his diary: that was what he suspected.

Labour and the Liberals had an ambivalent attitude toward this war. A year earlier they had opposed national service. Now Labour seemed to prefer Lord Halifax to Mr Churchill. The latter had sent Bracken to ask Clement Attlee outright a day or two before whether he would serve under Winston. The prim, schoolmasterly Labour leader had replied that they 'had never forgiven Churchill for Tonypandy,' when he had ordered soldiers to fire on striking miners.<sup>31</sup>

On the eighth the leading Labour doctrinist Hugh Dalton had told Halifax's under-secretary, R. A. Butler, that there was much to be said for his master. Butler set out in a letter, which is among Halifax's papers, the terms on which Labour would enter a national government. Halifax was their only choice; 'Churchill,' quoted Butler, 'must stick to the war.' Now, on May 9, Attlee's position softened – he agreed it lay between the

two contenders.<sup>32</sup> Churchill probably heard of this when Beaverbrook came to see him during the forenoon. 'Do you intend,' Beaverbrook asked, according to his pencilled notes, 'to serve under Halifax?' 'I will serve,' Churchill replied, obliquely, 'under any minister capable of prosecuting the war.'<sup>33</sup>

When Randolph Churchill telephoned him from his Territorial Army unit at Kettering, his father said: 'I may be in a big position tonight.'<sup>34</sup> By noon Ambassador Kennedy had learned that the 1922 Committee – the powerful body of Conservative backbenchers – had sent for Chamberlain at two-thirty P.M. and demanded a cabinet reshuffle. By lunchtime, Churchill had learned – because over that meal he passed it on to Eden and Kingsley Wood – that Chamberlain had decided to resign.

How to ensure that the ancient tree, shortly to be felled, toppled in the right direction? Suppose the P.M. recommended to His Majesty, as was his traditional right, Lord Halifax? Kingsley Wood suggested that Chamberlain would be rooting for Halifax, and would invite Churchill to give his blessing. '*Don't agree,*' – that was Kingsley Wood's urgent advice to his long-time friend – '*and don't say anything.*'<sup>35</sup>

AT FOUR-THIRTY P.M. that day, Churchill walked across Horse Guards Parade to see Chamberlain and Halifax together – knowing it was to be the most important hour of his life. Chamberlain talked of national unity and confirmed that he was ready to resign if Labour refused to serve under him. There followed the discussion which Kingsley Wood had rehearsed with Churchill. Chamberlain said that Lord Halifax was the man mentioned as most acceptable. All too generously, Halifax replied, 'I think Winston would be the better choice.'

If he expected a modest shake of the head from Churchill he was disappointed. The First Lord remained Sphinx-like – immobile and silent. ('Winston,' Halifax related to Sir Alec Cadogan shortly afterward, 'did *not* demur.')

Halifax courteously continued. It would surely be impossible for him to function as prime minister from the House of Lords. 'It would be a hopeless position,' he said. 'I should be a cypher.'

Churchill with equal courtesy agreed. The Chief Whip and others, he ventured, believed that feeling had been veering toward him. (In fact Margesson had advised Chamberlain the House would prefer Halifax.<sup>36</sup>)

At six-fifteen P.M. he sent for Attlee and his deputy Greenwood and put the questions: would they serve under the present leadership, or under any other? The two Labour leaders laboriously wrote these questions down and explained that they must consult with their brothers down in

Bournemouth. (Their party, with exquisite sense of national priorities, had convened its annual party conference at this South Coast resort.<sup>37</sup>)

Churchill, nothing if not a wily warrior, 'at this point made an impassioned plea to them to join under Chamberlain.' As Kennedy learned from one participant, Attlee and Greenwood were unmoved and left for Waterloo station.

Churchill returned to the admiralty to sketch his first cabinet. Over dinner with Anthony Eden, he explained that Halifax did not wish to succeed to the premiership. He, Churchill, would invite Mr Chamberlain to remain as leader of the House; he would appoint Anthony to the war office; he would assume for himself the style of 'minister of defence' as well as prime minister.<sup>38</sup>

From all sides came voices from the past, confirming that the battle was won. Robert Boothby, his former secretary, wrote about the feeling of the House: neither Labour, nor Sinclair, nor 'our group' – which had met that afternoon – would 'touch Chamberlain' at any price. Boothby was now working to harden opinion against Lord Halifax; the consensus was that Winston was the 'inevitable prime minister.'<sup>39</sup> Lady Violet wrote in the same, if more flowery, vein.



While these jealous democrats had prowled around each other in London, the dictator in Berlin had acted. A secret train had conveyed Adolf Hitler and his staff overnight to the western front.

Before dawn of the following day, a mild and lovely late spring morning, he suddenly uncoiled his armies westward. Ghastly messages gate-crashed Churchill's triumphant slumber at Admiralty House. The first, at five-twenty A.M., was that the Wehrmacht had stormed across the frontier into Holland. Still in his silken pyjamas, he telephoned the French ambassador: would both Allied armies nonetheless move forward into Belgium now? Monsieur Corbin called back almost at once – the Panzer divisions were rolling into Belgium too. Hoare and Stanley arrived, still ministers for air and war, and conferred with him over breakfast. Hoare, a timorous soul, marvelled at the First Lord's composure: tucking into eggs and bacon and chomping on a cigar as though nothing untoward was happening.<sup>40</sup>

Setting aside – briefly – the struggle for power, his mind was on the movements of fleets and armies again. The risks were real, and adrenaline was flowing in the old way.

By seven A.M., when his military co-ordination committee met, both of the indignant neutrals had appealed for Allied help. Mr Churchill had

ordered the B.E.F. across the frontier into Belgium. No vacillations or last-minute hitches this time: a well-oiled scheme was working. 'All our movements,' wrote Halifax, relieved, '[have] been for once prepared to the last gaiter-button.'

Churchill was exhilarated; but so too was Hitler. Months later, with his armies already hammering on the gates of Moscow, Hitler would still remember the thrill of that instant. 'When the news came that the enemy was advancing [into Belgium] . . . I could have wept for joy! They'd fallen right into my trap! It was a crafty move on our part, to strike toward Liège – we had to make them believe we were remaining faithful to the old Schlieffen Plan.'<sup>41</sup>

An emergency war cabinet had been called for eight A.M. Before Churchill and his two colleagues set out from Admiralty House, his son came on the phone again. 'What about what you told me last night?' he asked. 'Oh,' replied Winston, affecting a nonchalant air. 'I don't know about that. Nothing matters now except beating the enemy.'<sup>42</sup>

The mood at No. 10 was overcast by a joyless stream of incoming reports: enemy paratroops were already dropping into Holland. Churchill's report was the only bright news – he assured his colleagues that he had set in motion the pre-arranged advance into Belgium.

IN ENGLAND life went its normal way. With doughty defiance of Hitler and his grand strategy, the entire national executive of the Labour Party had again caught the 11:34 for Bournemouth. Dalton, sharing with Attlee a black cab to Waterloo, asked for the ministry of economic warfare when the national government was formed.<sup>43</sup>

At No. 10, however, Chamberlain was having second thoughts. 'As I expected,' he wrote to Beaverbrook, 'Hitler has seized the occasion of our divisions to strike the great blow and we cannot consider changes in the government while we are in the throes of battle.'

The logic was compelling. He persuaded Hoare, he convinced Sinclair, he repeated it to another minister in a personal letter which the American ambassador saw. 'Hitler's picking the moment to strike when we are divided has changed the entire situation,' this letter read. 'I propose to remain. The next three or four days' battle will determine the fate of civilisation for the next one hundred years.'<sup>44</sup>

But his enemies, having dislodged him this far, were not going to be cheated now. Bracken was heard to snarl, 'It's as hard getting rid of him as getting a leech off a corpse.'<sup>45</sup> He jangled the alarm to Paul Emrys Evans. Evans phoned Lord Salisbury, and his Lordship told them to insist on Churchill's appointment as prime minister before the day was out.<sup>46</sup> King-

sley Wood, to whom Churchill had promised the treasury, was no less disconcerted at the change that had come over Chamberlain, and persuaded him of the need for a national government to confront this crisis; he told Churchill of this at ten A.M.

Some of the Labour leaders wanted Parliament recalled immediately. More seasoned hands like Dalton advised against it, arguing that 'this would give the cheer leaders and crisis-exploiters a chance to rehabilitate the Old Man.'<sup>47</sup>

With his political future at stake, Churchill had little of his mind on the great land battle in Holland and Belgium. The Dutch ministers had arrived from Amsterdam to see him, with horror written across haggard faces. But what could he offer by way of comfort? That naval demolition teams were even now crossing the Channel in destroyers to blow up the great Dutch refineries and port installations to prevent Hitler getting them?<sup>48</sup>

The war cabinet met again at eleven-thirty. On his recommendation, it sent his querulous friend Sir Roger Keyes to liaise with the king of the Belgians.<sup>49</sup> Other plans were put in hand. British forces would seize Curaçao in the Dutch West Indies to prevent Nazi sabotage to the oil facilities there. The first fluvial mines would be fed into the Rhine that evening.

As Churchill gathered his thoughts, he lunched alone with Beaverbrook. At the third war cabinet at four-thirty the news was that Nazi paratroops had seized Rotterdam airport and that troop-carrying planes were landing; but in Belgium British troops had already advanced to the line of the River Dyle. The chief of air staff, Sir Cyril Newall, suggested they now bomb the Ruhr, Germany's vital industrial region, but that decision was postponed.

Late that afternoon a note was handed to Chamberlain, and he told his colleagues that it was Labour's answer. Speaking from a pay-'phone in Bournemouth, a Labour spokesperson had telephoned their party's refusal to serve under him.<sup>50</sup> Mr Chamberlain accordingly declared that he proposed to resign that evening, in favour of the First Lord.<sup>51</sup>

The news struck a chill through the admiralty.

Winston is P.M. [wrote Captain Edwards that day]. He told me so himself when I took him some news about yesterday's operations. . . I distrust the man and think it is a tragedy. God send I'm wrong.

The fleet had also watched the 'racket in Parliament' with distaste bordering on dismay. 'They think more of politics than they do of the

war,' wrote the commander-in-chief, Mediterranean, in a private letter. 'Winston has got what he has been intriguing for. I don't know if he will stick the course. He lives at a high rate.'<sup>52</sup>

THE ROYAL summons reached Churchill some hours later, and he hurried to the palace. The monarch had doubted his integrity every since the abdication, but was prepared to see what this new leader could do. 'I suppose,' he stuttered with forced humour, 'you don't know why I have sent for you?' Truckling to his style, Churchill replied: 'Sir, I simply couldn't imagine why.'

Back at the admiralty, he wrote fine words to Chamberlain:

The example which you have set of self-forgetting dignity and public spirit will govern the action of many, and be an inspiration to all.

His telephone rang. It was Ambassador Kennedy, profuse with congratulations. In his jaunty manner, the American claimed that he himself had played a vital role in securing for him the keys of office. 'You,' he continued to the puzzled First Lord, 'conceived the plan to mine the Norwegian territorial waters. But I was the one to obtain Roosevelt's consent.' Churchill still did not understand. Kennedy chuckled. 'Hence Norway,' he said, and laughed out loud. 'Hence prime minister!'<sup>53</sup>

Let us end this chapter of Mr Churchill's life not with the irreverence of the American ambassador, but with the sombre, historic note that he himself struck in recalling his emotions in his memoirs. 'I felt that I was walking with destiny,' he would write of this day, 'and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.'

## 23: *Rogue Elephant*

6 **W**AR IS A GAME to be played with a smiling face,' Churchill had once declared.<sup>1</sup> The new prime minister smiled as he blamed the defeat in Norway on traitors like Vidkun Quisling and on his compatriots who had failed to destroy tunnels and viaducts to prevent German reinforcements reaching Trondheim.<sup>2</sup> As Hitler opened his western offensive, Winston smiled again, blamed the overrunning of the Low Countries once more on traitors, and relied on his friend General Georges and his indomitable Army of the North-East for victory in France.

For the time being he remained at Admiralty House as an act of charity to Mr Chamberlain, but also because he knew how fragile were the buildings in Downing-street.

The staff at No. 10 feared it was the end of an era all the same. Chamberlain's secretary dourly hoped that his old master would soon be back in office.<sup>3</sup> Overseas reactions to Winston's assumption of power were equally mixed. Canada's Mackenzie King cabled support, but Roosevelt did not: when the news irrupted into his own cabinet he remarked that, though Churchill was the best man that England had, he was drunk half of the time. Winston was, he could not forget, one of the few public men who had ever been rude to him.<sup>4</sup>

For the first three days, Churchill barely applied his mind to the battle. He had old accounts to settle. Lord Hankey had rebuked him in 1938 over his 'pumping [of] serving officers' for material to abuse the government with; suspecting that Winston had never forgiven him, he wrote a letter of resignation but was awarded a minor ministerial office.<sup>5</sup>

Visiting Churchill on the eleventh to report on the XD teams' swift demolition of oil, power, harbour and coastal installations in the Low Countries, Hankey found the offices in chaos and Chamberlain in despair. 'The dictator,' he wrote to Sam Hoare, 'instead of dictating, was engaged in a sordid wrangle with the politicians of the Left about the secondary offices.' He saw some hope of stability in the solid core of Churchill, Chamberlain and Halifax: 'But whether the wise old elephants will ever be

able to hold the Rogue Elephant, I doubt.’<sup>6</sup> (The allusion was to a memorable cartoon by Mark Sykes.)

Labour had been swept out of office in 1931; recently, they had feared that a snap election would bury them for good. Now they were exploiting the military crisis to ram vital elements of the class struggle down Churchill’s throat, divining that there were few high Tory principles he would not sacrifice to entrench his government. That afternoon he offered two war cabinet seats out of five to Labour men – Attlee and Greenwood. Ernest Bevin, the earthy, honest and capable boss of the transport workers’ union, agreed to serve as labour minister – but only after extracting promises that union legislation would be revised.

Winston’s stalwart friends of the Focus were well rewarded. He brought into No. 10 a wagonload of friends described by shuddering permanent officials like Alec Cadogan as ‘the most awful people.’ Lindemann, Morton and Bracken headed the list, and they joined eagerly in the massacre of the rest. Sir Horace Wilson, head of the civil service and Chamberlain’s chief adviser, was physically evicted immediately. ‘The day Winston took over,’ Harold Macmillan snickered to a Labour intimate, ‘Sir H. Quisling came to his room as usual, but found that the “parachute troops” were already in possession. Bracken and Randolph Churchill, the latter in uniform, were sitting on the sofa. No words were exchanged. These two stared fixedly at Sir H.Q., who silently withdrew, never to return.’ Churchill gave Wilson until two P.M. to get out. ‘Tell that man,’ exploded Winston, when Wilson pleaded for four more hours, ‘that if that room is not cleared by two I will make him minister to Iceland.’<sup>7</sup>

Pandering to the other party organisations, he selected the Liberal leader Archie Sinclair as air minister, and A. V. Alexander, a Labour politician, as First Lord. These men would hold those offices throughout the war, in name at least: neither would seriously oppose him. Eden became secretary of war by virtue of the same distinction. As for Winston’s own new post of minister of defence, he told his chief of staff Pug Ismay, ‘We must be careful not to define our powers too precisely.’ In fact he intended to set the limits at infinity. Alexander, a former grocer, impressed few (though it is fair to mention that Sir Robert Menzies, Australia’s most enlightened prime minister, grew to admire the new First Lord). His appointment confirmed Captain Edwards’s suspicions as to Churchill’s real reason for remaining at Admiralty House: ‘I suspect him of becoming P.M. and 1st Lord. God help the Empire. It’s a disaster.’

The reshuffle met with a frosty royal disapproval. The king later confided to Roosevelt’s emissary that he had a low opinion of Churchill’s ministers. He balked at having to appoint Winston’s carrot-topped re-



tainer Brendan Bracken to the Privy Council. Mr Churchill was adamant. 'Mr Bracken,' he reminded the king's private secretary, 'has sometimes been almost my sole supporter in the years when I have been striving to get this country properly defended, especially from the air. He has suffered as I have done every form of official hostility.'

The king frowned even more upon Lord Beaverbrook; he had not forgotten the abdication crisis, and knew of Canadian hostility to this man.<sup>8</sup> Churchill hired him nonetheless and did not regret it. He had been out of power too long, perhaps, and needed a political insider whose brains he could pick. So we find them eating together on the eleventh, and whiling away a whole afternoon together on the twelfth. Shamelessly fawning on the new P.M., a few hours later Beaverbrook wrote him: 'I remember a trainload of Blue Jackets at Victoria Station cheering you wildly after you were dismissed from the admiralty in 1915.'<sup>9</sup> Having learned in Norway belated lessons about air power, Churchill created a ministry of aircraft production and gave it to this potent Canadian – one of the more inspired appointments in his cabinet.

As for the rest, Churchill appointed the Cockney London leader Herbert Morrison to the ministry of supply. Telephoning Hugh Dalton to offer him the ministry of economic warfare that he coveted – at the controls of the subversive war – he apologised, 'Well, if you'll excuse ceremony, I'll have that announced tonight. Time is pressing, and it's a life and death struggle.' 'You'll take the oath tomorrow,' he added, 'the Privy Council office will tell you when.'<sup>10</sup> The treasury found itself handed to the insipid Sir Kingsley Wood, a politician singularly innocent of qualifications. *The Economist* called it a disaster, but we know from Dalton's diary that Wood, like Macmillan, had judiciously kept in cahoots with Labour. The succession of Winston's other champion Duff Cooper to the ministry of information caused pain throughout Whitehall.

Not everybody was willingly seduced. Offered a lowly post at the ministry of food, Emanuel Shinwell telephoned that it was 'a bloody insult.'<sup>11</sup> Churchill bestowed it on Boothby instead. Stanley, eased out of the war office to make way for Eden, also refused a lesser office. 'There were a number of times,' he confessed to the new P.M., 'on which I questioned your judgement.'<sup>12</sup>

This process of cabinet-making distracted him until three A.M. on the thirteenth, when he grew bored with the process. 'My government,' he told Macmillan, 'is the most broad based that Britain has ever known.'<sup>13</sup> He summoned them to the admiralty that afternoon. 'I have nothing to offer,' he told them, 'but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' He rather liked the sound of that. Glancing up as though the skies might fill with Hitler's

bombers at any moment, he commented to Dalton afterward, not without pleasurable anticipation, 'I expect all these buildings will look a bit different in two or three weeks' time.'<sup>14</sup>



His popularity was still volatile. He stepped into the chamber that day to near silence, while Chamberlain was cheered – 'a terrific reception' as one M.P. recorded in puzzlement.<sup>15</sup>

When it was Winston's turn to rise, he repeated those ringing words: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' 'You ask,' he said, 'what is our policy? I will say: it is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy.'

As his car left him at the back gate to No. 10, he heard voices murmur, 'Good luck, Winnie,' and, 'God bless you.'

'Poor people,' he reflected, 'I can give them nothing but disaster for quite a long time.'<sup>16</sup>

THEN HITLER sprung his ugliest surprise, and hurled his Panzer divisions against France. In four days the catastrophe would be so complete that the confusion over Norway was as nothing in comparison. Cabinets would meet several times a day; meetings would overlap; orders would be issued, re-issued, and countermanded; frequently no records would be taken.

Churchill was a driven man – propelled by a purpose more profound than any other: military victory alone, whatever the cost to his country, would expunge the blemishes left on his name by a history of defeats from Gallipoli to Norway. Such manic purpose was unlikely to prosper rational decision.

The horrifying, unexpected crisis in France broke on the afternoon of the fourteenth with a telephone call from Paul Reynaud. 'The German army,' he announced, 'has smashed through our fortified lines south of Sedan.' He implored Winston to send over ten more fighter squadrons. Without them he could not halt the enemy advance. 'Between Sedan and Paris there are no fortifications.'<sup>17</sup> There followed a hastily-written note from the French ambassador appealing for massive air support: 'M Paul Reynaud assesses that Germany has now unmasked her real intentions by throwing in everything she's got.'

Now Churchill's affection for the French nearly proved Britain's undoing. Blinded by that emotion, he laboured mightily to give her those

extra squadrons, although the air ministry warned earnestly that Britain herself needed sixty and was already down to thirty-nine. Meeting at six P.M. the chiefs of staff warned him not to humour France's panicky request.<sup>18</sup>

An hour later Reynaud telephoned again: monstrous tanks had crossed the Meuse and were trampling through the anti-tank defences. Nothing stood between them and Paris. Churchill now agreed – so Reynaud told the American ambassador William C. Bullitt who saw him moments later – to send over every available plane.<sup>19</sup> But a gloomy and unpleasant cabinet meeting again prevailed upon him to hesitate before further denuding London, heart of the British empire. Even so, the reply which his secretary dictated by phone to Paris was not wholly discouraging – they were considering the French appeal, this said, but it would take time.<sup>20</sup>

STILL PUTTING the finishing touches to his government, Churchill retired to Admiralty House with his Chief Whip. Shaken by the day's events, he telephoned Beaverbrook to come over. The press lord had been drinking heavily. He listened to the ferocious news of Sedan and fled.<sup>21</sup>

Eden, Sinclair and Ismay dropped by. They were joined around midnight by the American ambassador with an alarming rumour from Rome – Mussolini seemed about to spring to Hitler's aid. The scene was well depicted by John Colville, whom the P.M. had inherited from Chamberlain as private secretary: 'They walked about,' he wrote, 'talking to each other, while Winston popped in and out, first through one door and then the next, appointing under-secretaries . . . talking about the German threat to Sedan with Eden, and listening to the alarmist, and, I think, untrustworthy opinions of Mr Kennedy.'<sup>22</sup>

According to Kennedy, Churchill blurted out that the war was lost, and he was going to appeal to Roosevelt. 'What can we do,' inquired Kennedy, 'that won't leave us holding the bag?'

He cabled Washington immediately upon his return to the embassy at two A.M.: 'He [Churchill] considers the chances of the Allies winning is [sic] slight with the entrance of Italy.'

'You know our strength,' I said. 'If we wanted to help all we can, what could we do? You don't need credit or money now; the bulk of our navy is in the Pacific Ocean, our army is not up to requirements, and we haven't sufficient aeroplanes for our own use. So what could we do if this is going to be a quick war all over in a few months?'

Churchill suggested America lend thirty or forty old destroyers (Britain had lost nine off Norway). He himself would never give up, 'even if England were burnt to the ground.' 'Why,' he told Kennedy, 'the government will move, take the fleet with it to Canada and fight on.'<sup>23</sup>

Churchill drafted a telegram to Roosevelt, signed 'Former Naval Person.' It began, 'Although I have changed my office, I am sure you would not wish me to discontinue our intimate, private correspondence.' He predicted that Hitler would attack Britain soon. 'If necessary,' he reiterated, 'we shall continue the war alone and we are not afraid of that.' He warned what would happen if Roosevelt should hesitate too long. 'You may have a completely subjugated, Nazified Europe established with astonishing swiftness, and the weight may be more than we can bear.' Britain's first need, he amplified, was for the loan of 'forty or fifty' destroyers; after that, aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, ammunition, and steel. 'We shall go on paying dollars for as long as we can,' he promised, 'but I should like to feel reasonably sure that when we can pay no more you will give us the stuff all the same.'<sup>24</sup>

HE SNATCHED a few hours of sleep. At seven A.M. the telephone rang: it was the French prime minister again, in extreme agitation – '*Nous sommes battus!* We're beaten!' The enemy were cascading through a fifty-mile breach. The road to Paris was wide open. More British squadrons must be thrown in. '*Nous avons perdu la bataille!*' he kept repeating. 'We've lost the battle!'

'*Impossible!*' shouted Churchill – in fact Reynaud told Bullitt that he screamed.<sup>25</sup> 'That can't have happened so fast. All experience shows that after a time an offensive comes to a halt of its own accord. Remember March the twenty-first, 1918!' This was no time to panic – surely the invaders must now be at their most vulnerable. 'Everything's changed,' he heard Reynaud say. 'There's a torrent of Panzers pouring through.'

Wide awake, Churchill retorted that whatever France elected to do, Britain would fight on – 'if necessary alone.' He promised to urge his colleagues to release more fighter squadrons. Meanwhile he asked to speak to General Georges.<sup>26</sup>

Locating the general was not easy. There were no communication links at all between General Georges, the British commander Lord Gort, and the French commander-in-chief General Gamelin. It was ten-thirty before Georges came on the phone. He confirmed the serious breach at Sedan, but was optimistic that it had been plugged.

Photographers, sensing the crisis, snapped Winston as he hurried across Horse Guards Parade to No. 10 – scowling, in sombre suit, heavy

watch chain and black homburg, carrying leather gloves and cane. Evasively, he assured the chiefs of staff that he had warned Georges that Britain had no squadrons to spare; Georges, he said, had 'quite understood.'<sup>27</sup> But the note of panic in Reynaud's voice had not escaped him, and he was contemplating crossing immediately to Paris to 'sustain' his government.

The chief of air staff had received a direct appeal from Gamelin for ten fighter squadrons.<sup>28</sup> Bluff, broad-shouldered Sir Cyril Newall was worried that Winston might fritter away their last squadrons in France. He persuaded his colleagues to give Sir Hugh Dowding, chief of R.A.F. Fighter Command, a hearing. Dowding made plain that he was against parting with a 'single additional Hurricane.' A gaunt, moustached air chief marshal, Dowding was widely disliked in Whitehall. He had trodden on many toes; he had become a spiritualist too (though careful to reveal his belief in the occult only to those who shared his mystic persuasions, like Dill and Mackenzie King).\*

Dowding carried the argument about squadrons into the war cabinet that morning, May 15. Temporarily convinced, Churchill persuaded his colleagues to approve the strategic bombing of Germany as from that night – 'the soundest action which we could take in the present situation,' in Dowding's words. Luring the enemy airforce over Britain, Churchill explained, would relieve the pressure on France. The cabinet decided to send no more squadrons to France 'for the present.'<sup>30</sup>

Of course there were fallacies in the strategic argument: the bombers that would be used for an attack on Britain, for example, were very different from the units engaged over the battlefield. But Churchill had political reasons for wanting the air attack on Britain to begin, as will become apparent. He candidly repeated the strategic argument in a letter to Reynaud justifying the negative decision on the fighter squadrons.

We are all agreed that it is better to draw the enemy onto this Island by striking at his vitals, and thus to aid the common cause.

He repeated his earlier observation on the 'phone: all experience of earlier wars taught that the enemy's real difficulties were about to begin. They would certainly not be lessened merely by making a 'bulge' in the

\* In 1942 a Sunday newspaper mischievously reported a statement by Dowding: 'I am sure that our war dead live on. I have read messages from them.' He claimed to have received these through automatic writing. In April 1943 he offered to let Beaverbrook 'see a number of messages from men killed on the battlefield in this war.' His lordship understood what was meant, and tactfully declined.<sup>29</sup>

front; they would in fact increase with each kilometre that the enemy advanced. So he reassured the nervous French prime minister.<sup>31</sup>

The fighter controversy continued on the sixteenth. Sinclair, the air minister, took the same line as Dowding. But the chiefs of staff had news that Hitler's troops had penetrated the vaunted Maginot Line. Stampeded refugees were clogging the roads. Gamelin again demanded ten squadrons, this time in a telegram to Churchill.<sup>32</sup> Churchill felt that he should comply, if only to put heart into the French soldiers. Newall advised sending four squadrons; Churchill suggested they add two more by weakening the Scapa defences, but Sinclair rebelled at this excessive generosity.

SEVERE THOUGH the blow of the Sedan breakthrough had been to the French, its effect on the B.E.F. was traumatic.

Lord Gort's papers were lost, but the private diaries kept by his chief of staff Sir Henry Pownall reveal him as clutching at straws, unnerved by trivial setbacks, and elated by the palest gleams of better news. His corps commanders shared these faults. On the fifteenth Lieutenant-General Alan Brooke, commanding II Corps, was already imagining both flanks being turned and the force having to 'extricate' itself: 'But,' he wrote, 'I still have a firm conviction that Right must conquer over Wrong.' Entries like these in his leatherbound, locked diary betray little confidence. He had lived in this idyllic spring countryside of cuckoos and cowslips for months, sentimental, homesick and under-employed, and Hitler's offensive had caught him, like the B.E.F., literally napping. Lieutenant-General Michael Barker, commanding I Corps, suffered a partial nervous breakdown. Small wonder that, as Gort saw the B.E.F. being unhinged, encircled and swept toward the sea, he proved incapable of developing a consistent offensive strategy to thwart the audacious German plan. No matter that his force did not encounter the full weight of the enemy at any stage during the retreat – Hitler had singled out the Dutch, the Belgians and the French for his main assault.

The B.E.F. had reached its forward defensive line in Belgium on the thirteenth. Two nights later Gort authorised its withdrawal. As it leap-frogged back from one line to the next, it forfeited stores, communications networks, officers' morale, and the confidence of its allies. The alliance would end at Dunkirk with lawless French soldiers murdering Major-General Bernard Montgomery's operations officer, with mutual recriminations, and with allegations of betrayal.<sup>33</sup>

By the sixteenth at least one of Churchill's colleagues – perhaps Lord Halifax – had written off the French. Quoting him, Kennedy secretly warned Roosevelt to face up to a possible Allied collapse. 'This crack-up

can come like a stroke of lightning.' He added: 'It is the view of my friend that nothing can save them from absolute defeat unless by some touch of genius and God's blessing the President can do it. This is absolutely reliable information.'<sup>34</sup>

Churchill refused to concede defeat so easily. 'It is ridiculous,' he exclaimed, 'to think that France can be conquered by 120 tanks!' By five P.M. he was in Paris, being shown into the prime minister's study at the Quai d'Orsay. He found Reynaud and Gamelin a picture of Gallic desolation. Daladier was barely on speaking terms with Reynaud; a certain lady still came between them. Gamelin for that matter was not on speaking terms with Georges. Churchill's own temper can be gauged from his reply when told – wrongly – by Gamelin that railroad strikes in Belgium had hampered troop movements: 'Shoot the strikers!' he rasped.<sup>35</sup>

Warning that enemy tanks might be *in* Paris by midnight, the city's military governor had recommended the government to flee. The political archives were already being destroyed. Ancient officials were heaping government files onto bonfires.<sup>36</sup> 'A mass of charred paper is flying around the garden of this office building,' pencilled Daladier in his notes. 'The files are being burnt. Smoke-laden atmosphere.'

On a wall map Churchill espied the offending bulge at Sedan.

'Churchill believes,' noted Daladier, 'that the salient can be tied off just as in 1918. I have to tell him you can't compare the two wars.'

Roland de Margerie, Reynaud's secretary, recorded the short discussion that developed on the German tank danger. Churchill still declined to take it seriously. 'Unless,' he said, 'the tanks are supported by considerable infantry forces they are just coloured flags stuck into a map – no more and no less. They can't support themselves or keep themselves supplied.' What they were looking at was not, in his view, a real invasion.

He asked General Gamelin when he was going to strike at the flanks of that bulge. The Frenchman shrugged – a gesture of hopelessness that stuck in Churchill's mind long after<sup>37</sup> – and spoke of 'Inferior numbers. Inferior equipment (armament). Inferior methods (doctrines).'

Churchill wheeled his kitchen French into action. 'Where is your mass of manoeuvre?' There was that shrug again, and this time Gamelin emphasised it by turning up the palms of both hands. '*Aucune!* – None,' he said. He talked about giving up the Namur–Wavre line in Belgium.

'Now that we have got there,' objected Winston, 'why should we retire? Let us fight on that line.'

The French asked for six fighter squadrons in addition to the four arriving that day. Churchill doubted they would make any difference.

'The French,' said Daladier, 'believe the contrary.' His record mirrors the blistering exchanges as the British argued that it would delay the Germans if they bombed the Ruhr.

I declare it absurd in my view to believe this [wrote the French war minister]. Damage to the Ruhr will leave them stone cold, they're not going to let their prey slip away like that. No, Britain's fate is being sealed in this salient.

Britain can't send over one more division to France (and there are only eight here now!) because their men are not trained (after eight months!). So let Britain at least send aeroplanes. London has to be defended right here.

Churchill drove back to his embassy to talk it over with London. At nine P.M. he dictated a recommendation that the cabinet release the six squadrons. 'It would not be good historically,' he reasoned, 'if their requests were denied and their ruin resulted.' (His aides in London sardonically commented: 'He's still thinking of his books.'<sup>38</sup>) His message ended with purple prose: 'I again emphasise the mortal gravity of the hour.' In London this attracted a remark about his 'blasted rhetoric,' but it did the trick. At midnight he received their telegram of agreement expressed in the Hindustani word for *Yes* – a language Pug Ismay understood.

Half an hour later they drove up to Reynaud's apartment. It was swathed in velvety darkness, and their gaze fell upon a lady's fur coat in the drawing room. Reynaud emerged; they read out the telegram; they prevailed upon him to fetch Daladier.

'I gave Churchill's hand a grateful squeeze,' recorded Daladier in his diary, perhaps oblivious of the fur coat.

Since enemy tanks might at any moment roll into Paris, Churchill rose at the crack of dawn and was back with his cabinet at ten A.M. His stamina was truly remarkable.

THIS DAY – May 17, 1940 – was the beginning of the great betrayal. Churchill had not missed the significance of that bulge. He confided to young Colville, who had met him at Hendon airport, that Gort's force might be cut off. Anxious to know Roosevelt's reply to his appeal, he telephoned Grosvenor-square from Hendon; at eleven Ambassador Kennedy was shown in.

The president's message offered legalisms, verbiage, and little else. Lending destroyers would require the sanction of a hostile Congress. In response to Winston's hint that part of the U.S. fleet should move to Sin-



gapore – 'I am looking to you to keep the Japanese quiet in the Pacific, using Singapore in any way convenient' – Roosevelt replied that the fleet would remain at Pearl Harbor.<sup>39</sup>

The original survives, drafted in his own hand, so there is no denying the authorship. Was Roosevelt's unhelpful attitude guided by lethargy, composure, or calculation? He had received an even less cheering telegram from his Paris embassy. Bullitt had cabled into his 'most private ear' that France was about to be crushed. 'You should have in mind,' warned Bullitt, 'the hypothesis that . . . the British may install a government of Oswald Mosley. . . That would mean that the British navy would be against us.' He urged Roosevelt to ensure – perhaps by 'some direct arrangement with the officers of the British fleet' – that it moved to Canada in time.<sup>40</sup>

A fresh appeal for air support had arrived from Gamelin, pointing out the obvious: 'The thrust threatens the British army's line of communications.'<sup>41</sup> After admitting to Kennedy that Hitler's purpose was now clear – to cut off the northern part of the Allied line – Churchill charged Chamberlain to study the evacuation of the B.E.F. through the Channel ports.<sup>42</sup>

For a while he dropped into his bed at the admiralty to catch up on his sleep. Nobody grudged it. ('A grand man!' marvelled Dalton.) Then he hurried over to the palace, late though it was.

SINCE WASHINGTON would not help, the Anglo–French plan to blast Stalin's oilfields was quietly put on ice. At Lord Halifax's suggestion, the cabinet decided to send Sir Stafford Cripps, an influential left-wing Socialist, on an exploratory mission to Moscow. 'If it goes wrong,' said Dalton, 'don't blame me.' Churchill made the wan reply: 'You're on velvet.'<sup>43</sup>

In Belgium the retreat went on. Brussels, an open city, was left to the enemy on Friday the seventeenth, after Gort's troops had wrecked its telephone exchange; in Antwerp that Saturday Royal Navy demolition teams torched the oil installations.<sup>44</sup> In London, Churchill gave his chief of Imperial General Staff, 'Tiny' Ironside, the dubious order to 'concert plans' with Gort to safeguard the B.E.F. in 'various eventualities' – even though the force came under French orders.<sup>45</sup>

That decision taken, Churchill sought sanctuary in the countryside. At five P.M. Colville handed him a cryptic message – evidently about the attempts to seal the enemy breach – dictated over the phone by Brigadier John Swayne from Georges field headquarters.

Patient is rather lower and depressed. The lower part of the wound continues to heal, but as I expected, the upper part had started to suppurate again, though they tell me that so far they

have not seen much pus. The effect of the injection will not be known for some time, but I have asked the Doctors to let me know as soon as possible the general effect, which, as you will realise, must be the combined result of many local injections.<sup>46</sup>

He had wanted to spend Trinity Sunday, May 19, at Chartwell, ministering to the goldfish and the one black swan that had survived a marauding fox. But at mid-day the telephone rang. A message had come from Lord Gort about basing himself on Dunkirk, a little French port across the Straits of Dover, and fighting it out with his back to the sea.



Lord Gort was accustomed to fighting offensive actions, unversed in the defence – a Manstein rather than Model. To be instructed to concert plans for ‘various eventualities’ was hardly calculated to inspire. He was faced by difficulties that seemed insuperable: his signals communications were fraught by premature demolitions, by power failures, by despatch rider shortages, and by the reluctance of truculent Belgian postal and telegraph officials to assist a failing ally against Germany, an ancient and substantial neighbour.

That Sunday morning Lord Gort was already alarmed by wildly inaccurate reports from the French general charged with co-ordinating the Allied armies, G. H. G. Billotte, about enemy formations getting in behind them. When Lord Gort now called the apprehensive corps commanders to what one of them, Brooke, called ‘a momentous’ conference at Armentières that morning, their eyes were fixed on Blighty. ‘GHQ had a scheme,’ Brooke wrote that day in his diary, ‘for a move . . . toward Dunkirk, establishing a defended area round this place and embarking all we could of the personnel of the B.E.F., abandoning stores and equipment.’

The alternative – counter-attacking – was easily dismissed. ‘To go south-west was impossible,’ summarised Pownall in his diary. He and Gort favoured Dunkirk; Brooke, fearing that a rush for the French ports would prompt an immediate Belgian defection, imperilling the B.E.F., suggested those in Belgium.

This was why, toward mid-day, Pownall had telephoned the war office to set out ‘what might become necessary’ – a retreat to Dunkirk, whence it might be possible to ship some troops home.\* An hour or two

\* Thus the bare bones of Pownall’s conversation with the director of military operations, Major-General R. H. Dewing. According to *his* record, Pownall stressed they would

later he telephoned again to discuss the Belgian ports as an alternative. He revealed that Gort had already authorised Air Vice-Marshal C. H. B. Blount to send some of his airforce component back to England. One way or another, the B.E.F. was quitting.

At the cabinet to which Winston was summoned in London that afternoon, Ironside declared that he had turned down Gort's evacuation plan. Churchill agreed: on the contrary, the B.E.F. must strike south to Amiens, cutting off the enemy spearheads. The cabinet broke up in dejection. Ironside murmured to Eden, 'This is the end of the British empire.'<sup>48</sup>

The indomitable prime minister wanted to fly out to Gort himself; he had a suitcase packed before he could be persuaded to leave the mission to Ironside. Instead, he made an impromptu broadcast, incredulous that three or four million French soldiers could be overwhelmed by a sudden 'scoop or raid of mechanised vehicles.' He warned that Hitler might in a few days turn against Britain.

Behind the armies and fleets of Britain and France gather[s] a group of shattered States and bludgeoned races: the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, the Belgians – upon all of whom the long night of barbarism will descend, unbroken even by a star of hope, unless we conquer, as conquer we must; as conquer we shall.

AFTER HIS broadcast he ordered a study of the fighter cover needed for an evacuation. He called for the chiefs of staff, he summoned Eden, he sent for Beaverbrook. Together they listened while Professor Lindemann drafted a bullying message to Washington, trading on the possibility that Britain might surrender her fleet to Hitler.

'Here's a telegram for those bloody Yankees,' Churchill barked at Colville. 'Send it off tonight.' Ninety minutes after midnight it went to the American embassy. The duty officer, Tyler Kent, scribbled a copy for his own purposes. 'I am very sorry about the destroyers,' Churchill's message said. 'If they were here in six weeks they would play an invaluable part.' Britain also urgently needed Curtiss P40 fighters. Then came the threat:

not withdraw unless (unspecified) French operations to the south failed. His note was drafted retrospectively – he evacuated his genuinely contemporary diary that same Sunday to his wife in England – and for an evident purpose, because he invited Gort and the corps commanders Brooke and Barker to sign the following handwritten endorsement: 'I heard the GHQ end of this conversation and the above is a fair summary.'<sup>47</sup>

If members of the present Administration were finished and others came in to parley amid the ruins, you must not be blind to the fact that the sole remaining bargaining counter with Germany would be the Fleet, and if this country was left by the United States to its fate no one would have the right to blame those then responsible if they made the best terms they could for the surviving inhabitants. Excuse me Mr President putting this nightmare bluntly.<sup>49</sup>

It was muscular language. Even Churchill got cold feet and asked Group Captain William Elliot, one of Ismay's staff, to have it stopped. Double-checking, the American embassy contacted No. 10 but learned that the P.M. still lived at Admiralty House. 'The prime minister,' Elliot apologised, rather stating the obvious, 'is rather unorthodox in his methods. . . Mr Churchill was asleep and could not be disturbed. . .' Finally he raised the Prof. 'As it turned out,' Elliot concluded nonchalantly, 'it was he who sent the message in the first place.'

The next morning, May 20, Churchill decided to let the message stand. 'I fetched this back during the night for a final view,' he told Ismay, 'but decided not to alter anything. Now despatch.'<sup>50</sup>

'THE ADMIRALTY,' he directed at his eleven-thirty cabinet that Monday morning, 'should assemble a large number of small vessels in readiness to proceed to ports and inlets on the French coast.'

Ironside had flown over to straighten out Lord Gort. Increasingly disenchanted with Ironside, however, Churchill had also sent over the Vice C.I.G.S., Sir John Dill, to recommend an energetic south-west offensive personally to the French high command. He now telephoned Dill to warn them that failing this, Britain would take whatever steps she could for the security of her forces. 'This might involve withdrawing to cover the Channel ports.'<sup>51</sup>

Ironside telephoned to say that Gort was blaming the slowness of the B.E.F. push southward on refugees choking the roads. In fact Gort had briefed the 5th and 50th divisions only on Sunday evening to make 'a small offensive' from Arras on Tuesday.<sup>52</sup>

The age-old problems of military coalition were surfacing in Flanders: the British found the French undisciplined and temperamental; the French found the British pedantic and pigheaded. The intervention from London strained already-taught tempers at B.E.F. Pownall described the instructions brought by Ironside, to attack south-west toward Amiens, as 'scandalous (i.e., Winstonian)' and 'quite impossible.' Drawing attention to

'some enemy mechanised parties' in that area, he and Gort convinced their visitor of the folly. The French high command found Gort's obstinacy mystifying. Over at his headquarters, purple-faced from shouting, Billotte persuaded Ironside and Pownall that the full-scale counter-attack must go ahead.

Taking an increasingly hard-nosed view of the future, Churchill ordered the navy's XD teams to prepare – of necessity, in secret – to demolish the northern French ports and installations. That afternoon he received confirmation from Dill that he had passed the warning about the consequences of failure – independent action by Britain – to generals Georges and Weygand at mid-day. (Weygand had arrived from the Middle East to replace the discredited Gamelin, whom Reynaud suspected of sabotaging his orders.)

The Dardanelles, Norway, and now Dunkirk: Churchill was facing yet another fiasco. By Tuesday May 21 Hitler's tanks were bearing down on Boulogne. Ironside flew back from Belgium, saw Winston that morning, and wrote in his diary: '[He] persists in thinking the position no worse.' 'It is a shock,' admitted one of Winston's staff, 'that the Germans should have penetrated so far.' Something like fatalism had grasped him. Recalling a happier Riviera evening two years earlier, he remarked grimly to Eden, 'About time No. 17 turned up!'<sup>53</sup>

But it was Hitler who had rolled high and was winning. That day his spearheads reached the estuary of the Somme at Abbeville. Ecstatic with praise for his generals, he talked of the generous peace he would now offer Britain: he had no claims on her; he had taken pains not to injure the B.E.F. 'The British can have their peace,' he exclaimed, 'as soon as they return our colonies to us.'\*

Churchill had no intention of giving up. He talked of the perils of invasion, and envisaged a paratroop assault on Whitehall itself. At that evening's defence committee he learned that thousands of soldiers in the depots had never taken a rifle to their shoulder; there were only 150,000 rifles in the whole kingdom.<sup>54</sup> Undismayed, he ordered sandbagged machine-gun posts set up covering the streets and arches of Whitehall.<sup>55</sup> Over in Belgium, at a 4:15 P.M. conference that afternoon, Lord Gort told his corps commanders the B.E.F. would fall back on its original frontier defence line the following evening.

AS THE French waited for Lord Gort to comply with Billotte's orders to counter-attack, the exchanges between Paris and London sharpened. At six P.M. Reynaud's secretary handed to the embassy Weygand's stiffly-

\* *Hitler's War*, page 118.

worded demand that Churchill 'invite' his airforce 'to initiate bombing operations on the battlefield as requested by General Billotte who is,' the new C-in-C reminded the British, 'co-ordinating the operations of the French, British and Belgian armies in Belgium.'<sup>56</sup>

But the R.A.F. was away bombing targets in the Ruhr, and Billotte's prestige with the British was in decline – some documents called him supine and useless. Trying in vain to raise Reynaud by telephone, Churchill rasped, 'In all the history of war I have never known such mismanagement.'

That evening Colville broke the news that Billotte had been critically injured in a car crash. The prime minister decided to fly again to Paris, and preach the gospel of attack.

There is no doubt that a bold counter-attack would have thrown the Germans into disarray, though for how long will always be open to dispute. Battle fatigue was making itself felt among the German troops. Hitler was nervous about his armour's flank defences, and General Fedor von Bock, commanding the army group facing the British, noted growing concern about his own lack of reserves.

On that afternoon, May 21, two British divisions had launched their 'small offensive' south of Arras and advanced eight miles. They found the territory thinly defended, inflicted casualties, took four hundred prisoners, suffered few losses, and bestowed a mortal fright on General Erwin Rommel, commanding the 7th Panzer division here. For the first time his tank crews found themselves fighting the British, and engaging a tank – the Matilda Mark II – that their 37-millimetre gun could not pierce. Justifying his setback here, Rommel would declare he had been attacked by five divisions. But then the British, mystifyingly, pulled back. By Wednesday May 22 even the timorous General Pownall had begun to see the B.E.F. corps commanders as 'unduly pessimistic.'

LONG BEFORE dawn on that Wednesday, Churchill had flown to France. He reached Reynaud's office after some aerial detour at mid-day and they drove on out to Weygand's fortress headquarters at Vincennes. The new C-in-C was seventy-three but fighting fit. Billotte having now died of his injuries, his place as army group commander was taken by the French General J. M. G. Blanchard, who visibly did not relish it.

Weygand received the two Allied premiers in his map room. He was optimistic. Altogether there were forty divisions – French, Belgian and British – north of the German thrust line. He refused to hear of retreating but demanded a full-blooded offensive southward, meeting a similar northward offensive by French forces massing under General Frère on the

Somme.<sup>57</sup> Churchill grunted frequent approval, according to Villelume's record, but Weygand wanted more than noises. He asked 'in firm and exact, although courteous, terms' for promises of greater British air support. Churchill so promised. He drafted a formal agreement to the Weygand plan, which both Reynaud and he himself initialled at one-fifteen P.M. Under this plan, eight of the forty divisions would launch a strategic counter-offensive toward Bapaume and Cambrai beginning on the morrow. They would liberate Amiens and meet Frère advancing from the south.<sup>58</sup>

By seven-thirty he was relating the Weygand plan to the war cabinet. His buoyancy was washed away by Eden, who had been telephoned at five P.M. by Gort's ADC, Lord Munster. 'Boy' Munster had had to come to the Belgian coast to telephone, since the cross-Channel telegraphic cable at Dunkirk had now been interrupted.<sup>59</sup> The B.E.F., his Lordship had said, was running out of food and ammunition, and he believed the French had got cold feet about the projected offensive. Eden reported that Munster would like to be fetched home by a destroyer 'if we wished to see him.'<sup>60</sup> (They didn't.) Between them, Eden and Gort killed the counter-offensive.

The war office had set up a direct radio circuit to Gort, enabling Eden to by-pass the French.\* Churchill persisted with the Weygand plan, however, telegraphing to Lord Gort that it tallied exactly with the 'general directions you have received from the war office.' This evoked from Pownall the shocked observation in his diary that they had received no directions except for 'the scribbled paper by Tiny [Ironsides] telling us to do an impossible *saue qui peut* to Amiens.'

Here are Winston's plans again. Can nobody prevent him trying to conduct operations himself as a super commander-in-chief? How does he think we are to collect eight divisions and attack as he suggests.

In an entry indicative of their mood, Gort's chief of staff concluded: 'The man's mad. I suppose these figments of the imagination are telegraphed without consulting his military advisers.'<sup>62</sup>



Tough decisions also had to be made about Norway. Aware from intercepts of the enemy's plight at Narvik, Churchill had signalled to Lord Cork, 'I should be very much obliged if you would enable me to under-

\* It was first monitored by German army Intelligence on May 22.<sup>61</sup>

stand what is holding you back.’ But now the chiefs of staff had to advise him to abandon Norway altogether as soon as they had captured Narvik. On May 23 he agreed: Britain would shortly need the weaponry and troops for her own defence.<sup>63</sup>

The news from France was a study in black. The war room maps in the admiralty showed the enemy Panzers inside Boulogne and perhaps Calais as well. General Brooke was torn between despair (‘Nothing but a miracle can save the B.E.F. now. . . The end cannot be very far off!’) and admiration for their phenomenal opponents: ‘There is no doubt that [the Germans] are the most wonderful soldiers.’

Frustrated, Churchill telegraphed to Reynaud a demand for the ‘immediate execution’ of the Weygand plan. That afternoon he impatiently telephoned as well. Reynaud took note of Churchill’s opening remarks: ‘Given the situation with the Panzer divisions, he wonders if it wouldn’t be better for the British army to beat a retreat to the ports.’

The Frenchman replied haughtily, ‘Weygand is satisfied. We must not change anything now’; and, in English, ‘*We must go on.*’<sup>64</sup>

Worried by the undertone to Churchill’s remarks, Reynaud had Weygand brought to the telephone at six P.M. to talk to London. The commander-in-chief assured Churchill that his planned attack *had* begun – indeed his forces had already retaken Amiens, Albert and Péronne in their northward drive.\* Churchill told his colleagues at the cabinet that he saw no choice but to conform to the plan.

Word of the crisis reached Buckingham Palace. The king asked to see Churchill after dinner, and wrote down the prime minister’s report that if the Weygand plan ‘did not come off’ he would order the B.E.F. back to England.<sup>66</sup>

But the great betrayal had already begun, effectively concealed from history. Without a word to Weygand, at about seven P.M. Gort had ordered the two attacking divisions, the 5th and 50th, to withdraw fifteen miles from Arras to the Canal Line. He gave a number of different reasons for this fateful decision. Their flank had been turned by ‘a number’ of armoured fighting vehicles; he had no word of the French thrust from the south; he wanted the two divisions to hold the perimeter from the Canal Line to the sea; they could attack southward later in conjunction with the

\* John Colville, Gort’s biographer, has termed this a deception, suggesting that Weygand was determined that ‘we should go under if *they* did.’ General von Bock’s diary, however, reveals the alarm caused by Weygand’s offensive<sup>65</sup>, and Reynaud’s private papers confirm that, at 4:20 P.M., Weygand had told Paul Boudouin that he was very satisfied with the development of operations since that morning. ‘He adds that our troops are touching Amiens, that he has been told of the message from Mr Winston Churchill and that he is happy to confirm once more their perfect community of views.’



First Army. Blanchard, unconvinced, accused the B.E.F. point-blank of ratting.<sup>67</sup>

Whatever the pretext, Gort had thus abandoned his half-hearted thrust toward the south – ‘For reasons to which history alone can apply an impartial judgement,’ as a chastened Reynaud would write, still baffled, after a year in captivity.<sup>68</sup> The effect on French opinion was annihilating. ‘Disobeying the orders of the G.O.C.-in-C,’ wrote Admiral Darlan in July, ‘and obeying orders from London, Lord Gort had his divisions retire forty kilometres for no valid military reason whatever.’ This, added Darlan, placed the French army to the east of him in a critical situation.<sup>69</sup> ‘The British lion,’ the admiral would write derisively to his wife, ‘seems to grow wings when it’s a matter of getting back to the sea.’<sup>70</sup>



An odd mood now mantled the English people. Ambassador Kennedy informed Washington that they still refused to believe they could be beaten. ‘I honestly don’t believe things will turn out as well as these people hope.’<sup>71</sup>

## 24: *An Avoidable Disaster*

EARLIER, HE had appeared as the champion of public liberties. In January 1939 he had told Kingsley Wood that Magna Carta and habeas corpus were indispensable to civilisation. ‘Criticism in the body politic,’ he had once said, when he was the leading critic, ‘is like pain in the human body. It is not pleasant, but where would the body be without it?’ Where criticism was crushed by concentration camp or firing squad, the dictator would be told only what he wanted to hear.

A less enlightened politician now ruled from Admiralty House. According to the security services there were fourteen thousand communists, eight thousand fascists, tens of thousands of aliens in Britain, and all were potential fifth columnists. He cleared the decks, instructing the chiefs of staff to intern ‘very considerable numbers,’ including the leading communists and fascists. He rolled up Magna Carta, suspended habeas corpus, and incarcerated the bigoted, the cranky, the extremist and the influential. Mosley was cast into prison; his organisation was ‘harried out of existence,’ its officers imprisoned, intimidated or ‘squelched.’<sup>1</sup>

Scotland Yard rooted out a particularly nasty cell on May 20. In a shabby rooming house off Oxford-street they arrested Tyler Kent, an American embassy cypher clerk, and found a brown portmanteau stuffed with hundreds of stolen documents including the secret messages exchanged between Churchill and Roosevelt.<sup>2</sup> Planning to blow the lid off their ‘intrigue’ he had squirreled away hundreds of documents since October and filed them under ‘Germany,’ ‘Turkey,’ ‘Czechoslovakia,’ ‘British cabinet,’ ‘Churchill,’ ‘Halifax.’ He was also safeguarding the padlocked membership register of the Right Club.

For months M.I.5 had been running surveillance on the club’s officials. The wiretap on one South Kensington telephone revealed Kent regularly leaking embassy secrets to a suspected enemy agent, Russian émigré Anna de Wolkoff. Her subversive activity seemed harmless enough – it included starting the hissing in darkened movie theatres whenever Churchill’s face appeared in newsreels. Among the secrets Kent leaked were Britain’s real naval losses off Norway and confidential interviews

between Kennedy and Halifax. On May 14 Wolkoff had telephoned him at the embassy, speaking Russian to foil the wiretappers. He told her later that Kennedy was warning Washington of coming internal unrest, and made what M.I.5 called 'libellous remarks' about Churchill's behaviour at one unruly cabinet meeting.

Wolkoff persuaded Tyler Kent to show the documents to Captain Archibald Ramsay, a Tory M.P. On May 22 Ramsay was interned, along with officers, clergymen, and professors – 1,847 of the more vociferous opponents of Churchill's War. Significantly, the embassy lifted Kent's immunity so he could be tried in camera in Britain, rather than in public in America. Kennedy told the state department on the twenty-second, 'This case stinks to heaven.' Sir Walter Monckton assured him it would be hushed up, and Wolkoff and Kent were tried in secret at the Old Bailey in November.



Roosevelt certainly engaged in remarkable dealings that spring of 1940. Twice late in April, while Britain's expedition was floundering in Norway, he had invited the Canadian prime minister to secret meetings – at Warm Springs and at the White House. Trying to shock the pious Canadian, he remarked that Winston Churchill was 'tight most of the time.'<sup>3</sup> On May 24 he invited Mackenzie King to send a secret emissary to Washington without telling Churchill. He then told that emissary that France and Britain were doomed, that he had it 'on good authority' – which was an outrageous lie – that Hitler was going to demand Britain's fleet and empire, and that Canada should 'line up the Dominions' to put pressure on Britain's inebriated leader to send her fleet across the Atlantic *now*. On no account, however, were they to let him know who was behind it.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing what big teeth the genial president now had, Mackenzie King demurred: he indicated that Mr Roosevelt should put his proposition to Mr Churchill himself. He was repelled by any suggestion of turning over Britain's fleet to the U.S. 'I would rather die,' he wrote in his diary, 'than to do aught to save ourselves or any part of this continent at the expense of Britain.' Responding to an appeal by Churchill on May 23, Canada sailed her three destroyers to Europe the very next day. This great Dominion's unselfish devotion to the empire cause would endure throughout the war.

'MIDST CONFUSION and duplicity, by May 24 Lord Gort was pulling the B.E.F. back to the Channel ports. One thousand troops escaped during the night from Boulogne. Irked that Gort could not relieve Calais, the P.M.

spun off an angry minute ending with the observation – which he omitted from his published text – ‘Of course if one side fights and the other does not, the war is apt to become somewhat unequal.’

He was surrounded by incompetents, many inherited from Chamberlain’s administration, and he knew it. Twice that day Captain Edwards brought admiralty messages into the cabinet – ‘a poor lot,’ he called them in his diary. ‘Most of them very ordinary & obviously out of touch with reality.’ In his presence they decided to abandon Narvik once they had captured it – ‘too late & at this time too! It’s quite mad.’

The strain of events told on Winston’s frame. When he retired for his siesta that afternoon he donned a silken dressing gown since Beaverbrook’s physician Sir Charles Wilson was to visit him. ‘I suffer from dyspepsia,’ the P.M. demonstrated, baring his midriff, ‘and *this* is the treatment’ – indicating some medicine he preferred. Wilson was ushered out.

It had been a long night. The day before, the king of the Belgians had given Admiral Keyes fair warning that, if the B.E.F. withdrew, this could only result in his army’s immediate capitulation; meanwhile, he had promised, Belgium would conform to the Weygand plan – the last Allied hope of pinching off the German armoured spearhead.

But at three A.M. on May 24 Keyes had telephoned Churchill to say King Leopold had not received any orders from the army group commander, Blanchard. Churchill passed this complaint on at five A.M. to the French premier, adding that Gort had lodged a similar complaint. ‘How does all this agree with your statement,’ Churchill challenged, ‘that Blanchard and Gort are hand-in-glove – *main dans la main*?’ But he hastened to reassure Reynaud, ‘We are instructing him to persevere in carrying out your plan.’<sup>5</sup>

General Weygand looked in vain that morning for signs that Lord Gort was adhering to the plan. ‘Accordingly,’ Reynaud stated in reply to Churchill, ‘[he] has this morning repeated his orders.’ Then he dropped the bombshell: Weygand had noted with surprise that, contrary to the plan, Gort had evacuated Arras and elements of his army were boarding ships at Le Havre. ‘General Weygand’s orders,’ he concluded, ‘should be obeyed.’<sup>6</sup>

Churchill hedged, and made inquiries. His ambassador had been present at that morning’s Paris meeting where a shocked Weygand returned from the front and reported to Reynaud. The two Frenchmen, Campbell reported dryly, seemed ‘rather put out.’

Weygand repeated several times that he was still pursuing his plan . . . and that he was convinced that the only hope for the encircled

armies was to fight through and join hands with Frère coming up from the south.

He had taken the line that Winston no doubt knew what was going on.<sup>7</sup> Winston, however, did not. 'We know nothing of any evacuation of Arras,' he telegraphed to Reynaud. 'It is entirely contrary to our wishes.' The rest of his bulldoggish reply did not lack candour: 'Believe me, my friend, until Weygand took control there has been no Command in the North worthy of the name since the retreat began.'

Frère's counter-offensive made steady progress that morning. French wireless bulletins reported the recapture of Bapaume.

But Lord Gort was not attacking from the north. At B.E.F. headquarters, as his chief of staff wrote in an expressive diary, their spirits rose and fell. An early corps commanders' conference had been startled by false rumours that the Germans were coming, and the resulting alarm had swamped the real news of the morning: at 11:32 A.M. the B.E.F. intercepted a German radio order *halting* the tank attack on the line Dunkirk–Hazebrouck–Merville. Pownall mentioned the intercept in his diary; so did Brooke. But it evinced no flicker of interest. For the next days their brains remained focused on the 'dash to the ports' while the German tanks paused – 'rooted to the spot,' as General Franz Halder fumed in his diary.

We now know what had caused this dramatic order. Hitler, visiting his army group headquarters, had found General Gerd von Rundstedt concerned that his armour had gone too fast and too far; he approved Rundstedt's order. On June 1 he would spell out his reasons to his generals: 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'you will have wondered why I stopped the Panzer divisions outside Dunkirk. . . I was anxious lest the enemy launch an offensive from the Somme and wipe out our Fourth Army's weak armoured force.' This was the very offensive which Lord Gort had unilaterally junked.<sup>8</sup>

REYNAUD HAD caught a whiff of these curious events in Flanders. He hurled a furious protest at Churchill: in flagrant disobedience of Weygand's orders that very morning, as Blanchard had now reported, 'the British army has decided on and carried out a withdrawal of forty kilometres toward the ports, at a time when our troops moving up from the south are gaining ground toward the north.' Weygand had therefore abandoned hope of restoring the front. 'It would be futile,' Reynaud's telegram concluded, 'to emphasise the gravity of the consequences that may ensue.'<sup>9</sup>

Churchill ventured a reassuring reply. '[F]rom everything we know here,' Gort had not renounced the idea of the offensive. But the allegation vexed him. He called in his personal advisers. Churchill's new secretary John Martin found them at Admiralty House that evening – the 'Crazy Gang of Prof. Lindemann, Bracken and Morton,' as he called them in his diary. Churchill packed off Dill to see Gort, and sent Spears to placate Reynaud. 'I would propose,' Winston suggested in the note he gave him for Reynaud, 'that General Spears should normally live in Paris.' But few days of normality remained to the metropolis on the Seine.

JOHN MARTIN had just become one of Churchill's six 'operational' secretaries. Ushered in on May 23, he had been ordered to stand in the window, searched with one gaze, then gruffly accepted: 'I understand you're to be one of my secretaries.' Martin was first apprehensive, then intrigued, then shell-shocked with fatigue. 'Eels,' Churchill would console him, 'get used to skinning.'

Capable, mild-mannered, a former principal secretary at the colonial office, Martin was aghast at the energy of this 'superman.' 'Yesterday,' he wrote on May 25, 'began at a quarter to ten in the morning and ended at the admiralty, where I was lucky to find a taxi, at three-fifteen A.M. . . The stimulus of the excitement seems to make up for lack of sleep.'

He was assigned to a battery of telephones next to the cabinet room with two colleagues – principal private secretary Eric Seal and Anthony Bevir, who handled patronage and general work. John Colville and another younger secretary shared another office with Edith Watson, who tackled the parliamentary and political matters. Within a few days Martin had discovered the working system. A box of papers was left outside Winston's bedroom each night; he read these in bed each morning, dictating responses. He dressed quite late, then went over to No. 10 for a mid-morning cabinet that might last until two. After lunch at Admiralty House and a siesta he would confer with ministers again at No. 10 or in the House.

He dines at Admiralty House and there sees a succession of ministers until bed-time. . . The chief difficulty is understanding what he says and great skill is required in interpreting inarticulate grunts or single words thrown out without explanation. I think he is consciously odd in these ways. Anyhow, he is certainly a 'character' and I shan't soon forget an interview with him in his bedroom walking about clad only in a vest.<sup>10</sup>

Churchill had brooded all night about Arras, and that morning, May 25, he dictated this query to Field Marshal Ironside: 'I must know at earliest why Gort gave up Arras, and what actually he is doing with the rest of his army? Is he still persevering in Weygand's plan, or has he become largely stationary?''<sup>11</sup>

Ironside's reply was not encouraging: Gort had not even informed London that he was giving up Arras; it seemed he had indeed abandoned his part of the Weygand plan; he might have taken as authority to do so a war office telegram of the twenty-third, whose final sentence had talked of making 'naval and air arrangements to assist you should you have to withdraw on the northern coast.' Ironside concluded,

I think he will be lucky if he extricates himself from encirclement.  
I think he must move on the Coast ports and then face the enemy.  
We must prepare all air and naval help for partial evacuation if this becomes necessary.

Unable to dismiss Lord Gort, Churchill evidently pondered: someone must go.

GENERAL SPEARS had flown to Paris at eight that Saturday morning in a Blenheim bomber. He assessed in a private diary that there was 'not one chance in a hundred' of the B.E.F. getting away, but when Reynaud now whined that British generals were 'always making for harbour,' Spears assured him: 'Gort's one idea is to get south.'<sup>12</sup>

Reynaud handed him a message for Churchill. Weygand had directed Blanchard to ensure that his northern group of armies could withdraw to the sea if the British retreat had wrecked the plan: Dunkirk was 'vital for their supplies.' But, continued Reynaud, Blanchard had not given up the plan yet. He had telegraphed Weygand since then, at one A.M., that he was going to counter-attack southward toward Cambrai, and then on toward Bapaume.

Meanwhile, at his Saturday morning cabinet, Churchill was conceding that the French had grounds for complaint. 'He [Lord Gort] should at once have informed us of the action he took,' he said. The cabinet decided that since the B.E.F. had – 'inexplicably, rather,' as Cadogan affably put it – retreated forty kilometres, it would be evacuated while a suicide garrison held Calais as a breakwater. Churchill signalled Brigadier Claude Nicholson: 'The eyes of the Empire are upon the defence of Calais.'<sup>13</sup>

No doubt, Winston postulated to his staff, the action had been forced upon Lord Gort. Shortly he dictated a message by telephone to Paris con-

firming it. He added, 'As soon as we know what has happened I will report fully. It is clear however that the Northern Army are practically surrounded and that its communications are cut except through Dunkirk and Ostend.'<sup>14</sup>



Counter-attack or final retreat? Lord Gort's confusion of mind at Armentières was unenviable. By seven A.M. his chief of staff could see him feeling the situation keenly: 'The least little thing that is helpful cheers him up and he clutches at it.' He was toying again with the Weygand plan. When, at two A.M., General Brooke (of II Corps) had become alarmed that the Belgians might collapse and pleaded for reinforcements, G.H.Q. would grant him only one brigade, explaining that the 'Rush for the Sea' was being abandoned. 'Thank God for it,' Brooke lamely inked into his diary, 'I have always hated this plan.' Told of renewed plans to counter-attack southward, Brooke was dubious, but drove over to the 4th and 3rd divisions to discuss it.

During the day, however, Gort's pessimism had grown. If the Belgians collapsed, in Pownall's words, 'we are bust.' At five P.M. – the time is confirmed by Pownall's diary – without informing the French, Gort pulled the 5th and 50th divisions out of the southern perimeter and ordered the retreat.

This act, Gort's ultimate betrayal of his allies, was retrospectively camouflaged by a neat piece of historical sleight-of-hand that deceived Churchill – whose relevant chapters were ghosted by the same Sir Henry Pownall – as well as his biographer and the official historian.<sup>15</sup> The legend was seeded that a 'captured German document' had prompted Gort's retreat, that this had conveniently revealed the enemy Sixth Army poised to hurl two *Armeekorps* at a gap between Menin and Ypres, and that Gort had thereupon slotted in the 5th and 50th divisions at that point and thus 'saved the B.E.F.'

This was not true. While a patrol had indeed recovered a document wallet from the derelict staff car of Lieutenant-Colonel Eberhard Kinzel, a feckless liaison officer to the Sixth Army, and this did contain the complete enemy order of battle,\* the other document, vaguely described as referring to a Sixth Army attack on the morrow, can scarcely have influenced Gort's decision. Brooke picked it up from 3rd division headquarters that afternoon, attended the seven P.M. conference at Armentières at which Lord Gort, to his relief, announced he had dropped the Weygand

\* Identified by M.I. 14 as *Gliederung und Stellenbesetzung Fall Gelb vom 1. Mai 1940*.



plan, and only afterward handed the German document to Gort's Intelligence officer for translation.<sup>16</sup>

In London, Winston dined at Admiralty House with the Prof., Beaverbrook and Bracken. At ten p.m. he called a defence committee meeting to pronounce the last rites over the Weygand plan: an 'advance' to the coast would begin twenty-four hours later. After all, he guiltily reasoned, Weygand's offensive in the south seemed unlikely to materialise for some time. No doubt Hitler would offer the French an armistice. If he were French prime minister, he said, he 'would accept it.'<sup>17</sup>

Later still that evening, he invited Ironside to Admiralty House and secured his resignation.

CHURCHILL'S ADMISSION, telephoned to Reynaud, that the B.E.F. was pulling out shattered what remained of France's fighting spirit.

A mouse-eaten folder in Reynaud's papers contains the essence of his council of war held later that same Saturday. Could they honourably sue for peace without consulting Britain? Reynaud himself was bound by the London agreement of March 28, but navy minister César Campinchi suggested that his signature would not bind a subsequent government.

'Suppose Germany,' ventured President Lebrun, 'offers us conditions that are relatively advantageous – ought we not give them very close and considered attention?' Reynaud agreed and declared he would fly to London the next day. He warned that Churchill might simply declare: 'You're bound by your signature. You've got to fight, even if there's no hope.'<sup>18</sup>

When London learned that Reynaud was coming over, Eden – obviously acting on Churchill's instructions – sent one of the less honourable signals of the Dunkirk affair. Claiming information that the French offensive from the Somme could not be made 'in sufficient strength to hold out any prospect of junction with your armies in the North,' he furtively directed Lord Gort to think only of the safety of the B.E.F. The navy would provide a fleet of small boats and the airforce would provide air cover. Gort was to prepare urgently all preliminary plans.

'In meantime,' ordered Eden, 'it is obvious that you should not discuss the possibility of the move with French or Belgians.'<sup>19</sup>

That Saturday evening, May 25, the Italian ambassadors in London and Paris hinted that Mussolini was willing to sponsor a peace conference. Reynaud liked the proposal. So did Chamberlain, who trusted the Italians. So did Halifax, who argued to the cabinet when it met on Sunday morning that what mattered was not defeating Germany, but 'safeguarding the independence of our own Empire.' Churchill disagreed.

The prime minister said that peace and security might be achieved under a German domination of Europe. That we could never accept. We must ensure our complete liberty and independence. He was opposed to any negotiations which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power.\*

Turbulent debate on this issue occupied the inner cabinet over the next three days – whether or not to halt the carnage at that moment. Whatever his motives – and it is perhaps no coincidence that he received a sealed message from his old confrère at the French foreign ministry, the viciously anti-Italian Alexis Léger, this day<sup>20</sup> – the P.M. never wavered: Hitler, he declared over and over again, would show Britain no mercy. He was supported by Attlee, Greenwood (both Labour), and Sinclair (Liberal), and opposed by Chamberlain and Halifax, both of whom alone had met and sized up Hitler.

Thinking in ink, Winston drafted these lines ‘upon the realities of the case,’ and it seems fair to set them out.

I fear that if we entered upon this pass we shd soon find that it leads to Mussolini being a mediator between us & Germany, & to an Armistice & conference under the conditions of our being at Hitler’s mercy. Such a conference wd only end in weakening fatally our power to resist the terrible terms wh will almost certainly be imposed, if not upon France, at any rate upon Britain.

We do not feel unable to continue the struggle & our people wd never allow us to quit until we have fought our fight. They are an unbeaten people & will never allow us to surrender. They know well that for us once under the Nazi domination there can be no mercy.

Thus we do not see any way but to fight on, and we have good hopes of holding out until some deep change occurs in Germany or Europe.<sup>21</sup>

REYNAUD ARRIVED and lunched at the admiralty. He too had jotted down some notes of what he intended to discuss: among them were, ‘Last straw British retreat.’ ‘My orders: fight on even if no hope.’ And, ‘Revolution both possible and probable – a factor ignored by your side.’<sup>22</sup>

Marshal Pétain, Reynaud announced, favoured letting Mussolini mediate. He got short shrift. One of Reynaud’s staff summarised: ‘Premier got nothing out of Churchill. Halifax was the only one to show the slightest

\* Hitler wanted nothing at all from Britain, and this seems worth emphasising.

understanding.' Churchill prophesied that Hitler would now turn against Britain. Reynaud retorted that the dream of every German was to conquer Paris.

During an adjournment Churchill reported to his colleagues: Reynaud's conversation showed that he was inclined toward surrender. To avoid charges of leaving the French in the lurch, Churchill now proposed to get him somehow to direct Weygand to order Blanchard to 'authorise' the B.E.F. to march to the coast and embark. The document was drafted on a Downing-street typewriter, translated into French, and handed to Reynaud to dictate by telephone to General Weygand at 4:05 P.M.<sup>23</sup>

This singular foreplay performed, Eden telegraphed to Lord Gort that, according to 'reports received from the front,' Weygand's plan had failed. In view of that, he was now 'authorised to operate toward coast forthwith.'<sup>24</sup> Of course, the operation had long since begun.

Churchill reported all this to Spears in Paris: he was to resist any suggestion by the French of 'cutting out.' 'Their duty,' Winston defined, 'is to continue in the war and do their best.' The British would fight on. 'I am advised by all our experts that we have power to do so.'<sup>25</sup>

That same afternoon the admiral commanding, Dover, was ordered to commence the evacuation, Operation DYNAMO. The liaison officer now sent over to him by French C-in-C Admiral Darlan was 'stupefied' to learn that the British admiralty had prepared DYNAMO days before, without notifying any of their allies.<sup>26</sup>



Churchill had asked his military staff if Britain could fight on alone. They replied that it depended on whether the aircraft factory workers would carry on 'in the face of wholesale havoc and destruction.' True, Hitler held most of the cards. 'The real test,' they predicted, 'is whether the morale of our fighting personnel and civil population will counter-balance the numerical and material advantages which Germany enjoys. We believe it will.'

At the admiralty that Sunday afternoon Churchill admitted to his inner cabinet that Hitler might offer to France 'decent' terms. 'There is no limit to the terms,' however, he asserted, 'which Germany would impose upon us if she has her way.'

He would leave this assertion studiously untested over the coming weeks. Lord Halifax expressed courteous but nonetheless firm disagreement, as the secret records show:

The foreign secretary . . . was not quite convinced that the prime minister's diagnosis was correct and that it was in Herr Hitler's interest to insist on outrageous terms.

After listening to wild speculation on Germany's possible demands – Somaliland, Kenya or Uganda – Halifax pointed out Britain might well be offered perfectly acceptable terms, which did not rob her of her independence. 'We should be foolish if we did not accept them.' Shortly, Churchill was summoned to the telephone. Admiral Keyes was telephoning from France: King Leopold was staying in Belgium, with his army; the admiral added that he had witnessed the cheering at B.E.F. headquarters as Eden's orders to march to the coast arrived. Churchill ended the cabinet meeting, leaving everything in the air. 'Settled nothing much,' wrote Cadogan, back at the F.O. 'W.S.C. too rambling and romantic and sentimental and temperamental.' Chamberlain was 'still the best of the lot.'

Churchill ordered a fresh signal to Brigadier Nicholson, to hold Calais to the last man. 'Every hour you continue to exist,' it began, 'is of the greatest help to the B.E.F.' That sent, the prime minister recalled betaking himself to the dining room. 'One has to eat and drink in war,' he would apologise in his memoirs. From time to time he had the tact to display, as Ismay observed during this meal, evident distaste.<sup>27</sup> As they folded their napkins, the B.B.C. was broadcasting an appeal for shotgun cartridges.

Churchill's signal to Nicholson was intercepted by a puzzled enemy. 'It is probable,' Hitler's Intelligence branch, Foreign Armies West, appreciated, 'that the embarkation of the B.E.F. has begun.' Incredulous that the British, his most feared adversaries, were ditching their allies, Hitler started his tanks rolling again.<sup>28</sup>

IT WOULD not be long before Belgium caved in; for Britain's purposes it was vital that King Leopold should escape while he could. Queen Wilhelmina of Holland had arrived in England two weeks earlier – though quite by accident. She had wanted to go to Flushing but the British destroyer *Hereward* brought her to exile in Britain instead. The flustered Dutch monarch had arrived at Liverpool-street station that afternoon clutching only a tin hat.<sup>29</sup>

The king of the Belgians proved less amenable. He had warned Britain explicitly that if the B.E.F. embarked he would cease fighting. Now the B.E.F. was quitting. At four-thirty A.M. on Monday May 27, with Eden at his side, Churchill signalled Gort: 'Presume troops know they are cutting their way home to Blighty. Never was there such a spur for fighting.' Still hoping to persuade the Belgians to fight on, he asked the general to con-

tact Leopold. 'We are asking them,' he said, 'to sacrifice themselves for us.' Admiral Keyes was to confirm to the monarch that the 'British and French' were fighting their way to the coast where they would embark. Keyes was also to suggest that for the B.E.F. to be 'hemmed in and starved out' would not serve Belgium's cause; and he was to ensure that Leopold escaped.<sup>30</sup> While this message lost its way, another did reach Keyes, telephoned directly by Churchill to Keyes sometime before dawn.

But King Leopold had seen enough bloodshed and depredation. He would allege shortly that the retreating Allied troops had pillaged and ransacked his country as they withdrew.<sup>31</sup> By late afternoon rumours were reaching London about an armistice. Accepting that his messages might actually have undermined Leopold's will to fight on, Churchill suggested to his cabinet that the king could hardly be blamed. That evening Spears telephoned: Leopold had indeed sent a plenipotentiary to the Germans.

It seems proper to set out these events in sequence because, for reasons of domestic policy, both Reynaud and Churchill would heap calumny upon King Leopold for his 'betrayal.' In truth, the Belgians had fought most gallantly, simplifying the embarkation that now began.

AUSTRALIA PLEDGED troops and Canada's destroyers arrived, but American aid was still conspicuously absent.

On May 27 a proposal arrived from Washington, passed on by the ambassador Lord Lothian, that Britain lease to the Americans airbases on empire territories at Trinidad, Newfoundland and Bermuda. The cabinet was indignant, and somebody remarked that Roosevelt seemed to take 'the view that it would be very nice of him to pick up the bits of the British empire if this country was overrun.'

For a third time the war cabinet considered approaching Italy; again they rejected it. The power of the minority parties of Attlee and Sinclair depended, of course, on the continuance of the war. If peace came now, they – along with Mr Churchill – would vanish into oblivion. Speaking 'with emotion,' Winston dismissed such an approach as futile. 'Our prestige in Europe,' he argued, 'is very low. The only way we can get it back is by showing that Germany has not beaten us. If, after two or three months, we can show the world that we are still unbeaten, our prestige will return.' Later he said, 'if the worst came to the worst it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting.'

Halifax listened to the rhetoric with mounting impatience.

He could not recognise any resemblance between the action which he proposed and the suggestion that we were suing for terms and following a line which would lead us to disaster.

He reminded Churchill that only the previous day he had asked whether the P.M. would discuss terms if he was satisfied that Britain's independence was unaffected; and that Mr Churchill had replied that he would be thankful to 'get out of our present difficulties' on such terms – 'even at the cost of some cession of territory.'

Overnight, continued Halifax, the P.M. had reverted to the view that Britain had no course but to fight to a finish. If it now proved possible to obtain a settlement, he announced, he for one would not accept Churchill's view. Two or three months, the P.M. had just said, would show whether Britain could withstand air attack. 'This means,' declared the foreign secretary, 'that the future of the country turns on whether the enemy's bombs happen to hit our aircraft factories.'

Lord Halifax was prepared to take that risk if Britain's independence was at stake, but not if it was not. 'I would think it right,' he concluded, 'to accept an offer which could save the country from avoidable disaster.'

Political oblivion looming ever closer, Churchill whistled up the familiar demons to prove Britain had no choice. 'If,' he argued,

Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the [basis of] restoration of the German colonies and the overlordship of Central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite unlikely that he would make any such offer.

The cabinet minutes cast a discreet veil over what followed, but not the diary which Lord Halifax privately maintained. If this was how Mr Churchill felt, he declared, their ways must separate; he asked to see him alone, in the garden of No. 10. Outside, Churchill mellowed, spluttered apologies. The foreign secretary was unconvinced. 'I thought Winston talked the most frightful rot,' he lamented in his diary. 'It does drive me to despair when he works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason.'<sup>32</sup> He seems to have imparted something of his irritation to the American ambassador. 'Not realising what difficulties may be in store for them,' Kennedy reported to Washington, 'people here are looking forward with joy to turning [Hitler's peace terms] down.'<sup>33</sup>

IT CAN perhaps be said that victory was now becoming a far more dangerous obsession for Churchill than CATHERINE or Narvik had ever been. But the horizon now was dark whichever way he looked. Walking back to the admiralty, he murmured that he still could not believe that France would give in. A letter came from Spears – he had just left Reynaud ‘rather yellow at the gills’ and predicting that others, willing to negotiate, would replace him. Spears had told him that his words in London had caused ‘grave concern.’ ‘Was I not right,’ Reynaud had replied, ‘to tell you the worst? What Weygand said?’

Winston read these documents quietly, called for Colville and bade him: ‘Pour me out a whisky and soda, very weak, there’s a good boy,’ and then retired to bed. The fate of 300,000 troops now depended on DYNAMO. But the R.A.F. was covering the beaches: its eight-gun fighter planes were outgunning the enemy, and that seemed to augur well.<sup>34</sup>



When he awoke it was May 28 and the Allied assault on Narvik, under the hard-bitten French general Antoine Béthouart, had begun. Eventually that forlorn Arctic township would be in Allied hands – a tiny victory at the cost of 150 more Allied lives. That battle won, against Béthouart’s protests, the British would abandon Norway without a word to King Haakon, and evacuate him too to British soil.

Across the Straits of Dover, Dunkirk was under German air attack; bodies littered the streets. After hours of searching, Gort found General Blanchard and read out to him Eden’s telegram ordering the B.E.F. to embark. Blanchard’s visible astonishment baffled the British generals. ‘For what other reason,’ wrote Pownall in his diary, ‘did he think that we – he and Gort – had been ordered to form bridgeheads?’ The French army group commander told them bluntly that if the B.E.F. withdrew it would be without the French First Army. ‘To which,’ recorded Pownall, ‘Gort replied that he was going.’ Gort moved his headquarters to La Panne, at the Dunkirk end of the telephone cable beneath the Channel.

Belgium had ceased fire at four A.M. In the confines of his cabinet, Churchill conceded that Leopold might well obtain better treatment for his people thereby. ‘No doubt,’ he admitted, ‘History will criticise the king for having involved us and the French in Belgium’s ruin.’ After speaking in the House that afternoon – with proper charity – about Belgium’s misfortune, he invited his colleagues up to his private room.

FOR A fourth time they argued whether to approach Italy as Reynaud had yet again suggested. The voting was as before. Greenwood and Attlee now

reasoned that any weakening would affront public opinion, particularly in the industrial centres.

Using what was to become a stock phrase, that the French were 'trying to get us onto the slippery slope,' Churchill suggested that the position would be very different once Germany had tried and failed to invade Britain.

Again Chamberlain and Halifax argued for peace. 'We may get better terms *before* France goes out of the war and our aircraft factories are bombed,' argued the foreign secretary, 'than . . . in three months' time.'

To Churchill this was heresy: Hitler's terms, he repeated, would put Britain 'at his mercy.' 'We should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, even if we were beaten, than were open to us now. If, however, we continued the war and Germany attacked us, no doubt we would suffer some damage, but they also would suffer severe losses.'

Halifax did not share this enthusiasm for trading blows. He still did not see, he said, what the prime minister 'felt was so wrong' in the French suggestion of trying out the possibilities of mediation. Neville Chamberlain also felt that to fight on involved a considerable gamble. He suggested they announce, 'While we will fight to the end to preserve our independence, we are ready to consider decent terms.'

This attracted only derision from the P.M. 'Nations,' he intoned, in full stormflood of his oratory, 'which go down fighting rise again; but those which surrender tamely are finished.'

'Nothing in my suggestion,' Halifax corrected him, 'could even remotely be described as ultimate capitulation.'

Churchill said it again: 'The chances of decent terms being offered to us are a thousand-to-one against.'

It was six-fifteen P.M. Evidently worried by the simmering revolt, he ushered them out and invited in all twenty-five of their junior cabinet colleagues. He motioned them to chairs around the long table, and harangued them under a lowering pall of cigar smoke, eschewing neither embellishment nor evasion. 'He is quite magnificent,' dictated Labour's Hugh Dalton for his diary that day. 'The man, and the only man, we have for this hour.'

Churchill spoke scathingly of the French – 'hypnotised by the Maginot Line,' he called them. He blamed the B.E.F.'s retreat on the French failure to push northward from the Somme.

How many would get away we could not tell. . . Calais had been defended by a British force which had refused to surrender, and it was said that there were no survivors.



Dunkirk, he continued, motioning with his cigar, was under a pall of black smoke. 'On two occasions great flights of German bombers turned away and declined battle when they saw our fighter patrols.'

It would be said, 'and with some truth,' that this was the greatest British defeat for centuries.

Attempts to invade us would no doubt be made, but they would be beset with immense difficulty. We should mine all round the coast; our Navy was immensely strong . . . our supplies of food, oil, etc., were ample; we had good troops in this island, others were on the way by sea, both British Army units coming from remote garrisons and excellent Dominion troops.

His main purpose was to discourage thoughts of peace.

It was idle to think that if we tried to make peace now, we should get better terms from Germany than if we went on and fought it out. The Germans would demand our fleet – that would be called 'disarmament' – our naval bases, and much else. We should become a puppet state, though a British Government which would be Hitler's puppet would be set up – 'under Mosley or some such person.'

'Therefore,' he said, 'we shall go on and we shall fight it out, here or elsewhere. And if at last the long story is to end . . . let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the field.'

At this there was 'a murmur of approval,'\* primarily from his stalwart friends of the Focus – Amery, Lord Lloyd and Dalton himself. No one expressed dissent. Asked by the home secretary, Churchill said he was against all evacuation of London. 'Mere bombing,' he growled, 'will not make us go.'

\* Thus in Dalton's original diary; in Martin Gilbert's volume, 'loud cries of approval.' Sir John Reith noted in his diary only 'humberging and sycophantic' interpolations of *hear, hear* during the 'dramatic, unreal, insincere' speech. The episode took its place in Winston's self-mythology and grew each time he recounted it, as in his memoirs: 'Quite a number seemed to jump up from the table and come running to my chair, shouting and patting me on the back.'

He went to the fireplace. Dalton joined him, stooped and patted his shoulder. 'You ought to get that cartoon of Low showing us all rolling up our sleeves and falling in behind you,' he remarked, 'and frame it.'

'Yes,' grinned Winston, 'that was a good one, wasn't it?'

'He is a darling!' added Dalton as a postscript to his diary.

When his inner cabinet reassembled at seven, Churchill referred to this demonstration – he could not, he said, recall 'a gathering of persons occupying such high places' expressing themselves so emphatically. He might have added that their political fortunes too were closely linked with his own.

So the fight would go on. Shortly before midnight his message was telephoned to Paris, discountenancing any Italian mediation: Britain and France must display 'stout hearts'; this would surely attract American support and admiration.<sup>35</sup>

True, the dissent was growing. The Australian high commissioner submitted a seven-page memorandum suggesting they invite Roosevelt to set up a conference 'to formulate a peace settlement.' Winston crossed this out and scrawled *No*. Where Stanley Bruce had pleaded on the final page, 'The further shedding of blood and the continuance of hideous suffering is unnecessary,' Churchill violently scribbled it out and scratched *rot* at its foot. 'The end is rotten,' he amplified to his personal assistant, Desmond Morton.<sup>36</sup>

IN THIS elderly prime minister, adrenaline had begun pumping. He savoured each ruthless decision.

He lectured the new C.I.G.S. that Gort must now slow his retreat to conform with French movements, 'otherwise there would be a danger of getting no troops off.' Weaponless and dispirited, two thousand British soldiers were now trickling onto the boats each hour, but as John Martin wrote, Churchill's confidence and energy were amazing.<sup>37</sup> There sprang to mind the famous lines on William Pitt: 'Nobody left his presence without feeling a braver man.' As disaster overtook calamity, his mood only brightened.

He telegraphed to Reynaud the promise to evacuate French troops on an equal basis. It was meant well, but when Spears delivered this telegram he saw the anger spurt into the Frenchman's face. If that were not so, Reynaud snapped, public opinion would be *dechainée* – 'unleashed' against

\* In December Churchill suspected that Low was a Trotskyist and complained of his *Evening Standard* cartoons. Beaverbrook reminded him how often Winston had told him not to interfere. 'I do not agree with Low,' the press lord wrote him. 'I have rarely done so. I do not interfere with Low. I have never done so.'

Britain. Churchill flashed a further message to Spears: 'Continue report constantly. Meanwhile reiterate our inflexible resolve to continue whatever they do.' He added, however, that 'it would be inexpedient to give all the figures Reynaud wants at present.'<sup>38</sup>

Over eight hundred boats and pleasure craft were now shuttling between England and the embattled beaches, braving air attacks. Vice-Admiral Jean-Charles Abrial, the French commander at Dunkirk, was furious at having to hold the port's perimeter merely to enable the British to decamp: his government, he challenged Pownall at Dunkirk, had given him no such instructions. The British general quietened the Frenchman, and embarked that night for England with Gort's ADC Lord Munster aboard a Thames pleasure steamer.

In London there was an air of tragedy and suspense. 'A horrible discussion of what instructions to send Gort,' wrote Cadogan, after the May 29 cabinet. They decided to instruct him to choose his own moment to surrender. That evening Churchill, who had been 'theatrically bulldog-gish,' opposed as usual by Chamberlain and Halifax, asked the war office to despatch this cypher message to the B.E.F. commander:

If you are cut from all communication with us, and all evacuation from Dunkirk and beaches had in your judgement been finally prevented . . . you would become the sole judge of when it was impossible to inflict further damage upon the enemy. His Majesty's Government are sure that the repute of the British army is safe in your hands.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly, he sent a message to Reynaud for the information of his generals: they had evacuated fifty thousand and hoped to save thirty thousand more during the night. 'We shall build up a new B.E.F. from St. Nazaire,' he promised. 'I am bringing regulars from India and Palestine. Australians and Canadians are arriving soon.' He ended by assuring Reynaud, 'I send this in all comradeship. Do not hesitate to speak frankly to me.'<sup>40</sup>

Hours later, impatient to know if his telegram had gone off to Lord Gort, he telephoned his duty secretary to check up. John Martin found him pacing the bedroom, dressed only in an undervest: there was still no word from the war office. Winston turned angrily away, snatched up the chamber pot, and made noisy use of it.

LORD MUNSTER arrived at Admiralty House the next morning. He pleaded with Winston, still in his bath, to extricate Lord Gort.

Sir Henry Pownall came over to the morning staff meeting with the same plea. Winston pressed him for the latest figures, and emphasised the need to embark French soldiers too. By morning, of 120,000 taken off the beaches, only six thousand were French. Only eight hundred troops had sailed with him on their pleasure boat – built for two thousand – but Pownall suggested that each Frenchman saved meant one less Englishman. He also urged priority for the B.E.F.'s valuable commanders, staff officers and NCOs rather than its 'tail.'

After asking him to stay behind with Eden and Dill to discuss the hapless Lord Gort, Churchill drafted new instructions ordering Gort home as soon as his force fell below corps strength. It was an inspired, if uninspiring, solution. The message was sent over Eden's name at two p.m.: 'No personal discretion is left to you in the matter.' When the corps commander nominated by Gort considered further evacuation impossible, he was authorised 'to capitulate formally to avoid useless slaughter.'<sup>41</sup>

The afternoon cabinet faced up to abandoning Norway. 'I regard the operations at Narvik,' minuted Churchill, 'as a shocking example of costly overcaution and feebleness, all the more lamentable in contrast with German fortitude in defence and vigour in attack.' 'Ordinary cabinet,' recorded Lord Halifax wearily afterward. 'Winston was in combative and discursive mood. I have never seen so disorderly a mind. I am coming to the conclusion that his process of thought is one that has to operate through speech. As this is exactly the reverse of my own, it is irritating.'



One day his son came on leave and, as Winston was shaving, commented in his forthright way, 'I don't see how you can beat the Germans.' Winston glared at Randolph. 'I shall drag the United States in,' he said.

The shrewd American president was not of a mind to be dragged anywhere, least of all in an election year. He hinted to Mackenzie King that he might wage an undeclared war against Germany in the Atlantic, rather as America had fought France soon after 1776. Meanwhile his interest in the British fleet was growing. Churchill now received from the Canadian a message suggesting that sending it over the Atlantic might indirectly ease American entry into the war. Both the president and Cordell Hull believed that, if Germany threatened vicious action to punish Britain for allowing the fleet to escape, 'public opinion in the United States would demand active intervention.'<sup>42</sup>

Churchill, for all his human failings in Roosevelt's eyes, was not befuddled by this convoluted offer: he correctly saw F.D.R.'s hand behind it, and replied to Ottawa in language strident enough to reach Washing-

ton. 'We must be careful not to let Americans view too complacently [the] prospect of a British collapse, out of which they would get the British fleet and the guardianship of the British empire, minus Great Britain.' And he allowed himself the pointed commentary: 'Although President is our best friend, no practical help has been forthcoming from the United States yet.'<sup>43</sup>



On the last morning of May he flew to Paris. Spears, meeting him at Villacoublay, found him in grand form – 'Very sweet to me, poking me in stomach.' Fortified by lunch at the embassy, Churchill entered the Supreme War Council with eyes aflame and cheeks aflush; the mood of the others was frigid. 'By noon today,' he boasted, 'we evacuated 165,000 men from Dunkirk by sea.'<sup>44</sup>

Reynaud pointed out the British had evacuated only fifteen thousand of the 200,000 French.

'The French are being left behind?' gasped Weygand.

Now it was Churchill who shrugged. 'We are companions in misfortune,' he responded. 'There is nothing to be gained from recriminations.' When Reynaud demanded that Britain throw in everything she had, Churchill hedged: 'I cannot say if we will be able to send forces to France.'

Since Reynaud insisted, he became blunt: 'Do you recall when you asked me for ten fighter squadrons a fortnight ago? . . . Nobody knows what's left of them now. Now we've got to protect our factories – not so much our civilian population, who might almost be better off [*dont il vaudrait presque mieux*] if they were bombed. If we don't defeat the German airforce, it will be all over for us not long after.'

'I'm well aware that you gave us one quarter of your defences,' Reynaud politely summarised. 'But we have thrown our entire airforce into this battle.'

Reverting to Dunkirk, he suggested they now embark the rearguard, commencing with the British. Deliberately trading on Churchill's generosity,<sup>45</sup> he introduced a draft telegram to Admiral Abrial at Dunkirk, ordering French troops to allow the British to embark first.

Churchill declared – 'with tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice,' according to the French record – that he did not want further French sacrifice. The three British divisions would be proud to form the rearguard. The telegram was amended: the evacuation was to proceed on equal terms – 'arm in arm.'

He returned to the embassy. Aware that he might never see Paris again, he tried in vain to persuade Louis Spears to motor him around its

streets for one last time. 'Winston magnificent,' his old friend recorded that night, 'and very moving: "No recriminations; British will provide rear guards; better our civilisation should perish now and Finish be written at end [of] these grand chapters than that they should drag on for a while in slavery."' "

'He means to say same thing in Commons on Tuesday.'



*All his life Churchill followed U.S. financier Bernard Baruch's advice. In February 1938 it nearly bankrupted him; Churchill recovered his fortunes, but the empire never did.*

## 25: *We Shall Fight in the Hills*

**A**FTER HITLER'S organisation chief Robert Ley strangled himself at Nuremberg, the Americans removed his brain; they also borrowed the murdered Mussolini's brain, hoping to learn something about the chemistries of power. But for the workings of Mr Churchill's brain, we can only draw upon his observed behaviour. We can ask what impelled him to press on? What generated his mental troughs and peaks?

Undoubtedly he deliberately courted danger. His lifelong adviser Desmond Morton would see in him a 'bogus maleness' – implying that Winston lacked those qualities of steadfastness otherwise known as 'moral courage'<sup>1</sup> that marked, say, a Claude Auchinleck. Modern psychiatrists would recognise in Winston a category familiar in the corporate world: the 'harried over-achiever' – the man who has become addicted to stress. Stress gives him the high, the physiological arousal, that others derive from alcohol, caffeine or nicotine. In chemical terms, it rushes catecholamines like adrenaline into the bloodstream.<sup>2</sup> Leaders among these harried over-achievers are the 'Type A' group – men who engage in chronic, continuous struggle against circumstances and against other people. Says Dr Paul A. Rosch, 'The Type A individual has perhaps become addicted to his own adrenaline and unconsciously seeks ways to get those little urges.'

Churchill displayed the characteristics of this type. If deprived of stress, he became irritable and depressed.<sup>3</sup> Speed was paramount. He glued specially-printed red tags onto directives to his staff: ACTION THIS DAY. Chamberlain's secretary would write, 'His policy is one of action for action's sake.'<sup>4</sup> A. V. Alexander, Winston's successor as First Lord, observed: 'Churchill [is] much better in health already since he became P.M.'<sup>5</sup> More than that: as his plight worsened, his mood brightened, his dynamism increased. Meeting him at Villacoublay on the last day in May 1940, General Spears spotted the startling freshness 'generated by the sense of the danger inherent in such a journey.' He added that the proximity of danger invariably acted as a tonic and a stimulant to Churchill.<sup>6</sup>

HE WAS up at six A.M. in Paris that Saturday, June 1, flew back to London and stomped into No. 10 toward mid-day. He relished the prospect of

Nazi attack. 'I believe,' he red-inked on a memo on that day, 'we shall make them rue the day they try to invade our island.'<sup>7</sup>

By now nearly 200,000 British soldiers had been taken off the beaches, but only 34,000 French. Lord Gort arrived at Victoria station at nine-twenty A.M., having crossed by motor boat. Anglo-French recriminations spewed out in his wake. At Dunkirk, Reynaud complained, Gort had refused boat passes to a French general and his ADC, saying 'Two French going means two less British.' Darlan later questioned whether it had been wise to entrust the defence of Dunkirk to the B.E.F. The British he opined, had only one thought: 'To the boats!'<sup>8</sup>

As Gort walked into the cabinet room the ministers rose and applauded. Churchill declared that DYNAMO, the gigantic evacuation operation, would end that night. Justifying this in a message telephoned to Weygand, he explained that the crisis had been reached.

Six ships, many filled with troops, sunk by bombing this morning. Artillery fire menaces only practicable channel. Enemy closing in on reduced bridgehead. . . By going tonight much may certainly be saved, though much will be lost.

Since, the message continued, neither Admiral Abrial in the fortress, nor Weygand, nor those in England, could fully assess the situation, he had ordered Major-General Sir Harold Alexander, commanding the British sector, to consult with Abrial on the best course to adopt.<sup>9</sup>

Before stepping into his boat Gort had consoled Admiral Abrial. 'I am giving you my finest – Alexander.' Darlan was unimpressed by Alexander. 'The moment this military thunderbolt, this *foudre de guerre*, arrived at Dunkirk,' he wrote scornfully, 'he told Admiral Abrial that in his view the situation would not allow of his remaining and that he would therefore embark that same Saturday evening for England.'<sup>10</sup>

Thus the French formed the rearguard after all.



In May the Zionists had resumed their haggling. They persuaded Churchill to lever their arch-enemy Malcolm Macdonald out of the colonial office; it was his White Paper that had thwarted their plans to settle Jews in Palestine.<sup>11</sup> Six days after attaining office, Winston sent his first-born son to their leader, Chaim Weizmann, bearing a reassuring letter. It promised to accept Jewish help and to investigate the British army's oppressive searches for illegal Jewish arms in Palestine.



Britain had ten regular battalions permanently stationed there. Weizmann now began demanding that Britain arm and mobilise the Jews there instead.

His long-term purpose was transparent. Macdonald's successor Lord Lloyd warned that to arm the Jews would stir up a Moslem hornet's nest. But on May 23 Churchill directed that, in view of the impending danger to Britain, 'At least eight battalions of British Regular Infantry must come at once from Palestine.' The Jews would be armed instead. Lloyd asked Churchill's P.P.S., Eric Seal, to see him immediately, and objected in the strongest terms: to give the Jews 'arms to use with their own discretion against the Arabs' would have appalling repercussions, 'even if ostensibly they are only given them for self defence.' Seal reported this to Churchill, adding: 'I must confess that I have a strong feeling that he is right.'

Churchill scratched this out. 'How can you remove all the troops,' he scribbled, 'and yet leave the Jews unarmed – & disarmed by us?' Lloyd refused to budge. He could spare the eight battalions, provided only that there was no deviation from the White Paper that might inflame Arab feeling. Above all, no steps whatever must be taken to raise 'a Jewish military force for internal security purposes.' Churchill scrawled: '*We must have the eight battalions.*' He invited Lloyd to talk with Weizmann, and commented crisply: 'You know what I think about the White Paper.'<sup>12</sup>

THE RICH and influential reacted to the emergency in different ways. One titled lady wrote him offering £60,000 in pearls;<sup>13</sup> others tried to ship their children and themselves out to the New World. Churchill warned Ottawa that the royal family might be sent there soon.<sup>14</sup>

Like a major stockholder in a troubled company, Ambassador Kennedy slept with one eye open throughout June. It worried him that Churchill had forbidden his ministers even to discuss the Canada plan with him. Asked point blank, Halifax ducked reply. 'You'd better ask Winston,' he said.<sup>15</sup> Then Churchill struck a different note: nothing, not even the National Gallery's collection, was to go abroad. Everything was to be hidden in caves and cellars. 'We are going to beat them.'<sup>16</sup>

That Saturday June 1, he drove to Chequers for his first weekend there as P.M. Henceforth, come Friday afternoon he would bustle out of No. 10, taking private secretary and shorthand writers down to the locked gate set in the garden wall where their car was waiting. The Daimler had been fitted with a police gong so they could scatter other cars and run every red light between Downing-street and Buckinghamshire.

Chequers, the country estate of prime ministers for thirty years, had rated a mention in the Domesday Book in 1086; work on the mansion had

begun comparatively recently, around 1320. On one flank was a large terrace and rose garden; on the other a lawn, and beyond that parks and woodland to the horizon. With its sweeping lawns, century-old yew pines, sprawling terraces and brick chimneys it would have been a peaceful retreat were it not for the barbed wire, sentries and permanent police detail supervised by a Scotland Yard inspector.\*

The twelve-hundred-acre estate stood relatively high, so the summer heat did not disturb it. Inside the E-shaped, three-storied Elizabethan-style mansion was what had originally been an open courtyard with a gallery along one side. The rooms were packed with museum-piece furniture and Cromwellian relics. It was not an easy building to heat. Winston's A.D.C. would discover one distinguished American visitor sitting in the toilet, reading the newspaper in an overcoat and trying to keep warm.

A distinguished painted audience of deceased English gentry frowned down upon the entrance hall, many with the bulbous noses typical of that species. The paintings of monarchs that enlivened this warren of panelled rooms revealed that several had the grubby necks that characterised former royalty – before their severance, that is.<sup>17</sup> At the entrance to the formal gardens were the words, 'All care abandon, ye who enter here.' But the weekends were not always carefree: some of the grimmest news came to him here – but also the most uplifting, including news of the atrocity at Pearl Harbor.

REFRESHED, BY early Sunday evening June 2, he was back at No. 10.

He again ordered *DYNAMO* ended. Taken aback, the French accused him of betraying their rearguard troops; Churchill relented. The French ambassador Charles Corbin had a frosty interview with him that evening and wired to Reynaud at seven-thirty: 'I have just seen the prime minister who has given me a formal promise to continue during the night of [June] third to fourth all naval and air effort necessary to ensure that the remaining French troops are evacuated.'<sup>18</sup>

Churchill performed this service in bad grace and sent a short-tempered telegram to Reynaud. 'We are coming back for your men tonight,' it read. 'Pray make sure that all facilities are used promptly. Last night for three hours many ships waited idly at much cost and danger.'<sup>19</sup>

Softening, Churchill felt that France should get the R.A.F. fighter squadrons that Reynaud again demanded. At a war cabinet on Monday the third, he ran into violent opposition from the austere, pragmatic air mar-

\* He kept a log of Mr Churchill's weekend guests. For example: 'Miss Roper, masseuse.' Mrs H. M. Hyams placed this treasured 140-page volume of her late husband's at the author's disposal.

shals over this. Newall wanted everything but six bomber squadrons and three Hurricane fighter squadrons brought back from France. He scathingly pointed out that over 250 fighter planes had already been sent over against Air Chief Marshal Dowding's explicit advice. At one stage Dowding, who was present, rose from his seat and slapped on the table in front of the prime minister a graph showing the fighter wastage rate. (Some thought that he was handing in his resignation.) The R.A.F. now had only 224 Hurricanes and 280 Spitfires left, and even fewer pilots; they were losing two dozen fighter planes a day. 'If the present rate of wastage continues for another fortnight,' he rasped, 'we shall not have a single Hurricane left in France,' and added, '*or in this country.*' Exasperated, Dowding laid down his pencil and announced: 'I have said my last word.'<sup>20</sup>

The prime minister of course had to take a less insular attitude than the air chief marshal. He uneasily pointed out that it would look to the French as though Britain had five hundred fighter planes standing idle while France was making her supreme effort. But the cabinet heeded Dowding's temper. For the coming battle on the Somme, the chiefs of staff agreed to send out two army divisions – Churchill even talked of three. He wired to his linkman Spears in Paris, staying at the Ritz: 'You should prepare them for favourable response Army but disappointment about Air.'<sup>21</sup>

THUS FAR he had not had a good war. He had been outwitted in Norway and France; he was still trying to toss his airforce into the maelstrom of France's defeat. Several times during June the opportunity arose of ending this madness, but personal prestige demanded that he struggle on, like a punch-drunk boxer. 'Britain always wins one battle,' the pot-valiant Major Morton would reassure the French: 'The last.'

Superb oratory alone enabled Churchill to ride down the apprehensions of his queasier colleagues. Few episodes illustrate his methods better than his address to a closed meeting of hero-worshipping junior ministers on Monday June 3, when he wheedled out of them a demand that he should not contemplate peace with Hitler now. He promised that things were getting better. He claimed that 'the French [had] insisted on the post of honour' at Dunkirk and so, 'after a seemly wrangle, we brought the Cameron Highlanders away' who would otherwise 'have stayed and died at the end.' He dwelt briefly upon Europe's likely fate – 'Famine, starvation and revolt most of all in the slave lands which Germany has overrun.'

The P.M. [Dalton recorded] wants to be able to say to the House tomorrow, 'If I wavered for a moment, all my colleagues in the Government would turn and rend me.'<sup>22</sup>

He detained his secretaries late at Admiralty House, preparing the next day's speech to the House and considering what support to render France.

That Tuesday afternoon – a swelteringly hot day – was tense with an uncertain excitement. Before going to the box to speak, he had ascertained the final figures on *DYNAMO*. The final score was magnificent: 224,318 British saved, to which had now been added 111,172 Allied troops. The total was thrice that at Gallipoli.<sup>23</sup>

While warning the Members that wars were not won by evacuations, he lauded the heroism of the R.A.F. and the rearguard who had withstood the enemy's 'eight or nine armoured divisions, each of four hundred armoured vehicles,' behind which had plodded the 'dull, brute mass of the ordinary German army.' Like splashes of oil colour, he daubed words across the great canvas of his speech. A torrent of prose invoked a cavalcade of childhood images from the knights of the Round Table to the Crusaders; he was in his element. 'We are told' – he did not say by whom – 'that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles,' he said, adding sombrely: 'This has often been thought of before.'

He described candidly how the enemy Panzer divisions had scythed around and to the rear of the Allied armies only to be halted just before Dunkirk – not by Hitler's order, which he did not mention, but by the heroic defenders of Calais and Boulogne. Four days of fighting had left only thirty unwounded survivors in Calais, he claimed, and these had been rescued by the navy. It was a legend in the making, but it was both magnificently done and necessary: the re-born British army must look back on it as a heroic passage of arms, as a triumph despite the 'treachery' of the Belgians. He accordingly reserved contumely for King Leopold. 'With the least possible notice,' he rasped, gripping the lapels of his jacket, 'and without the advice of his ministers,' that king had sent a plenipotentiary to the enemy, exposing the whole Allied flank. The House rang with cries of 'Shame! Shame!' Invited to form its own opinion of 'this pitiful episode,' the House dutifully roared: 'Treachery!' Taking their tone from this unseemly scene, the world's press labelled Leopold 'coward,' 'deserter,' 'traitor,' and even 'the Rat King.'<sup>\*</sup>

\* Tireless in his defence of the name of the king of the Belgians, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes told Dalton: 'It was a cowardly lie to say that the king ordered them to lay down their arms without having told his Allies.'<sup>24</sup>

Now, Churchill promised, the British would rebuild their expeditionary army.

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. . . We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. And even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the Old.

How often had the deliberations of the House been stifled by putrid, colourless verbiage. Now Winston Churchill's tear-provoking, august prose reared like a moss-grown fortress out of its ceaseless blare, defying the scorn of commoner people for its pedantry and archaic form. By its rare beauty his language ennobled and sanctified the cause it was proclaiming.

That evening the B.B.C. broadcast his speech after the news. The whole nation thrilled, not knowing that Churchill had refused to repeat it before the microphone. Instead, a B.B.C. actor – 'Larry the Lamb' of the Children's Hour – had agreed to mimic the prime minister before the microphone, and nobody was any the wiser.<sup>25</sup>



For months after the Dunkirk débâcle Britain would remain on the defensive. While Ironside set about rebuilding the army, post-mortems began into what Churchill had called the 'unmitigated military disaster.'

In retrospect, its seeds had been sown in February, with the provisional decision to ship three of the ten divisions (42nd, 44th and 5th) earmarked for Lord Gort to Scandinavia instead. Even at that time General Pownall had despairingly attributed this Norway/Finland plan to 'those master strategists Winston and Ironside' – and had made comparisons with Gallipoli. Neither Georges nor Gort had been consulted about it, although it set back their build-up in France by two months. In fact no ammunition at all was shipped to the B.E.F. during February – in case it was needed 'elsewhere.' By April Pownall was recording that Mr Churchill's military co-ordination committee, responsible for the original 'harebrained' plan, was known in the war office as the 'Crazy Gang.'<sup>26</sup>

Examination of the contemporary records, however, cannot exonerate the generals of the B.E.F. They were a poor match for Hitler's commanders, and they knew it. While the nervous breakdown of one British corps commander was unexpected, the consequences of retreat should not have surprised them – the loss of morale, of heavy equipment, of prepared positions, and above all of intricate signals facilities. Their private papers reveal aristocratic, condescending attitudes; their ancient dislike of the French and Belgians was resented and returned. The language barrier intensified the differences. French records tell of one farcical meeting between General Vuillemin 'who can't understand English' and the British forward air commander, Air Vice Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt, 'who talks impossible French.'<sup>27</sup>

Churchill's mind was already roaming ahead to more glorious times. 'How wonderful it would be,' he wrote wistfully to Ismay, 'if the Germans could be made to wonder where they were going to be struck next, instead of forcing us to try to wall in the Island and roof it over.' They must shake off this 'mental and moral prostration' to Hitler's will. Special troops must create 'a reign of terror' along Hitler's lengthening coastline with 'butcher and bolt' tactics; tanks landed from flat-bottomed assault craft must make full-scale raids; Bomber Command must deliver ruinous attacks on the towns and cities of Nazi-occupied Europe. He displayed his impatience in a letter to the king that evening: 'Better days will come – though not yet.' And he admitted to old rival Stanley Baldwin, 'I cannot say that I have enjoyed being prime minister very much so far.'<sup>28</sup>

AT LUNCHTIME ON Wednesday June 5 the hand-lettered newsbills announced: GREAT GERMAN OFFENSIVE BEGINS – OFFICIAL.

Hitler's armies were lunging south across the Somme toward Paris. Weygand complained that morning to Reynaud that Britain was ignoring every appeal. Learning that France was pleading for planes, Churchill was again overwhelmed by dangerous sentiment. 'W.S.C. had meeting with Air Staff, Dowding and Beaverbrook,' a top civil servant learned. 'I do hope we're not uncovering ourselves to help a helpless France.'

Again Dowding stood up to Churchill when closely cross-examined on how many planes and pilots he could spare.<sup>29</sup> Overruling him, Churchill telegraphed to Reynaud that two fighter squadrons and four bomber squadrons would stand by to help from British airfields.<sup>30</sup> But shortly he was shown an insulting letter written by the French airforce commander General Vuillemin jibing at the R.A.F. performance as 'tardy, inadequate,' and his sentiment ran out.<sup>31</sup> Two days earlier Vuillemin had demanded the support of at least half of Britain's home-based fighters –

wanting ten squadrons now and ten later; if Hitler should commit the 'strategic blunder' of attacking Britain first, they could instantly return.<sup>32</sup> Vuillemin's language broke the camel's back. Echoing Churchill, Ismay called France's behaviour 'outrageous – doing nothing but slinging mud at us.'<sup>33</sup>

At Admiralty House he stayed in bed the next morning, dictating fretful minutes about new inventions, recruiting naval pilots to the fighter defences, mining Luleå, and disabling a Norwegian airfield. 'This ought to have been thought of before,' he dictated. On one admiralty document he red-inked the comment: 'We seem quite incapable of *action*.' Shortly a minute arrived from the Prof., showing that his fertile brain was also working: 'Ten thousand hot air balloons have been ordered. . . Delivery will be completed on July 14.' Sir Henry Tizard, the Prof.'s jealous rival and scientific adviser to the air staff, visited the Prof. at No. 10, found that the P.M. had told him to 'drive ahead' with anything new that might be of use that summer and noted, disgruntled, in his diary: 'There is enough overlapping of responsibility to hinder almost anything useful being done.'<sup>34</sup> But improvisation was now the order of the day. At the mid-day cabinet on the sixth the news was that the B.E.F. had abandoned seven thousand tons of ammunition, ninety thousand rifles, one thousand heavy guns, eight thousand Bren machine guns, and four hundred anti-tank guns in Flanders, as well as 475 tanks and 38,000 motor vehicles.

A telegram came from Spears. Reynaud had telephoned President Roosevelt during the night and gained 'keen satisfaction.' Roosevelt had claimed to be helping as far as U.S. neutrality law would permit. Spears had then attended that morning's Paris cabinet: Weygand was proving difficult. 'Mr Churchill,' the French C-in-C had said, 'may think General Vuillemin's demands unreasonable. Perhaps if he saw the condition of our army he would think we were unreasonable to go on fighting.'<sup>35</sup>

The R.A.F. threw 144 fighters into the battle on June 7, an effort which Reynaud derided as inadequate. When Churchill promised five Hurricane squadrons for the morrow, and four more operating from British bases, the Frenchman protested that this was only a quarter of the British force. 'It is my duty,' he wrote the next day, 'to ask that like us, you throw your entire force into this battle.'<sup>36</sup> It was his final appeal, and it failed: Churchill smelt an alibi in preparation. As he pointed out to the defence committee, if Britain remained strong she could win the war 'and in so doing, restore France to her position.'

The French appeal was refused. Churchill's first draft was blunt to the point of being injurious: 'The score of squadrons or so,' he would have written to Reynaud, 'which you would like to have melted down in the

next few days as a mere makeweight or episode in your splendid struggle will we believe if properly used in this country enable us to break his air attack, and thus break him.' Ultimately a more tactful message was sent: 'We are giving you all the support we can in this great battle, short of ruining the capacity of this country to continue the war.'<sup>37</sup>

GENERAL SPEARS returned somewhat prematurely from Paris and attended the afternoon cabinet, resplendent in red and gold and with a revolver holstered to his belt. As they trooped out, they glimpsed the *Pictorial's* editor Cecil King sitting outside. He and many other editors were concerned about the rising tide of discontent as a quarter of a million B.E.F. survivors found their voice. Fortunately, they were as yet blaming the presence in continued high office of Chamberlain and his 'gang.' On the sixth Churchill had put pressure on the editors not to disturb national unity, promising to ease out Chamberlain soon on the grounds of ill-health.

Cecil King had asked for a meeting and was ushered in at eight P.M. on June 7, as the harassed air minister Sinclair was leaving – 'the complete tragic actor,' King wrote in his diary, a sort of 'minor [Henry] Irving' with his long black hair, deep-set hazel eyes and tragic pallor. Winston remained at the long table with his back to the fireplace; he was dressed in his rompers, his hair wispy, his face flushed. After warning that he would face down any serious criticism in the House with a vote of censure, he defended Chamberlain as head and shoulders above the rest of his 'pretty mediocre' team. Only a year before some Tories had hated him – Churchill – enough to try and hound him out of his constituency, and they were still in the House. It did not escape him that Chamberlain still attracted the louder cheers. However unrepresentative of popular feeling, he lectured the newspaperman, this House was the ultimate source and arbiter of power. If he trampled upon it – as he could – the resulting internecine strife would afford the Germans their best chance of victory.

What use to be dictator, he asked, if he could not choose his own governmental personnel? After all, he had favoured with office every Member who had opposed Chamberlain – men like Law, Boothby, and Macmillan. If he were to exclude everybody else, where was he to stop? Only 'a tiny handful' had been right. At a moment when Italy might declare war and France might quit, was this the time for bickering?

Spears came to dinner afterward, and marvelled once again at 'Winston's magnificent courage.'

He needed every ounce of it to take the blow which misfortune bestowed on the eighth. In the final evacuation of Norway which had begun



four days earlier, the aircraft carrier *Glorious* had completed the remarkable feat of deck-landing a land-based squadron of Hurricanes for passage home to Scapa. Now the troopships and supply convoys were homeward bound, although neither Lord Cork nor the admiralty had advised Admiral Forbes of these movements. That omission now cost Britain dearly. An enemy battle-cruiser squadron intercepted *Glorious* and her two destroyers, sailing alone to the south of the convoys, and *Scharnhorst* sank all three with the loss of 1,470 lives.

DESMOND MORTON had always warned that the French army and airforce were rotten; at the time Churchill would have none of it. But now he must have wished many things unsaid. 'Since the fall of the monarchy,' he had declared on September 18, 1936, 'the French Army has been the highest expression of the soul of France. No one can doubt its fine and enduring qualities.' 'The French Army,' he had written on February 17, 1938, 'from commander in chief to private soldier, from monarchist to communist, is a harmonious engine for the defence of France against aggression.' Their chiefs, he had then claimed, could certainly watch the nazification of the German army with composure.

Disappointed now in Georges and the older French generals, he was all the more enraptured by the lofty young cavalry officer who loped into No. 10 on June 9 and proclaimed his country's will to continue the struggle 'even, if need be, in her empire.' This was General Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle, recently appointed France's under-secretary for war – one of the few men not personally vetted by Reynaud's all-powerful mistress. The older diplomats mocked this ill-proportioned tank officer. Sir Alexander Cadogan's sardonic *mot* galloped round the ministries: 'I can't tell you anything about de Gaulle,' he scoffed, 'except that he's got a head like a pineapple and hips like a woman.'<sup>38</sup>

The extraordinary romance with de Gaulle was to cause Winston more grief than any other matter in World War Two. In the final year of war this Frenchman would swamp the cable traffic between London and Washington to the eclipse of matters of far greater moment: telegrams about de Gaulle outnumbered those about Poland by five-to-one.<sup>39</sup> An unexplained episode in April 1943 suggests that somebody even tried to do away with this power-hungry, amoral general.

Churchill detailed Morton to take de Gaulle under his wing.

HITLER HAD made no attempt to bomb London, and the intercepted Luftwaffe signals suggested he would not do so unless provoked. But to Churchill there seemed only one certain path to victory, as he informed his old

friend Field Marshal Smuts: Hitler *should* attack, 'and in so doing break his air weapon.'<sup>40</sup>

On the same day, June 9, he briefed Britain's ambassador in Washington to talk to Roosevelt about the probability that a pro-German government might surrender the British fleet. 'This dastard deed would not be done by His Majesty's present advisers, but if Moseley [*sic*] were prime minister or some other Quisling Government set up, it is exactly what they would do.' Lothian was to discourage 'any complacent assumption' by the Americans that they would 'pick up the debris of the British empire' by their present policy.

If we go down Hitler has a very good chance of conquering the world.<sup>41</sup>

Time was running out. Churchill could not expect United States intervention before the presidential election in November. Asked that midday if the French were likely to hold on, Sir John Dill replied with a terse 'No.' Churchill announced that he would fly to Paris after lunch.

All afternoon his party hung around, but nobody knew whether the government had left Paris or not, and they decided not to go until the next day. Spears detected that Reynaud was not very keen to meet Winston. To ease their meeting, Churchill sent a softer message hinting at aid and lauding the 'undaunted courage' of the French armies.<sup>42</sup>

He took an afternoon nap and was wakened with news that Italy had declared war. 'Am rather glad,' sniffed Cadogan, over at the F.O. 'Now we can say what we think of these purulent dogs.' Churchill's language also rose to the occasion. 'People who go to Italy to look at ruins,' he tersely said to his secretary, sending for the American ambassador, 'won't have to go so far as Naples and Pompeii again.'<sup>43</sup> 'Words fail me,' reported Kennedy, 'in repeating what he thinks of Mussolini.' Churchill swore to him – as Lothian was no doubt also telling Roosevelt – that as long as he lived the navy would never be turned over to Hitler. But he again sought to stir fears about what a Mosley government might do to save the country from destruction – in which context he expressed vexation that Hitler had yet to bomb a single English town. 'By his conversations,' noted Kennedy, 'I should judge that he believes that with the bombing of well-known places in England the United States will come in.'<sup>44</sup>

Roosevelt was too shrewd to hurry prematurely to either France's or Britain's aid. When an interventionist colleague urged him to send over aircraft, guns and destroyers, even if obsolete, the president replied can-

didly enough that the destroyers would be quite useless – they had only four guns each and no anti-aircraft armament. Moreover, what if Hitler should win? 'I might guess wrong,' explained Roosevelt. 'They [the destroyers] might serve further to enrage Hitler. We cannot tell the turn that the war will take.'<sup>45</sup> He was undecided whether to treat with a Nazi-installed regime in France or with Reynaud's. Thus Bullitt remained in Paris even though Reynaud's government was fleeing. Later that evening Kennedy warned Washington of mounting feeling in London. He could visualise the British people's 'possible eventual acceptance' of a German victory, but they would never forgive America for not coming to their aid.

The gloom spread to Admiralty House. Beaverbrook described Winston in a letter as like Atlas, but with two worlds to carry. 'With one hand,' wrote Beaverbrook, 'he bears up the British empire; with the other he sustains the French republic.'<sup>46</sup> Spears suspected that he ought to have remained in Paris. Over dinner the Churchills consoled him. Dill also joined the circle; the new C.I.G.S. impressed Spears as being already very tired. The war office seemed happy to fasten responsibility for the disaster on the French, and leave it at that. That evening Spears gained 'a very painful impression indeed.' He left the P.M. at one o'clock profoundly unhappy. 'He said several times,' wrote Spears, 'that we were losing everywhere in the field owing to lack of preparations.' John Colville also sensed this lowering mood. 'He was in a bad temper,' ran his account, 'snapped everybody's head off, wrote angry minutes to the First Sea Lord, and refused to pay any attention to messages given him orally.'

Before he left for France on the eleventh, a German battle-cruiser was reported at Trondheim, with two or three cruisers. The cabinet turned down an operations division suggestion that the fleet air arm go in and get them. 'What the hell has the cabinet to do with naval operations?' wrote Captain Edwards miserably. 'Winston again! To put down the B.C. would be the best possible tonic for the Allied cause. It would reduce the risk of invasion 30%, go 15% of the way to win the war, restore morale in the fleet. Why doesn't the 1st S.L. resign?'

DRESSED IN black, Churchill sat in the Flamingo that afternoon as it lifted into the sunshine, escorted by twelve Hurricanes. He had promised his cabinet to talk the French out of any armistice ideas. But in his file was a report by Lord Hankey on what to do if France collapsed – about her gold, her fleet, her oil, and the new aircraft she had ordered off American production lines.

The French army had evacuated its headquarters to Briare, eighty miles south of Paris. Reynaud had arranged a seven P.M. Supreme War

Council at the Château du Muguet.<sup>47</sup> Churchill found them all slumped around a dining table awaiting him; he recognised Reynaud, Pétain, Darlan, and de Gaulle. He spoke firmly – ‘forcefully, but retaining his magnificent composure,’ wrote an admiring Reynaud. ‘He interpolated only a few sentences in French in his remarks, as was his custom, but without much success.’ It was his ‘hope’ that Hitler would turn against Britain, thus giving France a respite.\* If France could hold on, by the spring of 1941 he could offer twenty or twenty-five more British divisions.

The French however were in despair. This became plain when Weygand spoke: France’s entire forces were committed; her troops were dead tired – or dead. A cohesive defence was no longer possible. ‘If I was to say the opposite,’ he said, ‘I should be lying.’ The sweat poured down Spears’s face as he listened to Weygand:

No reserves of any kind [Spears noted in his diary], troops been fighting for six days and nights without food or rest. Men fall back at night and have to be shaken to fire. The Germans are across the Seine. . . Nothing to prevent their reaching Paris.

Churchill flushed as Weygand continued the desolate tale. ‘*C’est la dislocation*’ – the break-up – said Weygand, ‘that is the position I’ve had to explain to my government.’ As for Reynaud, he just kept repeating: ‘If we lose this battle it’s because we lack the airforce.’

Churchill looked round for his old friend, inquired brusquely: ‘*Où est Georges?*’ The general was sent for; he only echoed Weygand.

Winston obviously horrified [recorded Spears that evening] but splendid. He declared as he always does that whatever happens we fight on. . . Found words of fiery eloquence, both in French and English, but said that France could not expect us to destroy our only hope, air arm, in this battle. Winston was understanding and kind to the French . . . yet very firm. I have never seen anything to approach it especially as he was under stress, great emotion.

He tried to argue that Hitler’s troops must be just as exhausted. This earned only fresh exasperation from the French.

Could they have seen into an American army docks in New Jersey that night, these unhappy allies would have witnessed the first supplies for

\* Hitler would lecture Field Marshal Erich von Manstein in December 1943: ‘The enemy’s not going to do what we *hope*, but what will damage us the most.’ – *Hitler’s War*, page 591.

Britain being loaded aboard merchant ships: 500,000 rifles, over twenty years old, accompanied by 250 bullets each; nine hundred field guns and eighty thousand machine guns. Fight on! That was Churchill's plea to the French – fight on even within the streets of Paris. In his imagination he already perceived, as Spears would write, 'the lurid glow of burning cities, some as beautiful as Paris, collapsing on garrisons who refused to accept defeat.'

True, the French did not share his enthusiasm for fire, but he remained incorrigibly hopeful. 'Perhaps the pressure will lessen in the next forty-eight hours,' he suggested. He continued, fortified by his own fantasy, as the French minutes show:

Mr Winston Churchill said he would not exclude the possibility of a rapid turn of the tide such as he witnessed several times during the last war, for example during the Battle of the Marne, when immediately after March 21 he was at Beauvais at Marshal Pétain's side. . . In a situation like this each day counts.\*

Pétain dryly advised him not to press the analogy too far: in 1918 the French had had forty divisions in reserve. Reynaud pointed out that the enemy now was at the gates of Paris. It was, as Mr Churchill had said, an honourable page in French history – to which Britain could still contribute by throwing in fresh air power. 'Without doubt,' he said, 'History will say that the Battle of France was lost for want of an airforce.' Churchill snapped back, 'For want of tanks as well!' He suggested holding at least a bridgehead on the Atlantic, or waging 'a kind of guerrilla war' until the Americans intervened.

Pétain poured a *douche* on the idea. 'That would lead to the country's destruction.'

'Would the alternative be less terrible?' was Churchill's rejoinder. 'Come what may, Britain will carry on the fight. If we are invaded, and if we experience all the horrors of war on our own soil, then that in itself must leave an impression on America.'

In conclusion, he voiced his confidence in the ultimate downfall of Hitler. 'Though Germany occupy the whole of France, That Man cannot win the war!' 'Britain,' he added, 'is ready and willing to face the same horrors. She is indeed anxious to draw on to herself the full malice of the Nazi's tyranny, and, however tremendous the German fury may prove to be, she will never give in.'

\* At this place on his French copy of the minutes Reynaud scrawled in the margin, '*aucun rapport!*' – 'Quite out of touch!'

The emotional conflagration damp'd down in this Pickwickian gentleman, the table was cleared for dinner. Ever pernickety about hygiene, he went off for a bath and change of clothes, and it was ten P.M. before the meal began.

Spears had watched General de Gaulle closely throughout the evening. 'He never blinked an eyelid,' he pencilled in his notes. 'Smoking cigarettes *du bout des lèvres*, perfect demeanour.' Churchill invited this junior general to sit next to him – a studied affront to the venerable Weygand that did not pass unnoticed. He cared little for Reynaud's generals now. At that moment, the local authorities were driving trucks onto the airfields at Sâlon, in southern France, to prevent R.A.F. bombers taking off against Italy.



He awakened with a start to the unfamiliar château surroundings, found his bath – after padding around the corridors in his red silk kimono and white silk pyjamas – and breakfasted heartily. The council resumed at eight A.M., but Pétain, Georges, and de Gaulle had already left. Reynaud asked outright for five more R.A.F. fighter squadrons, and defended Vuillemin's decision not to bomb Italy. Britain, he said, might do as she pleased but not from French airfields. As for Churchill's heroic vision of a Paris in flames, Weygand revealed that he had ordered the city surrendered as soon as its outer defences fell.

The gulf was widening. Speaking with emphasis, Churchill insisted that their prime minister notify him at once of any change in the situation so that he might return to see them 'at any convenient spot.'

With the conference dissolving on this unhappy note Churchill cornered the French fleet commander: 'Darlan,' he pleaded, 'I trust that you will never surrender the fleet.'

'There is no question of doing so,' promised Darlan. 'It would be contrary to our naval tradition and honour.'<sup>48</sup>

THE SUN had clouded over. Back in London, Churchill reported to his cabinet at five o'clock. It was time for Britain to withdraw within her watery frontiers. Even though it might spread ruin and starvation, he said, Britain must now intensify her blockade of Europe.

That evening Reynaud's cabinet was meeting near Tours, taking ominous decisions. Reynaud wrote in his notes that General Weygand declared it was time to ask for an armistice. Pétain backed him up.

The cabinet decided I should invite Churchill back tomorrow, to ask him the British government's attitude if France asks for an armistice.<sup>49</sup>

Unaware of this, Churchill sent a message to Roosevelt mentioning the young General de Gaulle and urging America to back France to the hilt. He had made clear to the French that Hitler could not win until he had disposed of the British, 'which has not been found easy in the past.'<sup>50</sup>

Kennedy however had submitted his own alarming prognosis to Washington. Churchill, he said, would stop at nothing to drag the United States in right after their presidential election. He was predicting that the American people would line up and demand war if they knew of the devastation of Britain's towns and cities 'after which so many American cities and towns have been named.' (No British towns, it must be repeated, had yet been bombed.) That very morning, reported Kennedy, the American correspondent of an English newspaper had mentioned that it only needed an 'incident' to bring in the United States: that was just what Kennedy feared. He warned Washington about Churchill, once again: 'Desperate people will do desperate things, if that is all that is needed.'<sup>51</sup>

Mr Churchill recovered that evening in his accustomed manner at Admiralty House. Lord Beaverbrook came round to share and revive his spirits.<sup>52</sup> Some time past midnight, somewhere in that building, a telephone rang. The call was put through to Winston just as he was preparing for bed; it was Paul Reynaud speaking, indistinctly. Could Mr Churchill return to France and see him at Tours that afternoon?

## 26: *Breakneck*

THUS, ONLY one day after leaving him, Churchill would again come face to face with Reynaud, this time at Tours, for a further bout of their alliance: Reynaud with his powerful mistress the Countess Hélène de Portes in his wake; Churchill – fearful of becoming intoxicated by his own francophile emotions – bringing along his own counsellors Lords Halifax and Beaverbrook.

He had got up late that day, June 13, 1940, and rushed off a telegram to Roosevelt before driving through London's warm sunshine, police gong ringing, to Hendon airport. 'French have sent for me again,' his message read, 'which means that crisis has arrived. Am just off. Anything you can say or do to help them now may make the difference.'<sup>1</sup> Escorted again by a dozen Hurricanes, the two Flamingos lowered themselves through clammy thunderclouds onto the rain-sodden runway at Tours and taxied past red-flagged craters to the Air France hangars.

It was two P.M. Clearly he was not expected. The only sign of life was two airmen idly munching sandwiches; they ferried these unexpected Englishmen downtown in private cars. Given Halifax's length and Churchill's girth, it was a cramped and bumpy ride.

They made for Tours police headquarters. The drab préfecture was besieged by equally hungry refugees who neither recognised nor venerated their august visitors. Here too everybody was out to lunch. Georges Mandel's aide, spotted outside by Tommy Thompson, said the minister was about to move in. Up in his office they found engineers installing telephones and a picnic luncheon waiting on a tray.

While Reynaud was fetched, Churchill's party went over to the Hôtel Grand Bretagne and lunched skimpily in a back room on cold chicken and cheese washed down by an unprepossessing local wine. Shortly Paul Baudouin, Reynaud's new under-secretary for foreign affairs, joined them. He talked silkily of the hopelessness of fighting on unless Roosevelt declared war too.

Back at police headquarters they found Mandel, minister of the interior, juggling two telephones and a chicken bone. When Reynaud arrived,



he turfed Mandel out as he was not a member of the Supreme War Council, and perched on his chair. The eight Englishmen grouped around him in a semi-circle and steeled themselves for the bad news. The French cabinet had charged him, he announced, to ascertain Britain's attitude, given 'the hard facts with which France is faced.'<sup>2</sup>

His secretary Roland de Margerie arrived and took a note of Churchill's passionate reply:

CHURCHILL: We're asking you to fight on as long as possible, if not in Paris at least behind Paris, in the provinces or in your Empire. In our view such a resistance could last very long, above all if France could count on American promises of support. Maybe Hitler does meanwhile become for some time the absolute master of the European peoples. But that will not last and must not last. All his victories cannot destroy the natural forces of all the nations, large and small, which may fleetingly pass under his yoke.

He spoke of France's magnificent navy, her empire, and the rest of her army; he suggested large-scale guerrilla war, promised that the German airforce would be broken against Britain, and that there would then come the moment when the Hitler regime would quake, particularly if the United States decided to declare war. 'Come what may, the British government means to continue the war. We are convinced that we shall break Hitler and his regime. . . The war will continue, it can only end with oblivion or victory.'

But Reynaud returned doggedly to his own central questions.

REYNAUD: The United States cannot adopt a position for many months before their presidential election, and suppose Roosevelt died? It is quite natural for Britain to continue, given that until today she has not suffered much: but we, the French government, do not believe that we ought to abandon our people without letting them see at least a light at the end of the tunnel, and we cannot see this light. . . Once the French army is *hors de combat*, we would have no means of preventing the Germans from occupying the entire territory. . . Hitler would be able to establish in France an authority with pretences to legitimacy, and the country would be prey to the most insidious propaganda.

He asked formally whether the British government would deem France justified, having now sacrificed the flower of her youth, in making a separate peace? 'This is the question I have to raise.'

'In that case,' responded Churchill in steel-fisted language gloved in silken verbiage, 'we should not waste our strength in reproaches. . . But that is very different from actually consenting to a separate peace concluded in direct contradiction of solemn engagements that you have entered into.' He suggested they both set out the situation to President Roosevelt and await his response. With tears forming in his eyes he continued: 'The cause of France will always be dear to our hearts, and we shall restore her in all her power and dignity if we are triumphant.'<sup>3</sup>

REYNAUD: The declaration that M Winston Churchill has just made is profoundly moving and I am very touched. The French government will therefore telegraph to M Roosevelt . . . that the French army, the vanguard of democracy, has gone down fighting in the front line. . . We have all committed many errors, as we French can well see. . . Hitler has killed France first, now he will attack Britain, finally America. It is both a moral and a material danger, and it threatens everybody alike.

In his reply, Churchill pointed to some questions that they should examine jointly if this terrible war was to continue. 'We are moving toward a total blockade.' Suppose Roosevelt's reply proved negative? 'If our struggle should prosper and we survive the winter, the war will go on in increasing savagery. France will not escape the consequences of this duel. . .'

Reynaud was shocked by the prospect – 'that if the war goes on Britain would find herself inflicting suffering directly on the French.' He chose his words with delicacy. 'If the French army and people continue to suffer,' he continued, 'without evoking from Britain the slightest sign that she recognises how much we have already suffered, I should be very concerned for the future.'

Spears slipped a note to Churchill suggesting they adjourn. Churchill led his team downstairs into the narrow garden. The undergrowth and branches were dripping from the drizzling rain. For twenty minutes they paced around this wretched garden. Beaverbrook's solution was the simplest: 'Tell Reynaud,' he exclaimed, 'that we have nothing to say or discuss until Roosevelt's answer is received. Don't commit yourself to anything. We are doing no good here. Let's get along home.'<sup>4</sup>

Upstairs Churchill announced that his opinion was unchanged.

REYNAUD: I am convinced that M Roosevelt will take one more step and that I shall therefore be able to agree conditions with the British government under which we shall continue in this war. . .

CHURCHILL: We shall say the same to the president in our most brutal manner. . . We cannot leave him many hours to reply. . . If he agrees to enter the war, victory is assured. It will become a war between continents, where we are in command of the oceans, and we shall liberate one after another of the different European nations, just as we did in the last war.

Gathering up his papers, Churchill mentioned one other urgent matter: 'You're holding hundreds of German airmen prisoner in France, many shot down by the R.A.F. Let us transport them to safekeeping while there is still time.'

'It shall be taken care of.'

Churchill promised that Britain would continue sending troops to France to keep up the pressure.

Assuring him that he himself never wanted to raise these 'certain eventualities,' Reynaud warned Churchill to make no mistake: 'If President Roosevelt's reply is negative, this will create a new situation.'

CHURCHILL: I preserve my confidence in the ultimate destruction of the Hitlerite regime. Hitler cannot win. Let us await with patience his downfall.

REYNAUD: I too keep faith in the future. Otherwise life for me would no longer be worth living.

Passing Charles de Gaulle in the courtyard of the *préfecture*, Churchill hissed three words to the impassive major-general – '*L'homme du destin*.'

His car was waiting. The Countess Hélène de Portes elbowed through the throng. 'Mr Churchill,' she cried emotionally, 'my country is bleeding to death . . . you *must* hear me.' She was evidently losing her head (and a few days later she did\*). The prime minister ignored her and told his driver to make haste for the airfield. Reynaud said his farewells there, then drove back to the countess who had, Churchill reflected contemptuously, succour to offer of the kind that was not in his gift.

He was aware that the long love affair with France was over. To cap the other indignities of this dreary day there were no batteries to enable

\* Reynaud was an indifferent driver: while fleeing through France he crashed and her neck was broken.<sup>5</sup>

the Hurricane pilots to restart their engines. He told his pilot to fly home without the fighter escort, above the cloud. But the cloud thinned out and they approached the English coast in dazzling sunshine; his Flamingo had to wavehop back to the shore. He landed at Hendon at eight-thirty that evening, having set foot in France for the last time for exactly four years.

His precipitous departure from Tours had unwittingly offended the French cabinet, who had been waiting nearby to hear him. Reynaud had forgotten to mention this to the British party. This added to the unfortunate impression burgeoning within the French ever since Dunkirk – that the British were leaving them in the lurch.<sup>6</sup>

IMMEDIATELY UPON his return, Churchill ordered Ambassador Kennedy to be ushered in.

He had Roosevelt's reply to Reynaud's earlier appeal, that of the tenth. It read: 'This Government is doing everything in its power to make available to the Allied Governments the material they so urgently require.'<sup>7</sup> The rest was platitudes, but Churchill was clutching at straws; he assured his colleagues at ten-fifteen P.M. that it was virtually an American declaration of war. Roosevelt, he triumphed, could hardly urge the French to 'continue the struggle,' if he did not intend to join in.

He stepped briefly out of the cabinet room and hectored Kennedy: the message must be published, to 'buck up' morale in France – 'The president's note will do it.' Kennedy was dubious. He had booked a call to Washington, he said, and expected it 'any minute.' Shortly it came through: Roosevelt blithely agreed to publication, but then Cordell Hull came on the line and forbade it. Baffled, Churchill told his cabinet the president did not realise how critical the situation was.<sup>8</sup>

As they rose at one A.M., a grim-faced Churchill handed to Kennedy, waiting outside, a further telegram to Roosevelt arguing that it was 'absolutely vital' to publish his message immediately so that it might play 'the decisive part in turning the course of world history.'<sup>9</sup> For an hour after that, while Kennedy watched, Churchill sat at his desk drafting an heroic proclamation to the French people. 'We shall never turn from the conflict,' he had written, 'until France stands safe and erect in all her grandeur, until the wronged and enslaved States and peoples have been liberated, and until civilisation is free from the nightmare of Nazism. That this day will dawn we are more sure than ever. It may dawn sooner than we now have the right to expect.'

Months later he would reveal to Eden that each day now he wakened with fresh dread in his heart.<sup>10</sup> At nine-twenty the next morning Kennedy telephoned: Roosevelt had again refused permission to publish – 'Not in

any circumstances.' He had also sent a TRIPLE PRIORITY telegram to that effect.<sup>11</sup> Kennedy spelt it out to the exhausted prime minister: only the U.S. Congress was authorised to declare war. The ambassador invited him to explain it to Reynaud, but this was a chore Churchill eschewed, accusing Roosevelt of 'holding back.' To convey this message to Reynaud now would merely dampen what little fire still burned within the French – 'and I much doubt' added Churchill 'whether it will be possible in that event for us to keep the French fleet out of German hands.'<sup>12</sup>

German troops were pouring into Paris. Reynaud had left Tours that morning, received Roosevelt's second telegram at four-thirty, and was at Bordeaux by eight. 'For the first time this morning,' reported Kennedy from London later on June 14 to Roosevelt, 'many people here realise that they are in for a terrible time. . . They are beginning to say we have everything to lose and nothing to gain, and what is the use of fighting. If the English people thought there was a chance of peace on any decent terms an upheaval against the government might come.'



During the day, the Neville Chamberlains had moved out of the upper part of No. 10 Downing-street and the Winston Churchills moved in. The famous house – built in about 1665 by Sir George Downing, the second graduate of Harvard – was more spacious inside than it seemed. It had an inner court, and among the large, elegantly furnished rooms was a hall for state dinners. Winston's secretary John Martin hoped that life would be simpler now that they no longer had alternative headquarters at Admiralty House. But Winston still 'thought it best' to sleep elsewhere. The Prof. had warned him on the thirteenth that the Germans seemed to have developed some type of 'ray device' to pinpoint their targets – perhaps radar, or radio beacons planted by spies.<sup>13</sup>

On June 14, keeping the promise he had made at Tours, Churchill had authorised the despatch of more troops.<sup>14</sup> But almost at once Dill warned that Weygand was talking of an end of 'organised resistance,' so Churchill stopped the movement.

At eight-twenty P.M. General Brooke, commanding the British force in France, telephoned Dill that he had already begun withdrawing the 52nd division to the coast. Dill handed the phone to Churchill, who angrily told Brooke that he was supposed to be making the French army feel the British were supporting them. 'It is impossible to make a corpse feel,' was Brooke's succinct reply. Their conversation heated the wires for half an hour.<sup>15</sup> Finally Churchill ordered the necessary steps to evacuate the remaining British force from the Cherbourg and Brittany peninsulas.

Though he might harbour bold schemes to lure Hitler's bombers to London, Churchill was too prudent to sleep at No. 10 as yet. He crossed Green Park and slept at Beaverbrook's London mansion instead. This nightmare would probably last until the presidential election. 'If we can hold on until November,' he said, brightening, to his staff as he left No. 10 for Stornoway House, 'we shall have won the war.'<sup>16</sup>

He drafted a further plea to Roosevelt on the fifteenth, stating cruelly that if they could publish his message to Reynaud it 'might save France,' and reiterating what might happen if Hitler offered Britain easy terms: 'A pro-German government would certainly be called into being to make peace,' Churchill prophesied, 'and might present to a shattered or a starving nation an almost irresistible case for entire submission to the Nazi will.' If Hitler could unite the fleets of Germany, Japan, France, Italy and Britain, he would have 'overwhelming sea-power' in his hands. Churchill was becoming dangerously obsessed with the French fleet.

The war cabinet endorsed a message to the Dominion prime ministers which he dictated there and then. New Zealand and Australia had cabled a pledge to remain with Britain to the end. Churchill's message encouraged the four Dominion prime ministers, 'I do not regard the situation as having passed beyond our strength. It is by no means certain that the French will not fight on in Africa and at sea, but, whatever they do, Hitler will have to break us in this island or lose the war.'<sup>17</sup> He liked that. He rolled it around his tongue and read it out to his staff that night. He sighed, and said with proper pride, 'If words counted, we should win this war.'<sup>18</sup>

AGAIN DUCKING No. 10, he had driven out to Chequers that Saturday evening: there was a full moon. Tin-helmeted sentries porting muskets with foot-long bayonets paced the lawns and mansion. The guest book shows that the Prof. joined him here. In fact he counted as 'family' – Mary totted up that Lindemann had signed the visitor's book at Chartwell 112 times since 1925. One of the crankier vegetarians, he refused to eat milk puddings, uncooked cheese, or eggs unless concealed in an omelette. But he was welcome, since he turned over his meat rations to Clementine. In return, Winston secured favours for him: among the Prof.'s papers is a certificate allowing his brother to send from Washington a gallon of pure olive oil 'as an urgent medical requirement' for the Prof.<sup>19</sup>

Lindemann briefed him on A.I., the airborne interception radar being developed for Fighter Command. Once, the phone rang; it was the F.O. – their ambassador at Bordeaux was finding it difficult to obtain straight answers from the French, and ministers there were asking in 'more brutal form' to be allowed to make a separate peace. Churchill slumped into a

lugubrious gloom.<sup>20</sup> But then, as Colville recorded, 'champagne, brandy and cigars did their work and we soon became talkative, even garrulous.' Churchill read out loud the telegrams he had exchanged with Roosevelt and the Dominions. 'The war,' he remarked cheerfully, 'is bound to become a bloody one for us now. I hope our people will stand up to bombing and the Huns aren't liking what we are giving them.'

He strolled in the moonlit rose garden with Duncan Sandys. There was no sign of the German airforce – they were still prohibited to attack towns. At one A.M. he went back inside, stretched out on a sofa, held forth on how to rebuild Fighter Command, told a few mellow stories, then bowed courteously and said: 'Goodnight, my children.'<sup>21</sup>



That Washington was refusing help clinched it for France. Reynaud read out to his cabinet in Bordeaux Roosevelt's unhelpful – Pétain would even call it 'evasive' – reply, brought to him by American ambassador Bill Bullitt at seven P.M. Pétain and others declared in favour of an armistice; Mandel and Campinchi opposed it. At eight Reynaud had sent for Spears and the British ambassador and drafted a telegram to Churchill announcing the end of the road. He was inquiring the enemy armistice terms through Washington. Seeing Bullitt again at midnight Reynaud told him this, adding without conviction, 'I only hope the terms won't be too moderate.'<sup>22</sup>

The dolorous telegram from Bordeaux reached Chequers by despatch rider in the early hours. Colville bore it into his master's bedroom. He found Churchill 'looking just like a rather nice pig clad in a silk vest.'<sup>23</sup> Moving with porcine swiftness, Churchill shifted a planned Sunday lunch engagement from Chequers to the Carlton Club and addressed an emergency cabinet in London at ten-fifteen A.M. – stressing his alarm at the involvement of Washington in asking for the terms, lest Roosevelt appeal to *all* the belligerents to 'call the war off,' as he put it.<sup>24</sup>

The spectre of Hitler offering acceptable peace terms to Britain was one abiding obsession for Churchill; the other was the possibility that he might lay hands on the French fleet. Faced with Reynaud's resolve – or rather, lack of it – Churchill's colleagues refused to release France from her solemn obligation not to negotiate a separate peace, except on one condition: 'That the French Fleet is sailed forthwith for British harbours pending negotiations.' Sir Ronald Campbell handed this demand to Reynaud in Bordeaux that afternoon.<sup>25</sup>

Reynaud had sent General de Gaulle to London to obtain the shipping France would need if she fought on from Africa. But in the British capital, de Gaulle plunged into an extraordinary intrigue. At noon-thirty he tele-

phoned Reynaud in Bordeaux claiming to have seen both Churchill and the war cabinet. Reynaud's papers contain the transcript.<sup>26</sup>

DE GAULLE: I've just seen Churchill, and there's something tremendous afoot on the lines of a union between our two countries. Churchill proposes we constitute one joint Franco-British government, and you, Monsieur le Président, can be the President of the Anglo-French war cabinet.

REYNAUD: It's the only solution for the future. But it's got to be done in a big way and fast, very fast. It's a matter of minutes now. There's a big row going on here. I can give you half an hour. It would be *magnifique!*

Half an hour later de Gaulle again telephoned Bordeaux and asked for Reynaud. Margerie told him Reynaud was in cabinet.

DE GAULLE: I wanted to tell him something tremendous is happening here. The war cabinet's in session, preparing the text of a declaration joining our two countries into one common nation. I'm off to lunch with Churchill and I'll phone you again shortly. You can tell him [Reynaud] in strict confidence that he can become the President of the Anglo-French war cabinet.

So far de Gaulle had impressed Churchill. He had proved very useful to the British cause, agreeing to divert to Britain the war goods France had ordered in America. Now, aided by the fine wine and Sunday luncheon offered by the Carlton Club, de Gaulle easily won him over to the extraordinary idea for a political union between Britain and France.<sup>27</sup>

Some days earlier Desmond Morton had sent René Pleven to dine with Winston; Pleven had suggested the idea to Tory Chief Whip David Margesson. Pleven, a tedious government economist, had failed to inspire Churchill (although M.I.5 showed interest in his wife<sup>28</sup>). When Chamberlain mentioned the idea in cabinet, Churchill had still seen only its propaganda value.<sup>29</sup> Now, lunching with de Gaulle, he suddenly warmed to the idea, agreed that the general should draft a Proclamation of Union, and emotionally commended it to his resumed cabinet after lunch.

He hoped this scheme might yet avert the armistice. Indeed, he now instructed his ambassador in Bordeaux to 'suspend action' on the telegram concerning the French fleet. On the copy in Reynaud's papers is a note, 'handed to P.R. by Campbell and Spears forenoon of June 16, but withdrawn by them before five P.M. council of ministers, Gen. de Gaulle hav-



ing meanwhile telephoned from London the text adopted by the war cabinet on the Franco–British Union.’

What had happened was this. Just before four p.m., Mr Churchill’s cabinet learned from a French radio broadcast that the Bordeaux government would decide in an hour’s time whether further resistance was possible. At four-thirty, de Gaulle, still haunting No. 10, telephoned to Reynaud – whom he privately termed ‘this frozen fish’ – the final extraordinary text of the proclamation, adopted by Mr Churchill’s colleagues:

At this most fateful moment in the history of the modern world, the Governments of the United Kingdom and French Republic made this declaration of indissoluble union and unyielding resolution in their common defence of justice and freedom, against subjection to a system which reduces mankind to a state of robots and slaves.

The two Governments declare that France and Great Britain shall no longer be two nations but one Franco–British Union.

The Constitution of the Union will provide for joint organs of defence, foreign, financial and economic policies.

Every citizen of France will enjoy immediate citizenship of Great Britain, every British subject will become a citizen of France.

Both countries will share responsibilities for repair of devastation of war, wherever it occurs in their territories, and resources of both shall be equal, and as one, applied to that purpose.

During the war there shall be a single war cabinet, and all the forces of Britain and France, whether on land, sea or in the air, will be under its direction. It will govern from wherever it best can. The two Parliaments will be formally associated. The nations of the British empire are already forming new armies. France will keep her available forces in the field, on the sea, and in the air. The Union appeals to [the] United States to fortify the economic resources of the Allies, and to bring her powerful material aid to the common cause.

The Union will concentrate its whole energy against the power of the enemy no matter where the battle may be.

And thus we shall conquer.

Having dictated this to Reynaud in French, de Gaulle added his own blunt postscript: ‘In the United States they’re asking whether you’re going to be a man of war or whether you’re going to chuck in the sponge like

Queen Wilhelmina or Leopold – whether you're the kind who'll resign so that others can surrender?'

Prising the telephone away from him, Churchill spoke to Reynaud. 'I hope you're happy,' he glowed. 'I want to see you in Brittany tomorrow mid-day. I'll telegraph to you where and when.'

The rooms and corridors of No. 10 glistened like the setting of a Gilbert & Sullivan opera. Birdsong twittered through the windows into the cabinet room; they too had evidently luncheoned well. Churchill's staff watched with amazement as he milled around with his visitors, beginning speeches, clapping de Gaulle on the back, and promising that he would be the new commander-in-chief. '*Je l'arrangerai*,' Winston cried to the Very Model of a Modern Major-general.

John Colville felt obliged to comment sardonically in his diary that meanwhile His Majesty did not know what was 'being done to his empire.' While Chamberlain undertook to break it to King George that Britain might yet see the fleur-de-lys restored to the royal standard, de Gaulle left to take the document to France.

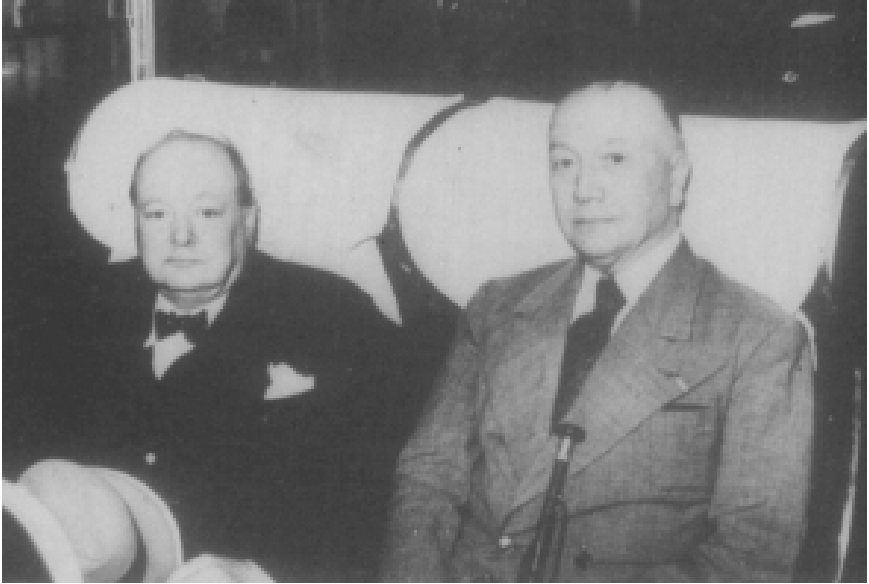
They did not have long to wait for Act Two. In Bordeaux, Reynaud's sober colleagues dismissed the proclamation with contempt. There were shouts of, 'I don't want to become a British subject.' In a private letter to Reynaud a year later, Pétain would protest that it would have 'reduced us to the rank of a [British] Dominion.' 'As for me,' Reynaud tartly rejoined, 'I prefer to collaborate with my allies rather than with the enemy.' In London the scheme would unquestionably have been shipwrecked on the outer reefs of authority had it ever emerged from the safety of Mr Churchill's cabinet. Lord Hankey wrote, greatly shocked, to Lord Halifax, 'I should resist to the uttermost in my power any sacrifice of our nationality or any permanent fusion with France.'<sup>30</sup>

ON THE evening of that exciting Sunday, Mr Churchill put on his naval uniform and prepared to leave for the solemn signing of the proclamation. Labour and Liberal leaders Attlee and Sinclair were beckoned to accompany him, joining at Waterloo station. The cruiser *Galatea* was standing by at Southampton to carry them to the westernmost French peninsula of Brittany; the *Arethusa* would convey Reynaud's government from Bordeaux to meet them there the following noon.

It was this sense of drama and atmosphere that so distinguished Churchill from his predecessors. A year later he would meet a different statesman on a British battleship, in an even more distant bay, to lay the empire's future in one foreign statesman's hands.

But his journey was not really necessary after all. At one A.M., as they still sat in the train at mundane Waterloo, after Clementine had kissed him farewell, a telegram reached him from the ambassador, Sir Ronald Campbell: Reynaud had twice read out Churchill's dramatic offer to his cabinet, but to no avail. He had accordingly resigned. Aged eighty-four, Pétain would replace him; Laval would be a member of his government.<sup>31</sup>

France was now determined to ask for an armistice, and no comic opera proclamation could stop her.



*Winston Churchill paid dearly for his love of France. The French field commander General Georges took him by train to inspect the Maginot Line in August 1939. Churchill returned to London convinced that the French army was invincible.*



*After Churchill dictated an abrasive telegram to President Roosevelt on May 20, 1940, he changed his mind and Captain Richard Pim, RNVR, 'phoned the embassy to recall it. Later, Churchill sent it off unchanged.*

## 27: *The Diehard*

**D**ISCONTENT FLARED up again in Churchill's cabinet after France's defeat. Lord Halifax was fearful that Winston was going to fight Britain into the ground. But what exactly did Hitler want? Halifax's capable under-secretary R. A. Butler had already extended feelers through Switzerland after the Norway fiasco.<sup>1</sup> On June 17, 1940 the F.O. began to probe through Sweden too. Mr Butler 'chanced upon' the Swedish envoy Björn Prytz in St. James's Park, and invited him back to the office.

Prytz was half English and equally concerned about the bloodletting now in prospect. Perhaps on instructions, Butler made no record of their talk, but Prytz immediately telegraphed Stockholm: Britain, Butler had announced, would pass up no opportunity of compromise if Hitler offered reasonable conditions. 'No diehards,' he had added, 'would be allowed to stand in the way.' After being briefly called in to see Lord Halifax, the Swede reported, Butler then emerged with a postscript: 'common sense and not bravado' would dictate the policy of His Majesty's government. This was not to be interpreted as 'peace at any price,' but the implication was clear to Prytz: if Mr Churchill got in their way, he would be forced to resign.

If Mr Churchill had now pocketed his pride, as the F.O. clearly felt he should, the war in western Europe would have ended – with Britain impoverished, but far from a pauper; with her empire unravelled; and with Europe's great cities and populations spared, along with the millions of innocents whom the Nazis two years later began to liquidate under the cruel mantle of total war. But Churchill was determined, as he had so often said, to fight on, and smote down the hand of conciliation that he found his own colleagues cautiously extending.

The British archives on these two extraordinary days, June 17 and 18, are still closed; and twice after the war London prevailed on Stockholm to suppress Prytz's revealing telegram.<sup>2</sup> But Swedish, Italian, and German records reflect what was happening, as does a cryptic entry in Sir Alexan-

der Cadogan's diary: 'Winston not there – writing his speech. *No reply from Germans.*'\*

While the foreign office awaited Hitler's response, on June 18 Churchill had made the tactical error of ducking the mid-day war cabinet to draft a speech for the House. The relevant paragraphs of the minutes of the cabinet presided over by Lord Halifax in his absence have been blanked out until 1990; but after the meeting the F.O. formally instructed the British envoy in Stockholm to investigate ways of extending official peace feelers to the Germans.<sup>3</sup> By the nineteenth, Germany had still not replied. But now, attending cabinet, Churchill found out (those paragraphs are also closed) and forbade all further soundings. To torpedo the Stockholm manoeuvre once and for all, he adopted startling, autocratic means. He ordered the navy to seize four destroyers which Sweden had just purchased from Italy and which were known to be passing nearby. The naval staff, unaware of the political background, were astonished. On the twenty-second Captain Edwards would write that the Swedes were rabid about it and threatening to break off diplomatic relations. He could not understand all this trouble over 'four elderly ships.'

'It is the most extraordinary brain, Winston's, to watch functioning that I have ever seen,' observed Halifax in utter resignation in his diary. 'A most curious mixture of a child's emotion and a man's reason.' A few days later the destroyers were released, but the act had the desired result on Sweden's future willingness to help. Still baffled, Edwards could only write: 'What a blunder it's all been!'

Churchill's energetic post-mortem into the Stockholm affair continued for several days. The Prytz telegram was quoted back to him;<sup>4</sup> it showed, Winston rebuked Halifax, that Butler had left a defeatist impression on Prytz or used 'odd language' to him. 'I was strongly pressed in the House of Commons in the Secret Session [on June 20],' he declaimed, 'to give assurances that the present Government and all its members were resolved to fight on to the death.'<sup>5</sup>



One afternoon he lunched at Lord Londonderry's mansion in the centre of London. As the brandy was served and cigars were lit he turned to the Hungarian ambassador György Barcza, a familiar gleam of mischief in his eye: 'I'm glad to see you,' he began. 'I know of your work and I know you're a good Hungarian. I hope that whatever the Germans demand of you, you won't cross certain lines.'

\* Author's emphasis.

Barcza assured him that Hungary would not.

'You are on good terms with Hitler,' continued Churchill, as the liquor suffused his veins. 'You could do me a little favour. The British are still not aware of the danger they are in – the seriousness of their situation. We'll have to do something to wake them up. Would you tell Hitler to start a little bombing over *London* – that should wake up the most indolent Englishman!'

Taken aback by the burden of this message, Barcza murmured something about not being on any terms with Hitler at all, but he felt sure that air raids would soon start.

'Well,' Churchill exclaimed, 'the sooner the better! London is full of ugly buildings, at least we can build new ones.'

Barcza reflected in his private papers afterward that the prime minister was 'stout, jovial, sometimes cynical and rude,' but that there was no doubting that he spoke succinctly and was a man of action rather than words, and would be ruthless to anybody standing in his way.<sup>6</sup>



France had ceased to fight at noon-forty on June 17. Some saw the collapse as a blessing. After a talk with Churchill that afternoon, Lord Halifax remarked in his diary that he was 'very robust and almost convincing himself that we shall do better without the French than with them.' 'Well!' wrote Sir Hugh Dowding, chief of R.A.F. Fighter Command, to the prime minister, 'now it is England against Germany, and I don't envy them their job.' He had lost 250 Hurricanes in the last ten days in France, and only two were being manufactured each day. But he had saved enough for Britain. Months later he confessed to Lord Halifax: 'When I heard the French had asked for a separate armistice I went on my knees and thanked God.'<sup>7</sup>

'It is rumoured,' wrote Captain Edwards, reflecting the prevailing nightmare in Whitehall, 'that one of the German terms is surrender of the French fleet intact.' After that day's cabinet John Colville espied Churchill pacing the beautiful walled garden laid out by the Chamberlains. He was alone, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. Later the P.M. drafted a stinging message warning 'the illustrious Marshal Pétain and the famous General Weygand' not to deliver their fleet to Hitler. 'Such an act,' he wrote, in awesome, untranslatable English, 'would scarify their names for a thousand years of history.'<sup>8</sup>

He asked the American ambassador to get the president also to warn Pétain about the fleet; at that moment a despatch arrived from Campbell reporting that the marshal was now talking of scuttling it. 'The old man's

gaga,' commented Churchill. He proposed to broadcast to America: Britain would fight on. 'Why,' he lisped to Kennedy, 'if I don't say that, the people of England would tear me to pieces.' Kennedy made no response, because he did not agree.<sup>9</sup> Newspapermen at the F.O. conference insisted that Churchill must broadcast that night.

The broadcast perturbed his information chief Harold Nicolson, who had bullied him into making it. It was plain that Winston hated the microphone. 'He just sulked,' he wrote, 'and read his House of Commons speech over again.' In the ancient chamber the words had sounded magnificent. '*We shall defend our island home,*' Churchill had roared at its end, the flames of his oratory licking around the rafters of the chamber, '*and with the British empire we shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of mankind.*'<sup>10</sup> But, truncated and broadcast, it sounded ghastly. All the vigour seemed to evaporate. Cecil King, who had lunched with him so recently, summarised it as a 'few stumbling sentences' – the situation was Disastrous but All Right. 'Whether he was drunk or all in,' he speculated in his diary, 'I don't know. . . He should have produced the finest speech of his life.'

That speech would come the next afternoon, June 18, one hundred and twenty-five years to the day since Wellington's victory at Waterloo.

When he sought new energy, Churchill returned to the fountainhead of his power: he communed with Parliament. Like Hitler, when he spoke, he needed live audiences. He needed a box to pound with his fist – then to stand back, mechanically smoothing his paunch with his small white hands, tucking his thumbs into the waistcoat bridged by its unsightly gold chain, and stepping back and forth to pace his oratory.

His speech was taunting, unrepentant, defiant. Nobody was going to rob him of his vision – of Britain's skies darkening to the enemy hordes, of a pall of smoke enshrouding her capital, and then of his own crusaders rising with thundering horsepower to joust and save their country. The Battle of France was over; the Battle of Britain was about to begin.

Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation. Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands; but if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age



made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of a perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth lasts for a thousand years men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

He had spent the whole morning writing this. Its delivery was indifferent. Again the loudest cheering came from Labour; Dalton found the subdued response of the Tories 'sinister.'<sup>11</sup> When it was broadcast that night, the B.B.C. again asked a Children's Hour actor to mimic the drooling, slurring, lisping, elocution. (Later, Churchill begged the House to allow the B.B.C. to record his orations live; alert to its traditions, it wisely declined.) His personal staff remarked upon the broadcast speech's halting start. One listener, worried that the tired voice betrayed a heart defect, sent a telegram suggesting superfluously that in future Winston work 'in a recumbent position.'<sup>12</sup>

In fact his morning work was done a-bed, resplendent in silk kimono, dictating to Kathleen Hill and her silent typewriter.<sup>13</sup> The box of documents sagged open on the coverlet, a silver ice-bucket purloined from the Savoy waited at the bedside to receive the cigar butts. Nelson, the admiralty's pampered tomcat, had evicted Chamberlain's black treasury cat in the way that felines do to establish their own imperium, and now fondled the new premier's feet. This latter animal – the cat, not the prime minister – had become famous as the Munich Mouser and received a substantial fan mail, including postal orders for catfood.<sup>14</sup> But Winston preferred Nelson's company: he found he could converse at any length with cats without fear of interruption, and once he would swear he heard one remark, 'Humans are very intelligent – I believe they understand quite a lot of what we say.'

During those June weeks the picture at No. 10 was like behind the scenes at a circus – 'every crank in the world' getting hold of the prime minister and extracting 'half-baked decisions' from him, as Cadogan put it. Among them was Hore-Belisha: he suggested that Britain kidnap Marshal Pétain on a warship and force him to sign over France's fleet and colonies. Churchill, he told Hugh Cudlipp, was prepared to discuss it.<sup>15</sup>

As France collapsed, the Nazis captured her archives. Churchill's rude telegrams to Reynaud and Daladier about Norway and Dunkirk were found in a railway truck at Le Charité; compromising documents were confiscated from the private files of his friends Léon Blum and Yvon Delbos and in the Polish and Czech legations. The foreign ministry files,

seized at Tours, revealed that France had been reading American diplomatic cyphers as recently as March.<sup>16</sup>

British ships rescued from Bordeaux Churchill's literary promoter Emery Reves\* and ex-King Zog of Albania; by MOST IMMEDIATE signal A. V. Alexander ordered the navy to evacuate hundreds of Red Spaniards too.<sup>17</sup> Ex-premier Paul Reynaud and his colleagues proved less willing to leave. Louis Spears and the British ambassador frog-marched them aboard a warship. Spears related to Hugh Dalton how he had even put aboard their mistresses – including Mandel's 'fat cow' – to make sure their menfolk left for England. But they had all galloped ashore at dusk to ask the British consulate the latest news. The ship left without them.

Georges Mandel, tragically, would be put to death by his own countrymen. Reynaud evidently hoped to escape to Spain, as Spanish border police detained his two private secretaries and found in their baggage twelve million francs, several pounds of solid gold, and the secret Anglo-French plans to invade Norway, enter Belgium, and bomb Russia, as well as the complete records of the Supreme War Council. The Madrid authorities illicitly copied six hundred pages for Hitler's amusement before returning everything to Marshal Pétain for his disposition.<sup>18</sup>

ONE VEXATION that now arose was of eggshell delicacy. It concerned the Duke of Windsor – still an admirer of the fascist dictators and still scornful of his kingly brother. While First Lord, Churchill could afford to honour the young ex-king. In September 1939 he had sent a destroyer to carry the duke back from exile and had greeted him at Portsmouth with a warm letter of welcome.<sup>19</sup> Neither the king, nor still less the queen, had welcomed his brother's return; the king posted his brother back to France – to Gamelin's headquarters. Upon France's capitulation, no British warship having been made available to evacuate the errant duke from Bordeaux, he headed for Spain instead 'to avoid capture,' and telegraphed plaintively to Winston from Barcelona on June 21.

Churchill had more important things on his plate. For a day he hesitated, consulted the war cabinet, then sent him an urgent message: 'We should like your Royal Highness to come home as soon as possible.' The F.O. reserved him a seat on the flying boat that would leave Lisbon two days later.<sup>20</sup> But the duke had now arrived in Madrid, and there he would

\* Hungarian-born Imre Revesz had become a British subject in February. He fled to New York where he perpetrated the 'autobiography' of German steel magnate Fritz Thyssen, *I Paid Hitler*. He purchased the foreign rights to Churchill's war memoirs in 1946.

remain for nine days while an unseemly tussle developed over this Spectre of the Feast – a tussle between Hitler, Churchill and Buckingham Palace.

Churchill had to make a hardnosed choice between satisfying an old friend and appeasing a new monarch who still had little liking for him as prime minister. Perhaps not realising the weakness of his position, the duke sent a personal cable declaring that he did not want to return as an unemployed refugee. Churchill replied evenly, 'It will be better for your Royal Highness to come to England as arranged, when everything can be considered.'

The duke's response was unyielding. 'In the light of past experience,' he stated, 'my wife and myself must not risk finding ourselves once more regarded by the British public as in a different status to other members of my family.'<sup>21</sup>

After a few days the prime minister sent a much sharper answer to Madrid, reminding the duke of his military rank. 'Refusal to obey direct orders of competent military authority would,' he pointed out, 'create a serious situation.' In the draft he even hinted that there were some doubts as to how the duke had left Paris, but he omitted this unflattering remark. The duke continued to smoulder in the Spanish capital, and he now cursed Churchill's name to anybody within earshot.<sup>22</sup>



'If Hitler,' Churchill assured Parliament, meeting in secret session for the first time on June 20, 'fails to invade or destroy Britain he has lost the war.' Britain must survive the next three months. Admittedly the United States had shown only lame interest so far, but he predicted: 'Nothing will stir them like fighting in England.' He ended on an alliterative note. 'I . . . feel,' he said, 'we have only one enemy to face – the foul foe who threatens our freedom and our life, and bars the upward march of Man.'<sup>\*</sup>

The Tories were still unmoved. 'There is always the quite inescapable suspicion that he loves war,' Chips Channon commented afterward, 'war which broke Neville Chamberlain's better heart.'

At about this time a placard appeared in the private secretaries' room displaying Queen Victoria's words: 'Please understand that there is no

\* Even the official *Hansard* reporters were traditionally 'espied' and escorted from the House. But Mr Churchill retained his notes and sold three of the speeches to *Life* for \$75,000 in 1945. Parliamentarians, irritated, claimed that the rightful place for these was in *Hansard*, not 'touted' around the American press. Unrepentant, Churchill explained to the magazine: 'It was like selling off my cuff links; the manuscripts belonged to me.' To avoid tax, he represented it as a capital sale.<sup>23</sup>

depression in this House and we are not interested in the possibilities of defeat. *They do not exist.*'

THE PRIME MINISTER certainly feared a pacifist trend. He could not intern everybody who opposed him. Once when somebody asked how the public schools were getting on, he growled, 'Much as usual – Harrow has Amery,\* Gort and myself, Eton has the king of the Belgians and Captain Ramsay, and Winchester has Oswald Mosley to their credit.' He asked the Canadian prime minister to impress upon Roosevelt that, though he would never enter peace negotiations with Hitler, he could not bind a future government, 'which, if we were deserted by the United States and beaten down here, might very easily be a kind of Quisling affair.'<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, he fielded every peace feeler arriving from the Continent. One, through the Vatican's envoy in Berne, stung him to write: 'I hope it will be made quite clear to the Nuncio that we do not desire to make any inquiries as to terms of peace with Hitler, and that all our agents are strictly forbidden to entertain any such suggestion.'<sup>26</sup>

What terms would Hitler offer France? Churchill hoped they would be crippling; but so far Hitler had not put a foot wrong, and they might even be magnanimous.

His hope was that soon enemy air raids might come, putting an end to any British talk of peace. Churchill anticipated the coming ordeal with almost masochistic enthusiasm. 'Steady continuous bombing,' he suggested in his secret speech to the House, 'probably rising to great intensity occasionally, must be[come a] regular condition of our life.' He minuted the minister of information that when the bombing began media coverage must be careful not to damage public morale – people must learn to take air raids as if they were no more troublesome than thunderstorms.

As though on cue, scattered air raids on southern England now began. The targets lacked logic or symmetry; Churchill suspected their purpose might be to wear down his anti-aircraft defences. One of his staff mentioned in a letter that he had twice recently slept on a camp bed at No. 10 and that on both occasions there were Yellow (preliminary) warnings. The night of June 22 had been particularly unsettled.

The P.M. had rashly gone down to Chequers but returned for a hastily summoned cabinet, which went on till a late hour. Bevir and I were the only Private Secretaries there and we had a very

\* In July 1945 Leo Amery's son John – brother of Julian – would be flown back from Milan and arraigned for treason at the Old Bailey in November; he pleaded guilty to spare his family the anguish of a trial and was hanged a few days later.<sup>24</sup>

hectic time, with a great many people coming and going and all the telephones (there are eight instruments) perpetually ringing. . . . A tiresome, complaining letter from —. I wish he could see some of the pathetically brave and loyal letters we get from humble people in the P.M.'s mail.<sup>27</sup>

Churchill had driven out to Chequers that Friday June 21. His mood had been intractable for several days, perhaps a result of the Halifax-Butler-Prytz affair. ('No diehards would be allowed to stand in the way.') Clementine noticed it — he was not as kindly as he used to be. A mutual friend confided to her unsettling details of his behaviour — 'No doubt it's the strain' — and after much soul-searching she penned a letter to Winston warning that he was becoming generally disliked because of his 'rough, sarcastic and overbearing' manner and his contemptuous way of dismissing ideas, good and bad alike. 'It is for you to give the orders,' she reminded him, 'and if they are bungled . . . you can sack anyone and everyone.' He must combine Olympic calm with this immense power. 'You won't get the best results by irascibility and rudeness.'<sup>28</sup>

But dining with a colleague, Winston's P.P.S. Eric Seal felt that their chief had in fact 'sobered down' now and was 'less violent, less wild and less impetuous.' Evidently the prime minister believed he had a mission to get Britain out of her present troubles, Seal said.<sup>29</sup>

THAT SATURDAY Germany signed the armistice with France in the forest of Compiègne. Hitler's terms were said to be lenient beyond belief — 'diabolically clever,' as Sir Ronald Campbell, a fluent French speaker, called them in his telegram. Germany would leave over half the country unoccupied, her forces would be demobilised, though not totally. But it was the future of the French fleet that worried the British. Marshal Pétain said he hoped to get the French fleet away to Dakar and Madagascar, but failing that it would be scuttled to prevent it falling into enemy hands. Campbell argued that the Germans, 'who know something about scuttling,' would find ways to prevent it.

An Italian wireless leak seemed to confirm Churchill's fears that the small print included German 'control' of the French fleet. He summoned an emergency war cabinet for nine-thirty p.m. Back in London, however, he learned from the admiralty that Darlan had that very day ordered his fleet to fight to the last, surrender no ship to the enemy, and obey only him. French officers at Toulon confidentially showed Darlan's signal to British naval liaison officers, and its arrival was confirmed by French units

all round the Mediterranean (for example by the squadron based at Alexandria on the twenty-third).

Uncertainty gripped the British cabinet that evening. Pound trusted Admiral Darlan. They were old friends, and the French fleet commander had personally promised he would ‘never, never, never, never’ allow the fleet to be handed to the Germans.

Half-chewed cigar jiggling up and down as he spoke, A. V. Alexander pointed out that it would be easy for the Germans to ‘jump’ the French ships.<sup>30</sup>

For compelling reasons, disregarding the weight of Intelligence evidence that Darlan could be trusted, Churchill wanted the French fleet sunk. While *Jean Bart* at Casablanca was only half completed, *Richelieu* at Dakar would soon be the most powerful ship afloat. Dramatic ideas were forming in his mind – British ships should go alongside those two battleships, parley with their captains and treat them as traitors to the Allied cause if they refused his demands. After a conversation with Halifax, Kennedy reported to Washington his own conviction that it was ‘not at all unlikely that . . . the first great naval battle may be between the French and the English.’



The American chief of staff, General George C. Marshall, would be startled to find in mid-1942 that ‘an interchange of cryptanalytic information [with Britain] has been in progress for over a year.’<sup>31</sup>

In January 1941 a new British battleship returning home from her maiden run to North America brought to England an extraordinary four-man American mission, armed with Mr Churchill’s permission to inspect a secret establishment so closely guarded that for thirty-five years after that no British writer\* was permitted to mention it: the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, fifty miles from London. In two closely-guarded trunks the American mission brought their own dowry – Japanese cyphers and two hand-made copies of Japanese cypher machines. The Americans would spend ten weeks investigating the G.C. & C.S. and its radio intercept stations, computer systems and equipment laboratories. Chamberlain, they learned, had already had one hundred experts working on codebreaking before the war. Now there were eight hundred in the one main building and eight huts at Bletchley Park. Officials proudly told

\* When the author drafted a chapter on G.C. & C.S. for *The Mare’s Nest* (London and New York, 1964), the authorities prevailed upon him to remove it and detained the chapter and accompanying research notes.

the Americans that only four months earlier, in September 1940, Britain was on the brink of collapse: now they were confident of victory.

In crude terms, by early 1940 'the Park' was costing His Majesty's government about two army divisions. But it was worth it: they had begun penetrating Hitler's 'impregnable' machine cyphers. For six years his army had relied on the ENIGMA family of cypher machines; his airforce and navy used similar machines, capable of 160 trillion different cypher combinations. Using a pioneering valve-based computer, Bletchley had discovered how to resynthesise ENIGMA's daily keys, and the illicit decrypts had begun to trickle out during March, April and May 1940. By late March they had broken about fifty ENIGMA settings; on April 15 they were continuously breaking the special cypher allocated for Hitler's airforce and army operations in Norway.

While General Marshall showed only a languid interest in cryptanalysis, Churchill worshipped it. It had already figured large at Jutland in 1916; after the Great War he had publicly eulogised Sir Alfred Ewing, the architect of British cryptanalysis, for his contribution to the fortunes of Britain and her admiralty.<sup>32</sup> Winston would do miracles for the G.C. & C.S., and Bletchley in turn provided the silent MAGIC that underlay his success. By 1945 he would have five thousand working there.

From its sealed compound the intercepts were sent by car to the non-descript Secret Intelligence Service (S.I.S.) building in Broadway. To his uninitiated underlings Churchill hinted that he had a super-agent, BONIFACE, in Berlin.<sup>33</sup> From Broadway the muffled voice of BONIFACE was carried in a buff box ('only to be opened by the prime minister in person') to No. 10. Usually the head of the S.I.S., Brigadier Menzies, put in a covering note typed in his characteristic true-blue on unheaded blue paper, signed just 'C.' It was Mr Churchill's MOST SECRET source in every sense: his own private secretaries never learned what was in that box; nor yet did some of his most trusted colleagues – among them A. V. Alexander and Anthony Eden.<sup>34</sup>

The G.C. & C.S. was evidently reading some Japanese cyphers to a higher command level than the Americans; they were also reading American cyphers. (Later, the P.M. would smugly assure Roosevelt he had personally ordered this must cease.<sup>35</sup>) Soviet, Italian and Vichy cyphers were an open book to them, as were those used by Spain and Latin America.<sup>36</sup> Churchill set up a unit out in Singapore, asked the American mission that arrived early in 1941 to supply Japanese translators, and undertook to cover Tokyo's cypher traffic with Berlin, London and Rome, in direct exchange for the Pacific traffic that was better-monitored from America. Nor did the American mission leave empty-handed. 'The [British] material

which was furnished by the army personnel,' they congratulated themselves, 'will result in a saving of several years of labour.'<sup>37</sup>

The codebreakers would give to the R.A.F. one important sword-edge, that summer of 1940. (The other was the supercharged Rolls-Royce Merlin engine.) On May 22 the trickle had swollen to a flood as the Park penetrated the operational ENIGMA cypher of the enemy airforce.

One breakthrough led to another. A navigation manual found in a crashed bomber referred to a radio *beam* of bearing 315° – aimed to the north-west, over England – and on about June 11 an intercepted airforce signal mentioned the 'intersection of the Cleve *Knickebein*' at a certain map reference near Doncaster. This ominous discovery was the origin of the Prof.'s warning on June 13, which seems to have caused Winston to think twice about sleeping in No. 10. A week later ENIGMA instructions on radio beams again coupled them with *Knickebein* (crooked leg).

An extraordinary row began between the professors. The air ministry's chief scientist, Sir Henry Tizard, argued that the earth's curvature made such beams impossible: besides, the R.A.F. was navigating satisfactorily by the stars. Lindemann disagreed and demanded an investigation. Churchill approved in red ink ('Let this be done without fail') and on June 21 found himself listening incredulously to Dr Reginald Jones, a young, solemn-faced scientist in air Intelligence. Convinced by the ENIGMAS, though he could not say so, Jones argued to Churchill's defence committee that the beams did exist. He was asked to send a radio reconnaissance plane up at night to search for such beams.<sup>38</sup>

THE R.A.F. had been bombing Germany ever since Hitler's invasion of the Low Countries. On May 20, Arthur Greenwood had described the Ruhr as 'a mass of ruins' but conceded that the Germans were somehow hiding the bomb damage from their public. Churchill read an F.O. summary of Intelligence reports proving, however, the 'terrible effects of British bombing operations in the Ruhr.'<sup>39</sup> He wondered when Hitler would retaliate, but while the sirens did sometimes wail, London remained unmolested.

As yet there were no signs of invasion preparations, but something akin to mutiny was growing in the naval staff over 'the higher direction of the war.' Their main concern was Sir Dudley Pound, the bumbling First Sea Lord. On June 17 several officers had privately taken their misgivings to Sir Walter Monckton, known to have close connections with the palace. He revealed that Amery and Beaverbrook had also spoken to him; on the nineteenth he told Captain Edwards of the operations division that they were ready to act and would probably do so through the queen –



'The power behind the throne.' Edwards suggested that Pound be replaced by Max Horton or Admiral Ramsay. On June 29 the king was told of the naval staff's 'profound distrust' of the high command.

By this time Churchill's preparations against the French fleet were adding to the naval staff's unrest. Edwards heard that the king had sent for Winston and asked to see the navy's plans to meet invasion. They were 'non-existent.' In consequence, on June 30 the prime minister called a conference on naval strategy which only dismayed the naval staff the more: 'Why can't he get on with his job!' was Edwards's reaction. 'W.C.,' he wrote on the first day of July, 'agrees that Sir D. is too old & promises action.' But no action against Pound would ever follow. Edwards was probably correct in his assessment on the second: 'The danger as I see it now is that W.C. has usurped the position of I.S.L.!!' That day, the admiralty ordered Sir Charles Forbes to submit plans for meeting an invasion.<sup>40</sup>



The Zionists and the Japanese, the Indians and Irish – all saw their chance in Britain's military embarrassment. Kennedy informed Washington on June 18, 1940 that the British were considering action very soon over Ireland. Short-sightedly, labour minister Ernest Bevin suggested they promise to Eire weapons and a united postwar Ireland if she would undertake to defend her territory against Hitler. But President Eamon de Valera told Malcolm Macdonald that he would fight whoever attacked Eire, 'whether it was Germany or England.' On June 21 Churchill's cabinet ruled out landing troops in Ireland as yet.<sup>41</sup>

A few days later they offered to de Valera a secret six-point agreement – among them, a declaration for a united Ireland in return for Eire coming into the war, permitting the use of her ports and troops, and interning all aliens and fifth columnists. Fortunately for Ulster, from whom this offer was concealed, Chamberlain handled the negotiations and they went badly. 'One reason,' Chamberlain told Kennedy, 'is that the Irish unquestionably believe that Britain is going to get licked.' A Nazi invasion would bring about a united Ireland anyway, and that was all they were interested in.<sup>42</sup>

## 28: *A Misunderstanding between Friends*

IF LANGUAGE problems had infected the alliance at Dunkirk, a muffed translation now led to an Anglo–French tragedy. Mr Churchill could not be blamed for failing to notice the gauche error when it occurred. He was proud of his French – in fact he aired it whenever he could – but the pride was unjustified. (‘Can anybody here speak French?’ a gathering was once asked, and he volunteered: ‘*Je!*’) His fractured French helped defuse awkward situations. At Casablanca in 1943 he would use it on the local French resident-general: looking him sternly in the eye, he warned him not to tip off Pétain that he was there. ‘*Parce que si ils bomber nous,*’ he threatened, jerking his thumb at the full moon, ‘*nous bomber vous aussi.*’<sup>1</sup>

When he conversed in French with the president of Turkey soon after, he paused in mid-speech and heard Eden whispering a more intelligible rendering to the Turks. ‘Anthony,’ he grumbled, ‘will you please stop translating my French into French!’<sup>2</sup> Once they had mastered his droll pronunciation, the French were flattered and amused, but more often foxed. Paul Reynaud dropped courteous hints that he should return to the safety of his native tongue, and once whispered *traduction* to the interpreter after Winston had obstinately finished.<sup>3</sup>

Until the end of June 1940 the only delicate linguistic problem had come at Tours on the thirteenth, when Reynaud had expatiated upon France’s likely need for an armistice. Churchill grasped the point and nodded ‘*je comprends*’; the French however took it to mean that he ‘would understand.’ Paul Baudouin certainly heard it that way.\* So did Pétain. ‘Churchill promised,’ Darlan recalled a year later, ‘and the marshal heard him, that if we had to seek an armistice he would understand our position and his friendship toward France would undergo no change.’ The admiral added bitterly, ‘The sequel was Mers-el-Kébir.’<sup>4</sup>

\* He said so in de Gaulle’s hearing; Spears hurried to Tours airfield and told the departing Churchill of the confusion. ‘Tell them,’ roared the P.M., ‘my French is not so bad as all that.’<sup>5</sup>

THIS WAS not strictly true. Oran, as that tragedy became known in Britain, had its origin in another mistranslation, coupled with Churchill's obsession with the French warships coming under 'German control.' That menacing possibility had been examined at a small admiralty meeting on June 7. Pound had warned that the Germans must not get 'control' of it – 'The only way to do that properly,' the meeting concluded, 'was to sink the French fleet.'<sup>6</sup>

It is now known that Hitler had ruled that France should retain her fleet. 'You have not defeated the French navy,' this quixotic dictator rebuffed Grand Admiral Erich Raeder on June 20. 'You are not entitled to it!' He wanted a deliberately soft armistice. 'Armistice,' Raeder noted:

The Führer wishes to refrain from taking any measures that would impinge upon French honour. The fleet is therefore to be interned [*festlegen*] at Brest and Toulon under peacetime disposition. The ships are to be immobilised.

France was even to be permitted warships to defend her empire in Indo-China.<sup>7</sup> Article 8 of the armistice signed on June 22 provided that the rest of her fleet was to be 'collected in ports to be specified, demobilised and disarmed under German or Italian supervision [*Kontrolle*].'\* The document also contained a solemn declaration disowning any intention of applying the French warships to Germany's war purposes or of claiming them in the final peace settlement.<sup>8</sup>

Clumsily, in the paper submitted to the British cabinet on June 23 the key phrase in Article 8 was translated from the German or French as 'under German control,' although neither *Kontrolle* nor *contrôle* means 'control' except in special usages like 'passport control.' Plainly a far smaller force was needed to *supervise* disarmament than to *seize* a fleet. But 'under German control' was precisely the phrase that Churchill's ears had been attuned to. No matter that Darlan had assured the departing British naval attaché that no warship would be handed over, that the fleet would be scuttled if the enemy attempted to interfere with them; no matter that the foreign ministry had made the same assurances to Sir Ronald Campbell.<sup>9</sup>

Churchill willingly believed that the French had signed a ruinous armistice. This slight translating error fuelled his obsession. It would cost the

\* While we can appreciate the problems facing an authorised biographer of Churchill, there is no basis for asserting that, 'It became clear that Hitler had indeed insisted upon controlling the French fleet' or that the armistice defined that 'all French warships were to come under German or Italian control.' (Gilbert, vol. vi, pages 589 and 628.)

lives of twelve hundred French sailors and poison relations between Britain and France for a generation afterward.



It seems to be a universal failing of dictators that they cannot command the entire horizon of civil government and military activity, but must sweep like a searchlight across the darkened landscape, lighting upon each different subject which momentarily attracts them.

After France's fall, Churchill's towering obsession was that Hitler might get control of the French fleet. It overshadowed all three meetings of the cabinet on June 24, held in the cabinet room overlooking the garden behind No. 10 – a garden that was a profusion of colour, and incongruous with birdsong that drifted into the room as though it were the library of a great country house. 'We must at all costs ensure,' Churchill declared, 'that these ships either come under our control or are put out of the way for good.'

Reassuringly, his codebreakers learned that during the day Darlan had signalled an order to all French warships to sail to the United States or scuttle if there was any danger of falling into enemy hands: the French naval mission in London had passed this signal to the admiralty. Darlan was keeping his promise. At the third cabinet at ten-thirty P.M. it was also known that the two battle-cruisers at Oran, Algeria, had moved into the adjacent naval base of Mers-el-Kébir where they were protected by shore guns.

We can reconstruct the thoughts that jumbled Churchill's mind. The wrong pall was forming over London – not of smoke, but the cloying pall of defeatism. The war was fizzling out before London had even been bombed. Roosevelt seemed unimpressed of Churchill's earnest. His leadership was under challenge both in the naval staff and in the cabinet. Always sensitive to criticism, he was becoming arrogant, unapproachable.<sup>10</sup> The sullen Tory silences, the eager Labour applause troubled him. Opposition hard-liners like Aneurin Bevan for their part could not understand why he kept Chamberlain and his 'old gang' on: the last ten years had been the most disastrous in British history, yet Mr Churchill had retained every single foreign secretary of that era in high office.<sup>11</sup>

There were therefore several complicated reasons for Churchill to want some brutal, purifying course of action; political distraction was one of them. He told Beaverbrook, who sat through part of the discussion, that he had brought in Admiral Pound during most of the day. 'Many objections were being raised to the policy,' Beaverbrook later recalled him as saying, 'and he wanted to keep Pound with him, in order to make answers

to arguments.' Six months later, sitting next to Cordell Hull at a Washington luncheon, Churchill himself confessed that he had wanted to raise Britain's low prestige throughout the world by showing 'that Britain still meant to fight.'<sup>12</sup>

It was one A.M. when the cabinet dispersed. By that time he had decided: the warships collected in French ports would be neutralised; those that had taken refuge in Britain would be seized. He took the decision alone.

He marched up and down the lawn [Beaverbrook remembered] and a high wind was blowing – a very high wind. The night was dark, but he knew the garden well and it did not bother him. He was terribly disturbed and only recovered after a few minutes of aggressive and vigorous exercise.<sup>13</sup>

That decision taken, he just sat there with Bracken, glass in hand, anaesthetising his thoughts with alcohol. Several glasses later, according to Bracken,<sup>14</sup> sirens wailed London's first Red warning since September. The dreary and colourless home secretary, Sir John Anderson, led the way down to the air-raid shelter where they joined Mrs Churchill, Mary and the domestic staff. As they settled on wooden benches it looked to one of the P.M.'s secretaries, unaware of the awful decision just taken, like a village meeting. Knowing from the Bletchley Oracle (his secret codebreakers) that London was not the target, Winston demonstrated the courage of the sapient, continuing to roam around the garden. 'The searchlights were rather beautiful,' wrote his secretary, 'nothing happened and about three o'clock, with Duff Cooper and others, I walked home through the empty streets and went to bed, so sleepy that the All Clear failed to awaken.' Lord Halifax, not privy to the ENIGMA intercepts, felt it more prudent to take shelter – already angry because, 'owing to Winston's garrulousness,' the cabinet had lasted an hour longer than necessary with the result that he was caught by this air-raid warning: 'Once in [our foreign office War Room] I sat till 4:15 gradually getting colder. I could not have been more bored. Dorothy [Lady Halifax] spent an entertaining evening in the Dorchester shelter with a mixed grill of George Clerk, the Vincent Masseys [Canadian high commissioner], Diana Duff Cooper, [Chaim] Weizmann reading the Old Testament, and a lot more. She said it was the funniest thing she had ever seen.'

On the following morning, the cruel decision about the French fleet hung over the prime minister. He announced in the House that he had read Article 8 – of which he rendered them the faulty translation – with

grief and amazement. While he would not now state cabinet policy on the French fleet, 'neither patience nor resolution will be lacking in any measures they may think it right to take for the safety of the empire.'

On his orders, the admiralty devised an operation to appropriate the two French battleships and four light cruisers that had sailed into Portsmouth and Plymouth; simultaneously, a naval taskforce would seize or sink the French squadron concentrated at Mers-el-Kébir. Pre-empting the cabinet's approval, on June 27 Churchill ordered the latter operation, CATAPULT, executed six days later. Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville sailed in *Arethusa* to Gibraltar to improvise the taskforce. In Somerset dialect A. V. Alexander signalled to him, 'Oi bee relyin on yu.' The admiral replied, 'Thank'ee zur. Doanee worree we got thay in the baag.'<sup>15</sup>



Nothing, mused newspaper editor Cecil King privately as July 1940 began, could now avert defeat: 'The country is already reconciling itself to the idea of a Nazi conquest.' Even were Britain well-led and really united, it was hard to see how she could prevail against a larger airforce and more powerful army, an enemy occupying the whole coastline from Narvik to the Spanish border. 'We are losing,' he wrote in his diary, 'because Germany does, and we do not, deserve to win.' This accurately mirrored the mood that Churchill had to dispel: that was why he ordered CATAPULT, an act of war without parallel in modern history. It might yet inspire the sluggish Roosevelt.

Not one American-built aircraft or shell had yet reached Britain. Beaverbrook, perhaps more sanguine than Churchill, cherished few illusions. Roosevelt, he predicted, was motivated purely by patriotism, and certainly not by any desire to help the empire. He would attend one meeting when Roosevelt, forgetting Beaverbrook's Canadian origin, declared, 'Don't let Canada get Newfoundland. We want it.'<sup>16</sup> Beaverbrook felt that Churchill should give him none of Britain's secrets 'except for money value received.'<sup>17</sup> Unhappy about the empire's slide unto a ruinous war, on the last day of June Beaverbrook composed the first of many letters of resignation.

'At a moment like this,' Winston replied on July 1, 'when an invasion is reported to be imminent there can be no question of any ministerial resignations being accepted.'<sup>18</sup>

What Churchill could not accept was that the president was the slave of Congress, forbidden by the Neutrality Act to sell even obsolete weapons to Britain. Roosevelt's treasury secretary, Henry Morgenthau Jr, had earlier proven helpful but latterly had recoiled, disheartened by the dé-

bâcle in France. General Marshall too predicted a British collapse and recommended a halt to all arms deliveries.<sup>19</sup>

On the same day, June 27, Cordell Hull urged the British ambassador to have the navy sent across the Atlantic to safety. 'Never cease to impress on President and others,' reiterated Churchill in his scornful response, 'that if this country were successfully invaded . . . some Quisling government would be formed to make peace on the basis of our becoming a German Protectorate. In this case the British Fleet would be the solid [sole?] contribution with which this Peace Government would buy terms.' He added with perceptible bitterness, 'We have really not had any help worth speaking of from the United States so far.'<sup>20</sup>

'Am sure we shall be alright here,' he reassured his veteran financier friend Bernard Baruch by cable, but carped: 'Your people are not doing much. If things go wrong with us it will be bad for them. Winston Churchill.'<sup>21</sup>

WHEN HE drove out to Chequers that evening, Friday June 28, he was still brooding on the French fleet. More evidence had accumulated indicating that Darlan was keeping his promise. That very day every British naval liaison officer in the region had converged on Casablanca and agreed that the French fleet wanted to fight on the Allied side. The N.L.O. at Mers-el-Kébir confirmed that the squadron there had received orders to tear up any signal from Vichy ordering its surrender to the enemy. On Wednesday June 26 vice-admiral, Malta, had reported seeing an order issued six days previously by Darlan: 'Whatever orders be received,' this read, 'never abandon to the enemy a ship of war intact.'

It was a ghastly weekend at Chequers. On Saturday Randolph came. Outsiders who witnessed the strange relationship for the first time winced at the son's 'coarse and aggressive' treatment of his dotting father. Randolph loudly demanded to be sent on active service. Winston refused, pointing out that if his son were killed it would impede him in his work. Vansittart had also come for dinner, bringing their old crony Alex Léger of the French foreign ministry. Churchill ruminated with utter candour about problems that would arise when he had to starve the French by blockade, and kill them by air raids, 'being cruel in order to be kind.' Léger began talking of propaganda, but Churchill corrected him: 'It is events that make the world.'<sup>22</sup>

He returned to Downing-street late on Sunday the thirtieth. His fan mail at last outstripped the Munich Mouser's. One writer said he was a tonic for the nation; he directed his office to refer the letter to the ministry of health.

John Martin told him that six people had died of heart failure during the Red warning of June 24–25. ‘I am more likely to die of overeating,’ Winston assured him. ‘But I don’t want to die yet when so many interesting things are happening.’ The private secretary saw him later that evening wrapped only in a huge towel, ‘looking like one of the later Roman emperors.’<sup>23</sup>

Churchill was eager for the coming passage of arms.

The admiralty had begun conducting an almost exaggerated search for loopholes in the evidence about Darlan’s intentions. Suppose the Germans had obtained his cyphers and faked these signals? Suppose he proved unable to stop the Germans? But even as signals expressing these doubts went out to naval commands, still firmer evidence of Darlan’s integrity reached the British. A French submarine commander handed over to British officers at Malta the French naval cyphers. On July 1 Bletchley began reading Darlan’s secret signals, and there was no hint of treachery in them. The first intercept forwarded to the admiralty that Monday was his cypher signal transmitted the day before to the French naval mission in London, explaining that he hoped and fully expected to get permission to base the demobilised fleet in North Africa and at Toulon – both areas not occupied by the Germans.

That Monday evening the cabinet decided nonetheless to send Somerville’s new taskforce to Mers-el-Kébir with a list of ‘options’ for the French squadron there. The signal to Somerville went out in the early hours of July 2.



Given this Intelligence background, the steady preparations for CATAPULT aroused acute opposition in the naval staff. ‘As I see it,’ wrote Captain Ralph Edwards, the acting director of operations (home), that Monday July 1, ‘W.C. wants to take drastic action for the glorification of W.C. and the discomfiture of his erstwhile friends. He’s always been the protagonist of France & feels their defection badly.’ He warned of all sorts of ugly possibilities. ‘Nothing however will shake W.C.’ The former naval attaché in Paris, Captain Cedric Holland, predicted that the assault would alienate every Frenchman.

‘Against all the advice of the naval staff,’ as Edwards learned on July 2, the taskforce was committed to the operation. Somerville was directed that if the French admiral in command, Marcel-Bruno Gensoul, failed to accept the alternatives, he was to be given six hours to scuttle his ships. Failing that, Somerville was to blast the French squadron out of the water, and particularly the battle-cruisers *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*. In a signal to



Somerville, Admiral Pound termed it 'one of the most disagreeable and difficult tasks that a British Admiral has ever been faced with.' Somerville agreed – it was 'a filthy job.'

In London that July 3, Churchill convened his cabinet at mid-day. It would sit throughout the next five hours. The French warships in British ports were seized without much bloodshed in Operation GRASP. Meanwhile Somerville's taskforce had arrived off Mers-el-Kébir and began Operation CATAPULT: he had sent Captain Holland into the port to serve the ultimatum. Unhappy at the unfolding tragedy, Admiral Pound showed the cabinet a draft signal, not yet sent, counselling Somerville to accept if the French offered to demilitarise their warships where they lay. But his draft was rejected lest it 'look like weakening.' When Gensoul did indeed make such an offer it was thus turned down.

Gensoul radioed his superiors in France and played for time. Bletchley intercepted his signal. It over-simplified the ultimatum as 'either-or': either join the British fleet or scuttle. Admiral Darlan's response was angry and swift; his suppressed rancour toward Mr Churchill since the British 'betrayal' at Dunkirk must not be overlooked in understanding this. He was shortly heard to make two distinctly ominous signals. The first ordered warships at Dakar in Senegal to show themselves 'worthy of being Frenchmen.' The second notified Gensoul at Mers-el-Kébir that he had ordered all French naval forces in the Mediterranean to join him immediately 'in fighting order.' It added: 'You are to answer force with force. Call in the submarines and airforce if necessary.' Darlan also informed the joint Franco-German armistice commission of the forthcoming hostilities with Britain: knowledge of this must have rubbed salt in Churchill's obsessive wound.

At four-fifteen P.M. he sent an urgent signal over admiralty transmitters to Somerville's taskforce. 'Settle the matter quickly,' this read, 'or you may have French reinforcements to deal with.'

OVER AT the ancient port of Alexandria, in Egypt, Britain's main Mediterranean naval base, the French had concentrated an elderly battleship and four cruisers under Admiral René-Émile Godfroy. When Churchill had first proposed their seizure three days earlier, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, the C-in-C Mediterranean, had strongly objected: this squadron could hardly fall into German hands, and patience alone might bring it to the British side. Any seizure attempt would end in a shoot-out, and the harbour would be wrecked.

He therefore now made a tactful approach to Godfroy, who agreed to discharge his warships' oil. This diplomatic success scarcely satisfied Chur-

chill's thirst for drama. Besides, a few minutes after six P.M., as the cabinet was rising, the admiralty received from Bletchley the teleprinted intercept of a cypher signal made over six hours earlier by Admiral Darlan. This reported the terms of Somerville's ultimatum, announced that Gen-soul had rejected it, and ordered all forces in the Mediterranean to sail to Mers-el-Kébir.

At 6:24 P.M. the admiralty sent Cunningham a signal unmistakably drafted by Churchill, defining that Godfroy's French crews were to be ordered off their ships 'at once.' 'Do not, repeat not, fail.' (Cunningham decided on balance to ignore it.) To report, no doubt, on all this Churchill drove off to the palace at six-thirty P.M.

He had taken a spectacular gamble. Upon his return to No. 10 he found Maisky, the Soviet ambassador, waiting. Looking fresh and cheerful, he told Maisky Britain's chances of winning were now good. Unaware of the extraordinary drama unfolding in the Mediterranean, Maisky asked how he viewed the future of the French navy. Churchill returned a look that the Russian could only describe as *artful*: 'That question,' he said through the cigar cloud, 'is being attended to.' Pressed further by the Russian, he amplified: 'My strategy consists of surviving the next three months.'<sup>24</sup>

BY THE time the squat, uncomely Russian had been shown out into Downing-street, the 'battle' of Mers-el-Kébir was over. Just before six P.M. Somerville's guns had begun the massacre. After nine minutes they fell silent, as the port was blanketed in smoke. Beneath its swathes the *Bretagne* had blown up, killing over one thousand French sailors; the *Dunkerque*, with 210 of her crew killed, had run aground. But the battle-cruiser *Strasbourg* – the other primary target – unexpectedly emerged from the smoke escorted by three destroyers, charged out of the harbour, braved the magnetic mines laid across the entrance, and eluded the task-force entirely. Somerville would regard CATAPULT as a failure.

Mr Churchill had burnt his boats. In reinforcing his political reputation, he had done lasting injury to Britain's; he had confirmed the image of Albion's endemic perfidy. Just before eight P.M. the French were heard ordering an all-out submarine and aircraft attack on Somerville's task-force, followed by a further order to attack any British warship encountered and to seize merchant ships; the British were referred to as 'the enemy.' After that night's defence committee, General Dill uncomfortably remarked on the spectacle of two recent allies grappling at each other's throats while 'the barbarians sat back and laughed.' As for Churchill, he half expected to be at war with France on the morrow.<sup>25</sup>

However, the marshal of France did not rise to the bait. Receiving U.S. Ambassador Bill Bullitt on America's national holiday, July the Fourth, Pétain frostily attributed Mers-el-Kébir to Churchill's 'personal lack of balance.'<sup>26</sup>

Only Admiral Cunningham's diplomacy prevented a repetition of the slaughter at Alexandria. The French admiral, alerted by Darlan's signals, had stopped the discharge of oil. Detecting this, Cunningham now demanded that he scuttle his ships. Godfroy refused and began raising steam, clearly intending to fight his way out. Shortly after midnight Cunningham radioed to the admiralty a wan message fearing that in the sense of their Lordship's earlier order, he *had* 'failed.' But using purely diplomatic arguments, as one old seadog to another, Cunningham succeeded in talking Godfroy into accepting the inevitable. Late on the fourth Godfroy resumed the demobilisation of his warships. It was not as spectacular as blasting battleships out of the water – there was no pall of smoke – but it was a solution many times more satisfactory than Mers-el-Kébir.

The whole incident devalued Churchill's stock throughout the navy.<sup>27</sup> At home, paradoxically, it raised it. On the fourth, the prime minister reported to the House. Its Members sat hushed, anguished, even ashamed at the day's news. But Winston spoke convincingly of the 'mortal injury' to Britain if the French fleet had been handed over to German control. Heaping infamy on Reynaud, he recalled the unfulfilled promise to transfer to Britain the four hundred Luftwaffe pilots taken prisoner in France. (It would have contravened the relevant Geneva Convention to do so.)

As for his own questionable deed, he told the House: 'I leave the judgement of our action, with confidence, to Parliament. I leave it also to the nation, and I leave it to the United States. I leave it to the world and to history.' It should, he said, dispose of the rumours of peace negotiations being spread by Hitler.

We shall on the contrary prosecute the war with the utmost vigour by all the means that are open to us until the righteous purposes for which we entered upon it have been fulfilled. This is no time for doubts or weakness. It is the supreme hour to which we have been called.

As this 'undistinguished little rotund figure' resumed his bench, the House found its voice. Nodding off in the official box – he had spent the day helping his master draft the speech – Eric Seal was woken by the great shout that went up. John Martin thought that every man except for the three I.L.P. Members rose. The decorum of the Parliament vanished,

wrote the American military attaché – everybody was shouting, cheering and waving order papers and handkerchiefs.<sup>28</sup> Winston's cheeks pinked with emotion. Tears welled in his eyes, overflowed and tumbled down his cheeks.

Why were they cheering? Perhaps it was from relief that Britain had found a leader with the requisite ruthlessness to slay even his best friend. Yet from his own central vantage point, as he looked around, he saw he still had to win over the Tories.<sup>29</sup> The cheering was still loudest from the Labour benches facing him. To Dalton it seemed even deliberately so: they had given him a much finer ovation than the 'old corpse upstairs' – meaning Chamberlain – ever got.<sup>30</sup>

A victory mood settled upon his staff at No. 10. That evening they made up a cinema party to the French film *Ils Étaient Neuf Célibataires*; his private secretary found it 'shriekingly funny.'

The twelve thousand French sailors now interned in camps in Britain seethed and smouldered. Whitehall forbade a memorial service for the dead, and only reluctantly agreed to compensate the officers looted by British ratings during GRASP. In September Admiral Muselier, de Gaulle's naval chief, would formally claim compensation for the wounded and next of kin of those killed in CATAPULT, and demand restitution after the war for the ships destroyed.<sup>31</sup> Softening, as de Gaulle began to recruit the *matelots* in the internment camps for his own Free French navy, the government permitted the French tricolour to flutter over Westminster Abbey on their national holiday.



On July 3, the day of the great tragedy, the Duke of Windsor had arrived, still sulking, in Lisbon. The American ambassador in Madrid telegraphed to Washington that, before leaving, the duke had remarked to embassy staff that it was vital to end the war before thousands more were 'killed or maimed to save the faces of a few politicians.'<sup>32</sup> Churchill read this telegram either immediately as an intercept or when it was forwarded to him a few days later by Sam Hoare, now British ambassador in Madrid. It did little for his vanity. When he saw the king on the evening of the third, they hatched a plan to transport the garrulous duke to the other side of the Atlantic to be governor of the Bahamas. There he would be out of harm's way.

The more petulant the duke became about leaving, the more Churchill insisted. His codebreakers must have culled increasingly aggravating snatches of Windsor wisdom – the duke asking the Spanish foreign minister to send an agent to Lisbon for a confidential message; the duke advising

that air raids would make Britain see reason; Ribbentrop directing his Madrid embassy to get the couple back, 'if necessary by force';<sup>33</sup> the U.S. ambassador in Lisbon warning Roosevelt not to allow the press near the duke or duchess since her private conversation showed her 'by no means enthusiastic about Britain's prospects.'<sup>34</sup>

FROM THE tenement slums of the East End to Buckingham Palace itself, most of London's populace still had no cover against bombs other than flimsily shored-up cupboards beneath wooden stairs. Scattered air raids were increasing, but a D-notice forbade newspapers to give details. On July 5, Churchill noted to Ismay: 'What has been done about air raid casualties? I understand that they were not to be published in any definite or alarming form, but I do not notice much difference in the procedure or any sign of measures being taken.'<sup>35</sup>

The faint-hearted had fled to Canada while they still could. The majority braved it out. 'I would rather be bombed to fragments than leave England,' wrote the child of one Labour M.P. to the *Times* on the fourth. Churchill congratulated the lad's father with a handwritten note: 'We must all try to live up to this standard.'

He and his colleagues would find it less hazardous than most, since the ministries had now built bunkers for themselves. Work had begun on the Central War Room beneath the ministries off Parliament-square during the Czech crisis two years earlier. Since it seemed an opportune moment, on July 5 the P.M. took Beaverbrook and Ironside with him across the F.O. courtyard to inspect this underground bunker.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps these battlefield conditions were good for his adrenaline too. The rooms above the chosen basement area had been emptied, and engineers had installed tons of steel girders and poured sixteen feet of solid concrete as a bombproof cover. A sentry opened the gas-tight door and the prime minister was led into the complex by Royal Marines, who would guard the complex in an emergency. The underground passages were covered with burgundy-red linoleum. The cabins where his ministers would sleep in an emergency were prison-like cells, shored up with balks of oak and equipped with a simple camp bed.

Churchill's own cell was only about five yards long, three yards wide, and crowded with timbers to shore up the ceiling. It boasted only a small bed, a desk with three ivory bellpushes on a small wooden block, and the only carpet in the bunker, a cheap red fitted cord. He did much of his work in bed – his dictum was, 'If you can sit, don't stand. If you can lie, don't sit.' For the chiefs of staff there were three buff chairs spaced along the wall next to the fireplace. (Of course they had their own conference

room elsewhere in the bunker.) On a small table was a cigar-cutter made of gunmetal and a cannon shell, with the Star of David mounted on its wooden pedestal.

Cream-coloured metal trunking clung like a rectangular serpent to ceilings and walls, entwined with the pneumatic tubes and lighting conduits. The air conditioning system hissed air through ball sockets. Indicators displayed the weather above ground and whether an air-raid alert had sounded.

The map room had been staffed for weeks already. On one wall of the small, crowded room a painted sign read, 'In case of Gas attack, Close this valve.' Down the centre of a long table ran an elevated dais crowded with telephones manned by captains, colonels and wing commanders. Three of the telephones were white – these could reach him instantly anywhere in London; two were green and one, standing on a table by itself, red. The walls were papered with charts – to his left Churchill saw the naval operations map, flagging the positions of merchant ships, escorts, U-boats and the fleet. The eastern Mediterranean was almost bare of pinholes, indicating how Axis seapower was forcing the Allies to use the long route around the Cape instead of the Suez Canal.

Heaped on a cross table were several files and boxes, including a red leather despatch box embossed in gold, *THE KING*. Beyond that was a floorspace surrounded by charts of the Far East and of Britain's immense empire – now at its greatest-ever extent.

The marines escorted him further into the maze, clanging shut each door behind them. At the tunnel's end a gas-tight hatch concealed a dark baize-covered door with a window slit of armoured glass. This opened into the cabinet room, a windowless chamber perhaps twenty-five feet square. Two-foot girders, painted fire-engine red, spanned its ceiling. A telephone stood in a recess, its scrambler in a small mahogany box. Charts covered the plasterboard soundproofing of these walls too. This room was dominated by blue-baize-covered trestle tables moved together into a hollow rectangle, with two dozen green-leatherette chairs of tubular steel. At each place was one white blotter, one Utility pencil, a polished silver ashtray, sheathed paper knife, and an inkwell; a polished wooden chair was provided for Churchill at the left of the table. In front was a tray of coloured pencils and the chromium hole-puncher he called his *klop* for tying documents together. Behind him as he sat at the desk was an electric fire and a red fire-bucket for cigar butts. There was another notice on the wall to his right. If enemy bombers were right overhead, it said, an alarm would ring.

Beneath it was a black box housing the bell. And on that was a white knob, so that he could turn it off.

## 29: *Gangster Methods*

OUTSIDE THE immediate compass of Mr Churchill's life – that is, outside the famous front door of No. 10 – London was becoming dull and drab. The ornamental railings around park and garden alike were ripped down and fed into the scrap furnaces; none was spared, or almost none. In London, traffic was sparse; in the countryside, except on Derby Day, it was non-existent.

Streets were barricaded against the expected paratroops: barbed wire and trenches serried the open spaces, and every road sign referring to the Thames had been painted over. The shops were empty, the grand houses evacuated. The bourgeoisie had fled Eaton-square and Harrods alike, although the great store was about to open its summer sale. Nobody wanted to linger in a city expecting an inferno, so the streets were given over to French matelots and soldiers, and crowds of bored Anzacs who had arrived by liner. An American newcomer found the city as 'dark as a pocket.'<sup>1</sup> In the suburbs, the D'Oyly Carte was performing *Mikado*. A newcomer called Margot Fonteyn was dancing *Sleeping Beauty* at Sadler's Wells to audiences clutching gasmasks in cardboard boxes.

The English, never fashionable, were now frumpy – the liveried doormen at the Dorchester and Savoy being the exception. The streets wore no flags, the girls no pretty frocks; women appeared in public in slacks; a few were even smoking cigarettes. Churchill's War was stirring a female migration to the factory bench, and this would have lasting social consequences.

It is unlikely that he noticed. He peopled a one-man world, friendless and alone. Like an absolute monarch, he never rode the bus, carried money, or went into a shop. In a sense he was living in the wrong century. In the fastnesses of No. 10 he was as remote from the common man as 'Tinskip,' the silvery barrage balloon that wallowed up from Horse Guards Parade toward the clouds each time the sirens wailed. Once when he ventured up into the Midlands he would gaze perplexed upon a slum. 'Fancy living in one of these streets,' he exclaimed. 'Never seeing any-



thing beautiful – never eating anything savoury – *never saying anything clever!*'<sup>2</sup>

His own sybaritic needs were certainly not those of the common English in the summer of 1940. 'My idea of a good dinner,' he once said, 'is first to have good food, then to discuss good food, and after this good food has been elaborately discussed, to discuss a good topic – with myself as chief conversationalist.' 'Take away this dish!' he would thunder at the waiter who placed a nondescript pudding before him. 'It has no *theme!*' Now food and clothing were rationed, although this fact had yet to permeate the clubs. 'Mr Churchill's tastes are simple,' the first Lord Birkenhead once drawled. 'He is easily contented with the best of everything.'

Not everybody shared his sense of content. When he notified his requirements for the Quebec conference three years later – special trains, costly jaunts, and accommodation for a princely entourage – Canada's frugal premier wondered how the man could square this with the rising toll in tax and sacrifice demanded from his people. 'One cannot go about too humbly, it seems to me,' this wise Canadian wrote.<sup>3</sup> To young John Colville, leaving the private office in 1941 to join the R.A.F., the prime minister would express anxiety about how he would find accommodation there for his *valet*. He had been out of touch with reality for half a century.



Surely Hitler would throw heavy air raids at London soon? Intercepts showed that his long-range bomber force was to be ready by July 8, 1940; an enemy flak (anti-aircraft artillery) corps was heard to clamour for maps of Britain as well as France.<sup>4</sup> Churchill called for the charts of tides and moons until mid-August and scrutinised them for clues as to Hitler's invasion intentions. But who could tell if the enemy would land at high tide or at low, by darkness or by dawn? Moonless nights and a dawn high tide, they told him, would prevail in the first two weeks of July.<sup>5</sup>

For decades there had been a field marshal inside this gibbous politician, struggling to get out. Occasionally the former's voice escaped the latter's lips. Baldwin's secretary had remarked upon Churchill's negotiating with striking miners in the Twenties: 'He is always deploying "guns" or "barrages" on the owners or the men.'<sup>6</sup> Like Hermann Göring, he had played only with tin soldiers as a child; as a youth he had hastened to every scene of bloodshed from Cuba, India and Egypt to South Africa. A German field marshal who chanced upon a copy of *My Early Life* in August 1945 would be struck by the obvious pleasure its author had derived from the adventure of killing. 'I know,' wrote this Nazi commander, 'of no such enthusiasts among my own acquaintances.'<sup>7</sup>

Winston's most intimate counsellor that summer of 1940 was the Prof. – Professor Friedrich Lindemann. Austere, ascetic, intensely lonely, seemingly omniscient and loyal beyond belief, the Prof. was the ideal foil. Winston was innocent of all scientific knowledge: when the B.B.C. developed a super-power transmitter, *Aspidistra*, he would believe it could be heard by the troops even without a receiver.<sup>8</sup> The Prof. entranced him with his thumbnail calculations. After Winston was hit by the New York cab in 1931, he had dourly telegraphed that the impact was equivalent to falling thirty feet, or to being hit by a brick dropped from six hundred feet. Even more flatteringly, Churchill's otherwise unenergetic person had absorbed the car's kinetic energy at the rate of eight thousand horsepower.<sup>9</sup>

The Prof. too harboured an Ovidian disdain for the *profanum vulgus*; he regarded the working classes as a species of sub-human.<sup>10</sup> He rated politicians and rival scientists little higher. 'Politicians?' he boomed over one dinner that summer. 'They'd have done much better if they'd tossed a coin before every decision since 1932. Then at least they'd probably have been right half the time.'<sup>11</sup> And he gave the little sniff that masqueraded as a laugh.

Churchill impelled him to start thinking about anti-aircraft rockets which could be guided by radar and detonated by proximity fuse, a new device.<sup>12</sup> Lindemann responded well to prompting and worked hard to better anti-tank weapons like 'sticky bombs.' He suggested Molotov cocktails too, which seemed to have proved effective in Spain and Poland.<sup>13</sup> Churchill promoted the Prof.'s favourite projects like the naval wire barrage heedless of expert criticism. When Churchill suggested using giant ice floes as aircraft carriers, the project – *HABAKKUK* – would haunt the government departments throughout the war. Lindemann frowned on the idea: it would involve pumping 100 million gallons of water a day, equal to the entire pumping capacity of the London Water Board, and freezing it three feet deep every twenty-four hours.

He suggested concrete instead – 'A concrete *HABAKKUK* would be very like a large skyscraper built on its side.' It would be about five thousand feet long by one thousand feet broad and one hundred feet deep. Churchill refused to be fobbed off. 'I have long zested for the floating island,' he would scrawl across one document. 'It has always broken down. The ice scheme must be reported on first. Don't get in its way.'<sup>14</sup>

Lindemann's fertile brain never wearied of new ideas. When Winston was still First Lord, the Prof. had nagged the experts to develop a torpedo that would home onto a U-boat's own noise; they choked it off as impracticable. (Both the Americans and Germans succeeded.) Now he would

suggest less likely projects: aerial mines dangled by slow aeroplanes along the enemy radio-beams, and myriad 'small magnets fitted with lights' cascaded into the waters where a submarine was suspected. Between them, however, Churchill and the Prof. did develop some schemes of great military vision. On July 7, for example, Churchill asked the minister of supply what was being done about designing ships capable of transporting tanks for an invasion.<sup>15</sup>

If such an idea prospered, like these tank landing craft or the later artificial harbours, he would claim absolute paternity. Woe betide any scheme he had not fathered. Independently of him, Lord Hankey created the Petroleum Warfare Department and was igniting streams of petrol along possible invasion beaches and approach roads. Winston disparaged and obstructed the idea.<sup>16</sup>

'ON WHAT may be the eve of an attempted invasion or battle for our native land,' stated the proclamation Churchill now circulated throughout his government, 'the prime minister desires to impress upon all persons . . . their duty to maintain a spirit of alert and confident energy.'

'The prime minister expects,' he continued, with Nelson's famous flag hoist fluttering in his memory,

all His Majesty's servants in high places to set an example of steadiness and resolution. They should check and rebuke expressions of loose and ill-digested opinion in their circles, or by their subordinates. They should not hesitate to report, or if necessary remove, any officers or officials who are found to be consciously exercising a disturbing or depressing influence, and whose talk is calculated to spread alarm and despondency.<sup>17</sup>

He half expected the invasion to begin that weekend: Hitler was known to favour Saturdays. Exasperated by his queries, Colonel Ian Jacob minuted to Ismay on July 2, 'We really must leave the C-in-C to make his own plans.' Saturday arrived, but not the enemy. Churchill obstinately minuted his staff to list every invasion indication,<sup>18</sup> then left with Field Marshal Ironside to watch British and newly-arrived Canadian troops conducting anti-invasion exercises in Kent. It gave him a happy excuse to weekend at Chartwell. He proudly showed off his pond and fed the golden carp. 'He calls them all darlings,' wrote a secretary who had accompanied him, 'and shouts to the cat and even the birds.'<sup>19</sup>

No warlord trusts subordinates to attend to detail. Hitler had scrutinised the demolition chambers on Dutch bridges, had reminded generals

that sunrise in France was later than in Berlin, had peered at models of the Belgian forts. 'The Playthings of the Empress,' his staff officers had sniggered.

Churchill had always shown the same obsessive attention to detail. During the General Strike he had haunted the offices of the *British Gazette*, overseeing every comma. 'He thinks he is Napoleon,' wrote the responsible cabinet minister ironically, 'but curiously enough the men who have been printing all their life . . . know more about their job than he does.'<sup>20</sup>

Now his inventive mind roamed the coming invasion battlefield, which he first took to be the east coast, and later the south. After donning an air commodore's uniform he would drive over to airfields in Kent and Sussex; in spurious naval rig he toured the Channel defences, asking probing questions about refugee control and the removal of untrustworthy people.<sup>21</sup> How could enemy agents fighting in British uniform be identified?<sup>22</sup> Had trenches been dug to prevent aircraft using open fields?<sup>23</sup> Had Britain prepared her own oil depots for demolition?<sup>24</sup>

He shared Hitler's fascination with gigantic artillery, and the navy had installed at Dover – on what Colville called his 'caprice' – a fourteen-inch gun capable of hurling one-ton shells at unfortunate France.<sup>25</sup> Around the coastline the admiralty was emplacing torpedo tubes and 150 six-inch guns with seven thousand sailors and marines to man them.<sup>26</sup>

Ironside found him 'in one of his go-getter humours.'<sup>27</sup> Finding General Sir Bernard Montgomery's 3rd division spread along the coast, the P.M. demanded – flagging the note ACTION THIS DAY – that the war office pull it back into reserve and requisition the omnibuses plying Brighton's summer seafront to make it mobile. The invasion battles should be fought inland; he suggested that the navy lay minefields to seal off the rear of an enemy seaborne landing.

A P.M. could take decisions that a colonel could not. He approved plans to drench invaders with poison gas, telling a major-general who lunched with him: 'I have no scruples.' He decided against apprising the United States; the necessary chemicals would be procured elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> When one Labour veteran from the Focus, Josiah Wedgwood, demanded that London not be declared an open city like Paris, Churchill, already fancying he saw a pall of smoke billowing above the capital as his troops fought the invaders in the streets below, replied with relish. 'I have a very clear view,' he advised Ismay, 'that we should fight every inch of it, and that it would devour quite a large invading army.'<sup>29</sup>

To the indoctrinated it was known that ever since the end of May Göring's messages to his commanders were being deciphered, and that Hitler had emphatically forbidden any attack on London, which cannot

have pleased Winston.<sup>30</sup> It was all rather an anti-climax. The air ministry had originally predicted six hundred tons of bombs a day on London, and thirty thousand casualties. Re-assessing the enemy strength at 2,500 bombers in June, the Joint Intelligence Committee had increased this eightfold. The Prof. pooh-poohed these estimates and called for intercept data from Bletchley for his statisticians. On July 6 the air staff still predicted 1,800-ton attacks. The Prof. pointed out that, in the last nine days of June, each plane had dropped less than one-eighth of a ton, and none of these bombs fell on London.<sup>31</sup>

THE PRIVATE secretaries were unaware of the intercepts. They wilted throughout that summer as the despatch boxes were borne in and stacked up on Winston's desk or around his bed. Humans, he lectured them, needed change, not rest. John Martin, summoned before breakfast to Winston's bedroom, wrote: 'Some day I propose to sleep for a week without stopping.'

Churchill revolutionised methods at No. 10. Telephone operators throughout Britain uttered the code 'Rapid Falls 4884' and were put through to him immediately. He issued orders only in writing, accepted responsibility for no others.<sup>32</sup> His terse 'prayers' multiplied. 'Pray let me have,' they might begin, 'by this evening, on one sheet of paper . . .' 'One sheet' became a requirement throughout Whitehall, though the wordier ambassadors writhed under the irksome rule. He would red-ink 'Why worry? W.S.C., 30.3' on a report by the Prof. on casualties in the British and American armies in the final battle for Germany; the two words were solemnly typed out as adequate reply.<sup>33</sup> As the more onerous matters silted down through the boxes, the staff devised an urgent TOP OF THE BOX category; when that too clogged, the really vital documents were taken in by hand.

Those officials he could not tolerate, those who failed to succumb to his spell, were sacked, and without ceremony. Sir John Reith would learn of his dismissal from his morning newspaper. 'Believe me,' Beaverbrook would reminisce three years later, 'No man is more ruthless . . . more bitter and unforgiving.'<sup>34</sup> Churchill was displeased when the permanent head of the foreign office included a kind remark in the telegram dismissing one wretch at his behest that summer. Cadogan was shocked, but kept his feelings to his diary: 'After all, the man had given the whole of his life, and we are sacking him on hearsay evidence.' 'Winston,' he added, 'is very babyish in some ways.'<sup>35</sup>

Nobody stood up to him. When Lord Halifax again ventured the idea, in cabinet on July 10, that at least they might *ascertain* Hitler's peace

terms, he camouflaged his courage with the weak excuse that this would win time to rearm.

On the twentieth he put General Brooke in command of Home Forces, retiring the bumbling Ironside. Brooke, like Halifax and Cadogan, was canny enough to confine his distaste of their prime minister's verbosity, meddling and occasional alcoholic fuddle to private, padlocked, leather-bound diaries.

Admirals followed generals into retirement. While Captain Edwards's diary entries should be treated with the reserve that all clandestine writings merit, they indicate how far Churchill's prestige had sunk in the Royal Navy since Mers-el-Kébir. As he predicted, Winston had not taken off the First Lord's cap and began a lengthy wrangle with Admiral Forbes over the distribution of the Home Fleet between anti-invasion and Atlantic convoy protection duties; Forbes refused to believe that the Germans either could or would invade.<sup>36</sup>

On July 15 Edwards wrote with evident sarcasm: 'Winston over at the admiralty telling us how to dispose the fleet.' Two days later, seeing the appointment of Lord Cork as C-in-C, Shetlands: 'Another Old Codger for a job. . . Another of Winston's ramps.' On the eighteenth, seeing Roger Keyes nominated director of combined operations: 'Are we all balmy? – God preserve us from the old Gang.'<sup>37</sup>

The First Sea Lord took a more comfortable view. Writing to another admiral in December, he would find mitigating circumstances for what Cadogan had called the P.M.'s 'babyish' ways.

The P.M. is very difficult these days, not that he has not always been. One has, however, to take a broad view, because one has to deal with a man who is proving a magnificent leader; and one just has to put up with his childishness as long as it isn't vital or dangerous.<sup>38</sup>

Such patience in the First Sea Lord was remarkable: there was not one sea-going admiral whom Winston would not try to dismiss. Neither Pound nor A. V. Alexander objected. The board of admiralty, whose prerogative dismissals had always been, was widely referred to as Alexander's Ragtime Band; the First Lord himself, as Churchill's toady.

Over Mers-el-Kébir, Winston had flouted the advice of all three competent admirals – Cunningham, Somerville and Admiral Sir Dudley North, the flag officer at Gibraltar. North protested in writing about the whole ungallant incident. The admiralty sent a chilling response, deprecating comments on any policy already decided. Shown a copy by Alexander,

Churchill ominously wrote back on the twentieth that Admiral North had evidently not got 'the root of the matter' in him: 'I should be very glad to see you replace him by a more resolute and clear-sighted officer.'<sup>39</sup>

But it would take another episode to break Admiral North finally.



During July 1940, England waited for Hitler's long-expected peace proposals. Churchill occasionally went to the Channel coast, hoping to see air battles, or drove out, dressed 'rather self-consciously' in airforce uniform, as Martin thought, to the Hurricane airfield at Kenley, and splashed around in gumboots among the fighter pilots.

His cheeks pink with exuberance, he toured the southern defences using a special train of whose comfort Lord Birkenhead would certainly have approved. The Midland Railways had installed two royal suites in it for the P.M. and his V.I.P.s, with a lounge in the centre, Pullman sleepers for his staff, and a diner and the usual boxcars.

His appointment card at No. 10 and the Chequers guestbook reveal him lingering with his old friends from the Focus, including his millionaire benefactor Sir Henry Strakosch. But he now needed little encouragement to hate Germans. Everywhere he preached the 'coming invasion' and spoke of the atrocities which the Nazis would perpetrate – the only way, he explained to his private staff, to get every man, woman and child to fight desperately. After one dinner engagement at Chequers with three generals he laughingly told his staff that he had enjoyed a 'real Hun hate' with them. 'I never hated the Hun in the last war,' he smiled, 'but now I hate them like an earwig.'<sup>40</sup>

By 1941 they would have fifty-five divisions – enough to execute raids of the 'butcher and bolt' variety. Whether or not Hitler ever invaded, as he told them with surprising candour, this 'invasion scare' was serving a useful purpose. He intended, he added, to broadcast about it that Sunday evening, July 14, and give a deliberate impression of 'long and dangerous vigils.'<sup>41</sup>

'Here in this strong City of Refuge,' he proclaimed into the microphone, with that easy grandiloquence of his, 'which enshrines the title-deeds of human progress and is of deep consequence to Christian civilisation; here, girt about by the seas and oceans where the navy reigns; shielded from above by the prowess and devotion of our airmen – we await undismayed the impending assault. Perhaps it will come tonight. Perhaps it will come next week. Perhaps it will never come. We must show ourselves equally capable of meeting a sudden violent shock or – what is perhaps a harder test – a prolonged vigil. But be the ordeal sharp

or long, or both, we shall seek no terms, we shall tolerate no parley; we may show mercy – we shall ask for none.’

Once again he boasted that the capital could devour an army: ‘We would rather see London laid in ruins and ashes than that it should be tamely and abjectly enslaved.’

Phonograph records of these broadcasts went on sale. The proceeds went to a charity set up for Londoners whose homes were shortly laid in the ruins and ashes of which he had spoken.

At the same time he took measures to deal with possible emergencies if Hitler’s proposals proved irresistible. Bevin declared strikes illegal; special courts would order the summary execution of disaffected citizens found guilty of treason, sabotage or looting.

That Monday his buoyant mood was perceptible to John Martin, lunching *en famille* with the Churchills and Attlee. ‘He likes his food,’ wrote the private secretary. He chuckled at Churchill’s remarks about the rationing ideas of the food faddists – they would have Britain fed on oatmeal, potatoes, and milk, ‘washed down on gala occasions with a glass of lemonade.’

He is in a very confident frame of mind, more so now than ever . . . he seems very playful in his family and fond of animals, playing with a little dog and making absurd remarks to it.

BY THE end of July the prime minister had become privately convinced that Hitler was not going to invade Britain – or at least not yet.

Inspired probably by the ‘feel’ of the ENIGMA intercepts, he took the decision to send Britain’s armoured forces out to Egypt. ‘He has seemed,’ wrote one of the servants of the Bletchley Oracle, ‘as bold as the senate of ancient Rome when it sent an army to Spain while Hannibal was still at the gates of the city.’ In fact, Winston knew rather more about his enemy than the Roman senate did. A newcomer at Bletchley that summer was given as his first job the role of *avocatus diaboli*, proving that Hitler’s invasion operations were genuine and not deception.<sup>42</sup>

The signs of Hitler’s hesitancy were there. On July 16 he had added to his main directive (‘I have decided to prepare a landing operation against England’) the eloquently indecisive afterthought – ‘*and, if necessary, to carry it out.*’

Whether or not this signal, or the secondary echoes of it, were intercepted, Churchill had already deduced Hitler’s ultimate intent to crush the Soviet Union. Cripps had just returned briefly from Moscow with word that Stalin expected such an attack.<sup>43</sup> ‘Even if that Man reached the Cas-



pian,' Churchill had remarked to John Colville on July 13, using a motif that was to recur many times over the coming months, 'he would return to find a fire in his backyard.'

BEFORE HITLER dared turn east, he had to quieten England one way or the other. For this reason Churchill acted firmly to pinch off each German feeler that came through, like ivy creeping through a wall, via Stockholm, the Vatican, Berne and Washington.

More than one high official showed profound disquiet at his obstinacy. In Berne, the British ambassador revived an earlier contact with Hitler's emissary Prince Max von Hohenlohe. Meeting him in secret in mid-July, Sir David Kelly had agreed with the unflattering description of Churchill as being unreasonable and often under alcohol, but had pointed reassuringly to Halifax and Butler as being still amenable to logic.<sup>44</sup>

On Friday the nineteenth Hitler delivered his famous Reichstag speech, calling upon Britain to see reason. Cripps, who had returned to Moscow, described it as 'outstanding' and 'very clever.'<sup>45</sup> Britain, the German leader said, now had a choice between peace or suffering – not that Mr Churchill, he scurrilously added, would be among those to suffer, for he would have betaken himself to Canada where the wealth and children of 'those principally interested in the war' had already gone before.

I consider myself in a position to make this appeal since I am not a vanquished foe begging favours, but the victor, speaking in the name of reason. I can see no reason why this war need go on. I am grieved to think of the sacrifices it must claim.

Halifax was disappointed that the speech contained no concrete terms. In his diary he regretted that little could be made of it. The B.B.C. broadcast an immediate rebuff one hour later, spoken in sneering German by Sefton Delmer of the government's black propaganda agency. Churchill believed he had scotched Hitler's final attempt.

That Saturday, however, a telegram jolted him: an American Quaker in Washington had brought a message from the British embassy from his German counterpart. 'German chargé d'affaires,' Lord Lothian said, 'sent me a message that if desired he could obtain from Berlin Germany's present peace terms.'<sup>46</sup> Lothian revealed to the American intermediary that dissidents in the war cabinet – which can only have meant Halifax and Chamberlain – felt it was time to negotiate a fair peace, and had asked him to find out from the German embassy what Hitler had to say about the kind of peace that 'a proud and unconquered nation' could accept.

Hans Thomsen, the German chargé d'affaires, had reported the gist of this by cypher message to Berlin on July 19. If, as is probable, Bletchley intercepted this,<sup>47</sup> it must have stunned Churchill to see it described as a 'British approach.'<sup>48</sup> He knew that Lothian had met Hitler and admired him. Hitler moreover authorised Thomsen to widen the Washington contact.

Annoyed at this hiccup in his strategy, Churchill fired a sharp telegram at the F.O. 'I do not know whether Lord Halifax is in town today,' this said, 'but Lord Lothian should be told on no account to make any reply to the German chargé d'affaires' message.'<sup>49</sup> Halifax, notably, did nothing.

IT WAS NOW all the more urgent to light that 'fire in Hitler's backyard.' A timely bombing of Berlin would put an end to his yammering about peace.

True, in calmer years Churchill had declared that when nations began to wage war on their enemy's civil population, they were doomed. Neville Chamberlain had opposed mass bombing: 'I do not believe,' he wrote, 'that holocausts are required.'<sup>50</sup> On September 1, Hitler too had appealed for an embargo. Roosevelt had warned that America would not aid any nation that initiated the bombing of civilians. That September, Winston told colleagues he wanted world opinion to see beyond doubt that 'Messieurs les Assassins' had begun this bloody exchange.

As First Lord, Churchill had nonetheless urged intermittently that they 'bomb the Ruhr' – a term showing no understanding of how verdant and farflung the Ruhr is. He felt that such a blow might destroy Germany's 'brittle morale,' that it would prove 'mortal' (he meant *fatal*).<sup>51</sup>

Two days after becoming prime minister, he again advocated bombing the Ruhr; after obtaining Labour approval he began a few days later. To justify it, he would shortly propagate the myth – which he maintained even in his memoirs – that 'many thousands' had been slaughtered in the enemy's tactical air strike at Rotterdam on May 14.<sup>52</sup>

Three months had passed since then, and there was little sign of German morale cracking. Impatient to do more, on July 8 he had asked Beaverbrook, minister of aircraft production, when Britain could obtain sufficient air mastery to launch 'an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers' which, he felt, was 'one sure path' to victory.

We have no continental army which can defeat the German military power. The blockade is broken and Hitler has Asia and probably Africa to draw from. Should he be repulsed here or not try

invasion, he will recoil eastward, and we have nothing to stop him.<sup>53</sup>

R.A.F. BOMBER COMMAND had now passed into the hands of Charles Portal, a tall, ice-cold air marshal destined for the highest post in the airforce, a man who may readily be judged from his application to the air staff for a directive that bomber crews might resume machine-gunning people seen rushing out of enemy factories, although many might be women.<sup>54</sup>

On the weekend of Hitler's peace speech and of Lord Lothian's mysterious feelers in Washington, Churchill suddenly invited 'Peter' Portal down to Chequers for the night.

The invitation was evidently unpremeditated, for he had written to Portal and his minister Sinclair earlier that Saturday, July 20, suggesting that if Hitler bombed 'the centre of government in London' it seemed important 'to return the compliment' the next day on Berlin. The new generation of heavy bombers, the Stirlings, would soon be ready, but would the nights be long enough to reach Berlin? 'Pray let me know.'<sup>55</sup>

In conversation that night with Portal it became clear that Winston intended to strike at Berlin anyway, and he named a target date: September 1. Portal agreed that the nights would then be long enough to reach Berlin with bombers carrying about one hundred tons.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile to prevent, as he said, Dr Goebbels branding him a war-monger, he decided not to reply himself to Adolf Hitler's speech – 'Not being,' he jocularly informed his staff, 'on speaking terms with him.'<sup>57</sup> The cabinet decided, with more than a little irony, that Lord Halifax should perform that historic deed in his routine ministerial broadcast on Monday evening. Churchill invited him to join Portal at Chequers, bringing a draft retort to Hitler.

The lugubrious foreign secretary lacked Winston's facile pen and laboured hard over the distasteful script. At one point he wanted to declaim that Hitler could not win, whatever he might achieve elsewhere, unless he disposed of the British army, navy and airforce. Churchill paced the room, then asked: 'Why not say, "unless That Man can sap the might of Britain"?'<sup>58</sup> Halifax marvelled at such talent. 'I have never met a greater artist in language!' he recorded. 'The only fly in the ointment was that he kept me talking till 1:30.' Later, when John Martin took a message in, he found the foreign secretary in blue velvet slippers, reading his Bible before the fire.

Worrying voices reached the P.M. upon his return to No. 10 that Sunday night, demanding a moderate response to Hitler. On Monday the

Chief Whip told him that forty-eight M.P.s had tabled a resolution calling upon him to state Britain's war aims. But that would mean telling the Poles and Czechs, for instance, sad home truths about the future of their territories.<sup>59</sup>

ONE LAST time, Churchill's War hung in the balance as the debate flared up anew that Monday morning. Once more, the relevant paragraphs have been blanked out in the archives.<sup>60</sup> Once again, he carried the day: outnumbered, or outflanked, Halifax inserted the terse rejection of Hitler's 'appeal to common sense' into his B.B.C. script that evening. (He showed it beforehand to Kennedy; the ambassador's only comment was that 'the God stuff' sounded all right.)

Even so, it was touch and go. Berlin's official response to Lothian's feeler had now reached Washington. Berlin, Hans Thomsen was directed to say, would welcome a fair peace – one which Britain could properly accept – but Mr Churchill's bellicose broadcast of the fourteenth, implying warfare from city to city, was a stumbling block. Thomsen was to ask whether the P.M. had spoken purely for 'home and colonial consumption.' If so, Berlin would not take it amiss; otherwise it would change the face of the war.

At seven P.M. that Monday, just before Halifax was due to broadcast, Lothian *telephoned* from Washington an appeal not to close the door – a further approach had arrived from Thomsen. 'Lord Lothian,' Halifax scribbled, '[said he] could get the information as to what he means if we want it.' Evidently Hitler was willing to disclose his terms. 'We ought to find out what Hitler means,' Lothian had pleaded, 'before condemning the world to one million casualties.'<sup>61</sup>

London's reply was simple: Lord Lothian should tune in to Halifax's broadcast that evening.

In the event, one million was to prove an under-estimate.

A FURTHER, political consideration underlay Churchill's stubbornness. 'At this moment,' he argued, reading a suggested F.O. reply to the Swedish king's renewed offer of mediation, 'when we have had no sort of success, the slightest opening will be misjudged.'

Four years later Hitler would use the same stubborn arguments for fighting on. Even so, Halifax's rude reply was a shock to Berlin. The Nazi propaganda agencies were ordered to take the gloves off and brand the rejection a 'war crime.'<sup>62</sup> Moderates had been optimistic that, faced with the alternative – the bankruptcy of her empire – Britain would see reason. 'Churchill,' Baron von Weizsäcker privately assessed that Tuesday, 'has

gone out on a limb and can't get back.' That day, Britain jacked up income tax to eight shillings, sixpence (forty-three pence) on the pound. On Wednesday Walther Hewel, linkman between Hitler and Ribbentrop, wrote to an intermediary: 'The Führer does not desire further attempts made to build bridges for the British. If they crave their own destruction, they can have it.'



In mid-May 1940 it was already clear that Britain might have only three weapons of offence: economic warfare, bombing, and the fomenting of unrest in enemy-occupied territories.<sup>63</sup> '[For the Germans] to try to hold all Europe down,' Churchill had reassured his venerated friend, the South African prime minister Jan Smuts, 'in a starving condition with only Gestapo and military occupation, and no large theme appealing to [the] masses is not an arrangement which can last long.'<sup>64</sup>

Churchill decided to set up a British fifth column to organise special operations – strikes, propaganda, terrorist acts, boycotts, riots, bribery, industrial and military sabotage, assassination. A civilian should run this dirty war, ideally a radical intellectual from the left, since most agents would be recruited from the underground. His choice fell on the minister of economic warfare.

It was going to be a distasteful job, but then Hugh Dalton was a distasteful man – booming of voice, towering of physique, with eyes of Me-  
phistophelean pale blue.<sup>65</sup> He was also a fervent advocate of 'all those ungentlemanly means of winning the war,' as he described them to a queasy Attlee, 'which come so easily to the Nazis.' Throughout occupied territory, he wrote, they must agitate – 'one might as well admit it' – like the networks of Nazi agents all round the world.<sup>66</sup>

Churchill had asked him to come over to No. 10 on July 16.<sup>67</sup> 'I was just writing to you,' he said, looking up. He was minded to ask Vansittart to help with this task. Would they get on together? 'Why yes,' replied Dalton, 'we are very old friends and all through these years he, you and I have thought the same.' On the twenty-second the P.M. introduced him to the war cabinet in his new role. 'And now,' he said, turning to Dalton, 'go and . . .'\*

Desmond Morton's files suggest that he, Vansittart and Dalton would also have a hand in a hitherto unknown department, identified only as M.U.W., directing strategic bribery.<sup>68</sup>

\* Dalton inserted the missing words in handwriting in his dictated diary – '*set Europe ablaze.*'

Meanwhile, Special Operations spread tentacles across the Continent. Available documents are patchy, Dalton's diaries being more eloquent for their omissions. Trawling through the archives turns up glimpses of its work – including assassins ordered to dispose of dangerous enemies like Rommel, inexpedient French officers like Huntziger and Darlan, American isolationists like William Rhodes Davis, and at least one friendly statesman, to render credible British allegations about an international Nazi conspiracy.\*



Lord Beaverbrook felt that Mr Churchill's judgement was still unsound. He later recalled months of 'decisions taken at 1:30 A.M. – always bad,' of nobody standing up to Winston except Herbert Morrison and himself, and of people agreeing only because they were desperate for bed. He watched the P.M. switch his attention to the Middle East that July, and realised that Churchill had been obsessed with that region since Omdurman in 1898. On that occasion, attached to the 21st Lancers, his horse had rather galloped him into that battle. Now, in mid-July, Churchill warned Eden that the storm might soon break in the Middle East.<sup>69</sup>

He was unhappy with the C-in-C out there, Wavell. Eden disagreed, and over dinner on the twenty-fifth they flew at each other in front of General Dill, while Beaverbrook and Lord Lloyd listened in silence.<sup>70</sup> Dill and Beaverbrook were at Chequers the next evening, which impressed itself upon General James Marshall-Cornwall as the Mad Hatter's dinner party.

After champagne the Prof. conjured forth a Mills grenade, toyed with it, lectured his bilious companions on its inadequacies. Churchill invited the general to talk about his corps and its deficiencies. His figures differed from the war office tables which Winston produced, and when the general denounced them the P.M. hurled the papers at Dill in a rage.

Retiring to an adjoining room with brandy and cigar, Churchill unfurled a map of the Red Sea and outlined a capricious plan for an immediate descent on Massawa, presently in Italian hands.<sup>71</sup> General Dill was increasingly disinclined to indulge him: only recently the P.M. had ordered marines in Northern Ireland to stand by to seize Portuguese islands in the Atlantic, alternatively to invade Eire and reoccupy the naval bases.<sup>72</sup> Those bases were in danger of becoming a typical obsession even though all convoys now approached Britain by the north-western route anyway, which made them irrelevant.

\* See page 560.

Churchill was irked by Dill's relentless professional opposition. He intimated to Eden that the general was disappointing the hopes they had vested in him after Dunkirk – he seemed 'tired, disheartened, and over-impressed with the might of Germany.'

This was unjust to the general. His vision sharpened by years of soldiering, the C.I.G.S. had decided that this war was foolish and opportunist. He remarked over dinner with Sir John Reith that Winston was 'cashing in' on a war which was all his own fault. He left no doubt what he felt about their P.M. and his present *galèrie*.<sup>73</sup>



Still lingering at Lisbon, the Duke of Windsor was delaying his exile to the Bahamas as long as he could. Churchill had good reason to suspect his motives. Bletchley Park was reading many foreign diplomatic cyphers, and these now rang with Hitler's attempts to procure the former king's services, and with the duke's language about Churchill and his war. The duke's Madrid friend, the brother of José Antonio, repeated to the German embassy that the duke dismissed King George as 'altogether stupid' but feared the 'clever' Queen Elizabeth and her intrigues against the duchess; he was toying with publicly dissociating himself from Britain's policies and 'breaking with his brother.'

Similar vapourings bubbled forth from Lisbon. The Italian minister radioed that the duke had no intention of leaving Portugal until October.<sup>74</sup> On July 24 the duke told the Spanish ambassador – General Franco's brother Nicholas – that he was 'ready to return to Spain.'<sup>75</sup> Worse still was the German cypher report from Lisbon on the twenty-fifth. A Nazi intermediary had told him he might yet ascend the British throne. The duke had displayed surprise and disbelief.<sup>76</sup>

Small wonder that Churchill's messages to the Duke of Windsor during the next few days were garnished with a caustic imperative which the mere exile of a friend would hardly warrant. On the twenty-fifth the Italian minister radioed to Rome that the duke had applied for a Spanish visa and that he had told a friend that the king had 'demonstrated much feebleness.'<sup>77</sup> On the twenty-sixth the German ambassador quoted the duke as calling the war a crime, and Halifax's speech rejecting Hitler's peace offer shocking. 'The duke,' the telegram read, 'is said to be delaying departure.'<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile Mr David Eccles, an Intelligence officer operating in Lisbon, flew back to London with despatches furnished by Franco's brother. These confirmed that the duke was planning to return to Spain.<sup>79</sup>

When Halifax reported to Churchill the next day there was turmoil. The P.M.'s first action was to send for Sir Walter Monckton, a friend of

the duke's, a former lawyer steeped in secret service rituals as head of British censorship. He came round to No. 10 at 5:45 P.M., and Churchill told him to fly out to Lisbon. His precise instructions other than to brief the duke on 'various matters' are shrouded in mystery. What is known is that Churchill sent to the duke a peremptory telegram on July 27 ordering him to sail for the Bahamas five days later as arranged. Fearing quite reasonably that the duke might even then return, he drew attention to the monarch's archaic rules forbidding his governors to quit their islands 'on any pretence whatever' without first obtaining 'leave from Us for so doing under Our Sign Manual and Signet.'

The evidence that Churchill had been reading other people's telegrams is in the letter which Monckton carried, counselling the duke to hold his tongue. 'Many sharp and unfriendly ears,' he wrote, 'will be pricked up to catch any suggestion that your Royal Highness takes a view about the war, or about the Germans, or about Hitlerism which is different from that adopted by the British nation and Parliament.' The duke's various Lisbon conversations had, he said, been 'reported by telegraph through various channels' to his disadvantage.<sup>80</sup> \*

Despite the pressure from Monckton the duke was still loath to leave. Churchill knew why. On the twenty-ninth the Italian minister radioed to Rome that, still playing for time, the duke had become less cautious the last few days in conversations with his intimates, and that one of them – a Spaniard of Falangist tendencies – had told a colleague: 'The prince [*sic*] thinks like us.'<sup>81</sup> On July 29 Monckton telegraphed from Lisbon asking for a Scotland Yard detective to be sent 'to accompany our friend for voyage to destination.' A plausible reason for such an armed escort was concocted. On the eve of his departure for the Bahamas the duke secretly visited the Spanish ambassador and revealed that he had fears 'that old Churchill, who had given such clear proof of his unscrupulousness, would have him assassinated if he did not decide to leave.' 'And so,' reported the Spaniard's Italian colleague Bova Scoppa to Rome, in a telegram that cannot have endeared the duke to the British prime minister, 'in spite of . . . his personal conviction that he might be able to pull his country back from the precipice by hurling Churchill and his gang into the sea, the ex-king took the road to political isolation and exile.'

The duke drafted an angry missive to Churchill, hurt by his 'gangster methods,' but sailed from Portugal on the first day of August, the appointed day, aboard an American merchantman.<sup>82</sup>

\* Such documents have been well used by Martin Gilbert. Unhappily the Churchill files in royal archives are reserved exclusively for Dr Gilbert's perusal.



There were two epilogues to this extraordinary story. In August he wired his Lisbon linkman to the Nazi foreign minister Ribbentrop to let him know when he should 'act.'<sup>83</sup> After the war the Americans found a German file with this and all the other highly compromising messages despatched by the German embassies in Madrid and Lisbon. The foreign office accessioned the file – 'with the contents, of which,' Attlee minuted Churchill, using the routine circumlocutions used to deal with code-breaking references, 'I think you should be familiar.' Dropping the broadest hint, Churchill replied: 'I earnestly trust it may be possible to destroy all traces of these German intrigues.'<sup>84</sup>

The Americans, however, had already microfilmed the file at Marburg. Their ambassador in London pressed their supreme commander to track down every copy made 'without delay.' Prime minister again in 1953, Churchill suppressed official publication of the documents. The microfilm was destroyed.<sup>85</sup>

ON THE last night of July 1940 the first convoy of American rifles, guns and ammunition reached a British port. Churchill ordered special trains to rush the rifles to his new army. Until then they had had to drill with wooden imitations.

But it was in the revival of the fighter defences that the miracle occurred. From January to April they had received only 638 new fighters. But now Beaverbrook had taken over. By cannibalising aircraft, by raiding squadrons and factories for hamstered stores of spare parts, by deciding which plane types should be produced, he had multiplied production.

New concepts had not frightened him. Against all advice he had installed cannon instead of .303 machine guns. Dowding had backed him, the manufacturers had agreed, and it was done. Later he would put his shoulder behind jet engine development, the ten-ton earthquake bomb, and the dam-busting weapons known as Highball and Upkeep. Incorruptible, ambitious, insensitive, neither Beaverbrook nor his senior officials drew government salaries: they were paid by industry or by his own newspaper group.

Justifiably proud of this man he had appointed, Churchill never tired of showing off his achievements. 'Beaverbrook,' he triumphed to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* at the end of July, 'has done miracles.'<sup>86</sup> Told that Beaverbrook was a magician, the jealous labour minister Ernest Bevin would say, 'Magic is nine-tenths illusion.'

But it was no illusion, what Beaverbrook had done. From May to August his factories produced 1,785 fighters and repaired 1,872 more. This extraordinary Canadian would write to Winston boasting that, thanks

to him, the R.A.F. had now been able to draw upon nearly one thousand new operational aircraft. 'In addition,' he bragged, 'all casualties had to be replaced. And 720 aircraft were shipped abroad.'

'Nobody,' he ended, 'knows the trouble I've seen.'<sup>87</sup>

'I do,' replied Churchill.

## 30: *The Eagle Never Landed*

FOR SIX weeks after the French collapse, Churchill would recall, the Americans treated Britain in that 'rather distant and sympathetic manner' that one adopts toward an old friend dying of cancer.<sup>1</sup>

Hitler did not invade, however. He had other fish to fry. On June 20, 1940, the day when the armistice took effect in France, his private secretary wrote: 'I think it still hurts him to have to get tough with the British. He would obviously far prefer them to use their common-sense. If they only new the Boss doesn't want anything at all from them other than our former colonies, they might be more approachable.' This was the unfortunate truth that Mr Churchill would withhold from the British people. In fighting Hitler, Britain would quintuple her prewar debt, forfeit her world position, bring the Red Army to the Elbe, and collapse her empire. But we now know from captured documents that, despite all the sabre-rattling, Hitler probably never intended to invade. Jolted by Soviet expansionism toward Romania, late in June 1940 he had reverted to his primary ambition, a German empire in the east, trusting that the British would see reason. He refrained from inflicting real pain on them: they had rescued their army at Dunkirk; he had vetoed all air attacks on London.

Only Hitler's closest advisers were aware that he did not plan to invade Britain. General Hans Jeschonnek, chief of air staff, refused to attend to lower echelons' queries about invasion plans, explaining: 'In my opinion the Führer does *not* have a Channel crossing in mind.' 'SEALION,' he snapped to a staff officer, 'won't take place and I've no time to bother about it.' Significantly, Hitler's high command (O.K.W.) had simultaneously issued a directive ordering its Intelligence agency to dupe Britain into expecting an invasion and, in collusion with Italy and Russia, an attack on the Middle East; the latter was to provide cover for the steady eastward movement of the Eighteenth Army from France.<sup>2</sup> The O.K.W. colonel who countersigned this directive had already begun mapping out a Russian campaign for Hitler.

In the first week of July Hitler disclosed his decision to attack Russia to his chief adjutant (Schmundt) and his army's commander-in-chief (von

Brauchitsch), who in turn briefed the chief of general staff (Halder).<sup>3</sup> Henceforth Hitler continued the dispositions for invasion only as a deception, codenamed SEALION.<sup>4</sup> He had hornswoggled Churchill before; he believed he could do it again.

A month later his staff issued a directive codenamed AUFBAU OST, Eastern Buildup. The O.K.W. war diary defined this on August 8 as 'our order to camouflage the preparations against Russia.'<sup>5</sup> By that time the army's own Russian campaign plan, drafted by the Eighteenth Army's chief of staff, was also ready.<sup>6</sup>

The deception would continue throughout the summer. Barges were convened into 'assault craft,' stores were brought up, maps of England noisily procured. Hitler's field commanders wondered why he vacillated; the more astute realised what he was up to. 'The Führer wants the *threat* of invasion of Britain to persist,' the German naval staff learned on August 14. 'That is why the *preparations*, whatever the final decision, must continue.' Unhappy about the cost to the economy, the chief of naval operations suggested calling off Operation SEALION altogether – 'In its place a special deception operation should be mounted to maintain the threat on the enemy.'<sup>7</sup>

A few days later Hitler expressed his frustration to Major Vidkun Quisling. 'I now find myself,' he exclaimed, 'forced against my will to fight this war against Britain. I find myself in the same position as Martin Luther, who had just as little desire to fight Rome, but was left with no alternative.'<sup>8</sup> Two weeks after that, although Churchill's bombers had just singed Berlin for the first time, Hitler sent his adjutant to scout a location for his headquarters against Russia.<sup>9</sup>

THIS TIME Churchill was not outwitted. Thanks to his codebreakers at Bletchley, he now commanded a total, indeed Olympian, view which his subordinates were denied. Armed with immense wartime and political experience, he interpreted the auguries more accurately than his soldiers. By the end of July he certainly recognised that SEALION was bluff. Colonel Menzies, head of the secret service, believed however in the invasion: on the twenty-ninth for example he circulated a typical intercepted Luftwaffe signal reminding bomber crews not to damage certain South Coast ports.<sup>10</sup>

That seemed a bit too obvious even to the diplomats. They too, albeit slowly, grasped what Hitler was up to. Halifax referred in his diary of July 25 to evidence that Hitler was hesitating; Sir Alec Cadogan also remarked on the 'funny pause' across the Channel. 'What are they doing,' he mused on the thirtieth, 'with these costly and half-hearted air-raids?' Both he and Halifax concluded by the end of July that Hitler was not going to invade.

R. A. Butler, under-secretary at the F.O., would brief a newspaperman on August 20 that the invasion was hooey – ‘There had never been,’ he said, ‘sufficient concentrations of troops in northern France.’ Hitler’s troops were going east, he said: ‘They are going to attack Russia.’<sup>11</sup>

Churchill had deduced this too, but kept his comforting deduction to himself, because what he himself had privately termed the ‘invasion scare’ was bringing him overwhelming support. Gallup now polled eighty-eight per cent backing him as prime minister – twenty per cent more than Chamberlain at his most popular. Besides, Roosevelt still had to be gulled into entering the war.

In Grosvenor-square, Kennedy found the shift in Churchill’s stance, from Cassandra to optimist, somewhat perplexing.<sup>12</sup> Kennedy also fancied he heard rumbles of discontent from the munitions workers and poorer classes – they had begun comparing the liberty which Churchill *told* them they enjoyed, with the security that Hitler gave his people.

Churchill had a stranglehold on public opinion. The Socialists were now the dominating group in his government, but those Englishmen with insight had begun to ask, he said, ‘Where is all this doing to end?’<sup>13</sup>



Whitehall that summer became accustomed to the sandbags and barricades, the barbed wire and the pocketful of passes needed for even the shortest walk between ministries. Winston yearned for real air raids to begin and he talked about them ceaselessly: he had been predicting them ever since 1934, but still they had not come. Instead, all that summer he found himself contending with enemies more malevolent to Britain’s interests than Hitler.

There were the Japanese. In mid-June they had demanded that Britain close down the Burma Road – the supply route for the Chinese – as well as the frontier with Hong Kong and the military base at Shanghai. Meeting Lord Halifax briefly on July 6, he had remarked that he had no desire at all to get into a war with Japan. ‘Nor do I,’ observed Lord Halifax in his diary, ‘but I am more disposed to think they are bluffing than he is.’ Unwilling to be seen as an appeaser, Churchill instructed the ambassador, Sir Robert Craigie, to negotiate a compromise. The Japanese refused; Churchill agreed to close the Burma Road. ‘Cabinet,’ recorded Cadogan on July 10, ‘led by Winston, evidently bent on surrender.’<sup>14</sup> On balance, the prime minister felt that Britain must play for time in the Far East.

That included India. When the cabinet had discussed India’s claims in October he had protested against yielding to parties ‘exploiting the dangers with which Britain was faced.’ Genuinely proud of the empire, he had

flung some of his fieriest epithets at its enemies. Earlier in his career he had slighted Hindu leader Mohandas Gandhi as 'a seditious Middle Temple lawyer now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace.' When Sam Hoare's India Act was passed in 1935 Churchill had warned that it was bound to dislodge India from the empire. Two years later Gandhi's Congress party triumphed at the elections. In the ensuing turmoil the subcontinent divided along religious lines.

Within that cause – the British empire – his methods were more profane than humane. He opposed any attempt at religious reconciliation, cynically telling the cabinet in February 1940 that he 'regarded the Hindu–Moslem feud as the bulwark of British rule in India.' He wrote to Chamberlain in the same vein, complaining about the viceroy's policy of 'running after Gandhi and the Congress.'<sup>15</sup> Now that he was himself prime minister, the Socialist minority held the Whip hand, as Kennedy had remarked: beholden to them in the fight against those who favoured a negotiated peace with Hitler, he had to shape his tactics over India accordingly.

The Labour Party and *Tribune*, the newspaper founded by Sir Stafford Cripps, backed Gandhi. Cripps visited India and befriended Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of Congress. Labour's policy was simple: in return for Indian collaboration now, Churchill should promise independence afterward. Thus he played for time. Churchill had Cripps posted out of harm's way to Moscow, and there he would languish as ambassador for the next twenty months, a 'lunatic in a land of lunatics.'

In a sense, Churchill was hoist by his own petard. For reasons of high policy, he was portraying Britain's peril as dire and immediate. After the fall of France, the viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, had promised Gandhi, with no authorisation from London, that Britain would 'spare no effort to bring about Dominion status within a year after conclusion of the war.' Fortunately, Gandhi held out obstinately for independence and Churchill refused to utter any promises. 'Not now.' He wanted the Indians to understand 'not yet,' but what he meant was 'not ever.'

'You must remember,' he wrote sternly to the viceroy, 'that we are here facing constant threat of invasion.' If such an immense issue as India were put to the cabinet now it must be 'to the detriment of matters touching the final life and safety of the State.'

He tried to send this off on July 26 without consulting the India Office. Blistering with anger, the Dominions Secretary Leo Amery, came round to No. 10 to remonstrate. Churchill promised to redraft it, but the version finally sent off still avoided either commitments or promises.

THROUGHOUT THAT violent summer Churchill also had to contend with the single-minded badgering of British and American Zionists, to mobilise and arm the Jews in Palestine. When he obdurately refused to offer more than oral expressions of goodwill, Chaim Weizmann stepped up the campaign he had resumed after Dunkirk.<sup>16</sup> 'If we go down in Palestine,' he cried in June, writing from the Dorchester, 'we are entitled to go down fighting.' Privately believing that England was in fact in the more immediate danger, in mid-June the Zionist Office began shipping its archives out to Palestine.

After France collapsed this hubbub over Palestine arose anew. Churchill received a letter from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which had sustained the Focus during his wilderness years (the letter is missing from the official files). In Washington, American Jewry pressured Lord Lothian into telegraphing him on June 21 about their concern that Palestine might be overrun: Britain must arm and organise the Jews there under her command. Lothian warned of 'a most deplorable effect' on Jewish opinion in America if Britain did not comply.

Churchill passed this to the colonial secretary. He reminded Lord Lloyd of his greatest interest in the matter, and added that the 'cruel penalties' imposed by Lloyd's predecessor for illegal arms had made it necessary to tie up forces for the Jews' protection now. 'Pray let me know exactly,' concluded the P.M., 'what weapons and organisation the Jews have for self defence.' Lloyd replied that substantial sealed armouries had been provided, and that of 21,411 Palestinian police all but five thousand were Jews – an enormous force for so small a country.

Taken aback, Churchill huffed in his reply that colonial office policy on Palestine had failed – otherwise they would not need to keep twenty thousand trained infantry there to protect the Jewish settlers and native Arabs from each other. Refusing to admit the strength of Moslem feeling in the Middle East and India, he could not help letting off steam about this 'scandal':

This is the price we have for the anti-Jewish policy which has been persisted in for some years. Should the war go heavily into Egypt, all these troops will have to be withdrawn and the position of the Jewish colonists will be one of the greatest danger.

There was no danger of 'properly armed' Jews ever attacking the Arabs, he felt, since they were dependent upon Britain and her command of the seas. In further justification he argued that the Levantine Arabs were 'very poor representatives, and are only a small part' of the Moslem

world. 'We have treated them with the greatest consideration and as you know, the settlement I made with them on the basis of the Zionist policy commanded the full assent of [T. E.] Lawrence.'

The colonial office refused to budge. Lloyd had no political objection to the enlistment of Jews and Arabs in Palestine, he assured Churchill on July 20, but only on the basis of absolute numerical equality, and 'provided that nothing in the nature of a Jewish army should be created for service in Palestine.' But this was precisely the ultimate Zionist objective: a cohesive Jewish army, fighting under its own emblem. Nothing of course prevented Jews from volunteering singly for active service with the British forces; many did so and fought with distinction, as did individual Americans and Irishmen.

Heedless of the air battles now beginning over England's countryside, and 'Loth as I am to take up your time,' Weizmann wrote again to Churchill on August 6. 'In a war of the magnitude now proceeding,' he reasoned, adopting a scarcely flattering argument now, 'it is impossible to say what the strategic disposition of the British fleets and armies may be before victory is attained. Should it come to a temporary withdrawal from Palestine – a contingency which,' he added, 'we hope will never arise – the Jews of Palestine would be exposed to wholesale massacre at the hands of the Arabs.' He now held out the prospect of an army of sixty thousand Jews – 'No negligible force if properly trained, armed and led.'<sup>17</sup>

Churchill endorsed this proposal – 'arming the Jewish colonists sufficiently to enable them to undertake their own defence' – in a letter to the chiefs of staff and General Wavell on the twelfth. But they were not keen. His proposal got nowhere, and the haggling continued.

At one Zionist luncheon with members of the Focus on September 3, Winston emotionally gushed that he was 'in favour' of a Jewish army. 'Everybody,' Weizmann cynically replied, 'even Lord Beaverbrook, seems to be in favour of it.' He produced a memorandum and asked if he might carry it straight round to the war office. This ambush evoked chuckles around the table. Churchill read it and *verbally* approved.

Weizmann suggested that Churchill's intimate friend Bracken accompany him in case of 'difficulties.'<sup>18</sup> \*

\* Beaverbrook's files C57 and D447 reveal Bracken's increasing anti-Semitism over the years: squashing 1929 campaign rumours that he was a German Jew by publishing his Irish birth certificate; writing in 1933 of a certain cinema group as being 'as crazily constructed as those of their co-religionist Mr Elias of Odham's'; writing in 1952 to Beaverbrook about certain 'tarbrushed American Hebrews'; and referring to the Savoy Hotel's attempts to 'purge itself of the invading Israelites' Samuels and Clore (whom he called 'the Jewish terrorist').



His triumph ('As great a day as the Balfour Declaration!' he called it at the Dorchester that evening) was shortlived.<sup>19</sup> After sober reflection Churchill slithered out of this noose too, and welshed on his convivial lunch-time commitment. Mid-December would find Weizmann complaining to the Prof. that the war office was showing 'scant enthusiasm.' Several times over the next year he would hark back to Mr Churchill's 'broken promise.'<sup>20</sup>



A regular pattern emerged in Churchill's routine which exhausted his friends and defeated his subordinates. He could climb into pyjamas each afternoon and sleep, but not they. The records testify to meetings of his defence committee, in the clammy Central War Room bunker, often lasting until two A.M. When it rose he would sometimes insist that the unhappy Beaverbrook, clutching his chest and gasping with asthma, join him upstairs to carry on the discussion in his sitting room.

After one 1941 weekend at Chequers, General Pownall would write, 'We went to bed at two A.M. *He* gets some sleep in between lunch and tea – others can't do that and he is wearing them down in consequence.' This officer regarded it as a serious failing that the captain could not care for his crew better. 'Other people,' Pownall repeated two months later, 'have not the opportunities for afternoon naps that the P.M. has got. *They* have got to go on all day and every day.'<sup>21</sup>

Everybody lamented the verbosity that choked these proceedings – one girl who had worked at No. 10 since Lloyd George's time described them as Winston's Midnight Follies. In April 1944 the First Sea Lord would write, 'Never has the P.M. been so discursive and wasted so much time.' And on July 6 of that year, 'P.M. is in no state to discuss anything – too tired and too much alcohol.'<sup>22</sup>

AT ONE interminable meeting after the 1940 French collapse he had run probing fingers over the Canary Islands, Casablanca, and even Oran. 'W.S.C.,' wrote Sir Alec Cadogan, describing the confusion of those days, 'endorses any wild idea.'<sup>23</sup>

De Gaulle bulked large in them, although by hiring him the British had offended more Frenchmen than they pleased. But there was no going back, and Winston authorised substantial sums for bribery and covert operations against Marshal Pétain. General Georges Catroux was bribed to leave Saigon and head the Free French in Egypt; de Gaulle also recommended purchasing anti-Pétain coups in Syria and Morocco. Mr Leo d'Erlanger, who owned property in Tunis, advised that most French offi-

cials in North Africa had their price. 'He strongly advocates,' Desmond Morton reported, 'an intensive campaign of propaganda and bribery.' Churchill approved in red ink.<sup>24</sup> In December one Daniel Dreyfus would even offer to buy Pierre Laval for Britain, claiming to have bribed him in the past. Sir John Anderson suggested that Dreyfus, while otherwise 'thoroughly unscrupulous,' could be relied on because of his religion. But by the time Halifax put the idea up Pétain had dismissed his prime minister and Churchill red-inked that Laval was 'no longer worth buying.'<sup>25</sup>

Winston trusted Morton – one of his prewar informers inside the S.I.S. and his neighbour at Chartwell – implicitly. In 1919 Winston had appointed him to the secret service; he had created the Industrial Intelligence Centre. Now the bluff and somewhat pompous major alone had a key to Winston's buff box of MOST SECRET documents; he kept it attached to his person. Some idea of his position is given by Winston's memorandum constituting his liaison staff in June: his son-in-law Duncan Sandys to liaise with Home Defence and the Air Raid Precautions; Oliver Lyttelton, with the Ministry of Supply; and Morton, to handle enemy war production data, relations with the F.O. and the French Committee, and 'Secret Service and fifth column activities.'<sup>26</sup> Now pushing fifty, Morton had a predilection for pink gins that made Winston feel at home with him, and an Irish impertinence as well: he successfully put himself forward for a K.C.M.G. in the 1945 New Year's Honours List.<sup>27</sup>

In June 1940 Morton had formed a small committee to manipulate de Gaulle. Churchill had formally recognised this extraordinary general as leader of the Free French on the day after the armistice, and had invited him to broadcast a declaration to France. (It had taken quite a tussle at the F.O. to persuade this headstrong Frenchman to amend the declaration and take out names – 'In particular *his*,' as Cadogan observed in his diary.) Admiral Cunningham, close to the disgruntled French in the Middle East, warned the First Sea Lord that 'no one has any opinion of him.' But Churchill had, and Eden found him late in July in the garden of No. 10 'anxious to let de Gaulle loose somewhere.'

With Churchill's approval, Morton gave a City public relations expert a big budget to 'sell' de Gaulle in Britain as well as in France's colonies and the Americas. Morton had argued that they could switch off his publicity at any moment.<sup>28</sup>

On July 5, Churchill directed the admiralty to allow him access to the French sailors interned after GRASP so that he could raise a small navy of two or three ships, perhaps even a battleship, to fly the Free French flag. 'These ships,' he suggested, 'may be of use in parleying with French colonies and in getting into French harbours on one pretext or another.'

He was already eyeing Dakar in Senegal, a port of strategic importance in West Africa. Officials there had suggested that taking it would be easy; on July 5 he had asked Spears to discuss it with de Gaulle. The French general warned frostily that in view of CATAPULT any British force would be received with the utmost hostility.<sup>29</sup> The corollary was obvious – he and his troops should occupy Dakar.

Planning went forward all summer. Over lunch with de Gaulle at Chequers on August 3, Churchill approved a plan to put ashore three battalions of French troops.<sup>30</sup> The British were to keep a low profile: their ships would ferry the Gaullist troops but would ideally even stay out of sight of land. The chiefs of staff were uneasy about accepting an unlimited liability in a non-essential theatre. Churchill tore into them over their lack of enthusiasm. His vehemence shortly persuaded them to approve a more ambitious plan.

By mid-August the plan had significantly changed in character. British troops were to secure Dakar, following which de Gaulle's troops would come in from beyond the horizon and take over, to 'impart a French character' to it. Churchill's added interest now was in grasping the new French battleship *Richelieu*, damaged in July by Royal Navy attack, and the Polish and Belgian gold reserves which he believed the French had spirited away to Dakar.

Later in August the plan hit snags. Admiral Cunningham stipulated that tides and moon would not be favourable until September 12. The chiefs of staff suggested Conakry and an overland march to Dakar. Churchill disagreed and insisted that de Gaulle be master of Dakar, if need be by force, by nightfall of the first day.

All too lightly de Gaulle accepted the decision, and was shortly observed buying tropical equipment at a Piccadilly store for use in 'West Africa.' Free French security was not good. At a public dinner in Liverpool his officers toasted 'Dakar' by name.

THE FREE French was one of several ad hoc exile movements managed by Desmond Morton's committee. The Norwegians, Poles and Dutch had been allowed these privileges; but not the Austrian, German or Italian émigrés who might equally argue that their countries had been overrun by the fascists; nor the Baltic states which Stalin had annexed in cahoots with Hitler.

If Churchill stolidly refused to hand over the London-banked gold of the Baltic states to Moscow, there were cogent economic reasons; exile leaders who mentioned their gold balances found him afflicted by sudden deafness. Since 1939 a committee under Lord Hankey had kept tabs on

Europe's gold, urging Oslo, Copenhagen, The Hague, Brussels and Paris to ship theirs to the safety of London, and keeping track if the gold was sent elsewhere.

On June 7, Hankey had briefed Churchill,

Every [French] warship larger than a destroyer which crosses the Atlantic [to the U.S.A.] to bring back aeroplanes is taking as much gold as possible; and practically the whole will have left France by the 15th or 20th June.<sup>31</sup>

In June the cruiser *Vincennes* alone transported \$240 million of gold from Bordeaux to buy arms in America. On the twentieth, Intelligence learned, a French warship left Lorient carrying all of Poland's gold and much of Belgium's. The French refused to impart its destination to their British allies, but part was believed to be bound for Dakar. A few days later Intelligence learned that the *Émile Berlin* was leaving Nova Scotia to carry France's gold to her Caribbean colony, Martinique. Major Morton's committee recommended persuading these ships to take the gold to Canada instead.<sup>32</sup>

'What a wonderful thing,' wrote the American military attaché with unconscious irony, 'if these blokes do win the war! They will be bankrupt, but entitled to almost unlimited respect.'<sup>33</sup>

That was not the same as unlimited credit, and less starry-eyed Americans wondered how Britain was going to pay for the war. Sir Kingsley Wood suggested the treasury requisition everybody's wedding ring to replenish the gold reserves; Churchill did not need a Gallup poll to know where that would leave his popularity. He suggested they defer such a step until Britain needed 'some striking gesture for the purpose of shaming the Americans.'<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile he took the less painful alternative of separating Britain's foreign guests from their gold in the cause of liberty.

Among the earliest arrivals had been the Czechs. His treasury had cast covetous eyes on their national bank's gold deposits in London; in October their former president Dr Eduard Beneš would agree to lend the entire £7.5 million-worth to Britain for 'increased expenditure on aircraft and munitions in America.'<sup>35</sup> But another year would pass before Churchill would even recognise his government in exile. He dismissed the teetotal 'Dr Beans' as a lightweight and found meals with him particularly trying, since the wronged Czech politician held authoritarian views on everything from sex to religion, having been agnostic since he was eighteen.

Churchill paid only lip service to Czechoslovakia's cause. After one luncheon with the P.M. on August 8, Beneš reported in code to his agents in Czechoslovakia that the prime minister had been incisive and firm, he was determined to 'fight to the end,' since anything less would spell the end for Britain. 'Our restoration is self-evident,' triumphed Dr Beneš, 'and like Poland's is a war aim.' 'Churchill,' he dictated to his secretary afterward, 'expects the German offensive against the British Isles to begin in the next few days. He is full of optimism concerning this great battle, but he thinks that the war will go on for quite some time.'<sup>36</sup>

THE TOWNS were not yet bleeding. The enemy airforce was still attacking mainly ports and shipping. But in a new directive on the first day of August, Hitler ordered the airforce, starting on or after the fifth, to knock the British airforce out of the skies – both literally and by marauding its ground organisation, supply lines, and aircraft factories. Hitler reserved strictly to himself the right to order 'terror raids' – meaning air raids on city areas – even in reprisal.<sup>37</sup>

Thus London was still not bombed. On Sunday August 4, de Gaulle found the prime minister on the lawn at Chequers shaking his fist at the sky, and shouting in strange fury, 'So they won't come!' Seeing his puzzlement, Churchill explained his deadly rationale. The bombing of cities like Oxford and Canterbury would cause such indignation in the United States that they would have to come into the war. De Gaulle was sceptical. Roosevelt, he observed, had not come in for France.

Churchill knew how close he was to inveigling the Americans. So did Berlin. Rumours were filtering through from Washington of an extraordinary deal whereby Churchill was offering Roosevelt bases in the Caribbean in exchange for American destroyers. On August 7 Ribbentrop exclaimed to Dino Alfieri, the Italian ambassador, 'Churchill is crazy and the British are imbeciles!' The ambassador radioed this message to Rome in a cypher which the British could read.<sup>38</sup>

After lunching that Sunday with Spears and Morton, Churchill went over with Dowding to see Fighter Command's new operations bunker at Bentley Priory, Stanmore. Work had begun here, on the outskirts of London, three months after Munich. By March 1940, when it began operations, sixty thousand tons of earth had been dug out of the pit, and over twenty thousand tons of concrete poured to reinforce the deep shelter. Over the next few weeks the magnetism of the unfolding drama repeatedly drew Churchill to this command centre.

Chequers that Sunday evening was enlivened by the arrival of the chief of Bomber Command. Clementine had returned to London, leaving only Winston, Portal and the Prof. in the house party.

Winston was in a very good form [a private secretary wrote]. I only wish I hadn't such a sieve-like memory and could remember all the talk afterwards. He always talks very freely on these occasions and is extremely good company.

CHURCHILL HAD NOW streamlined the flow of Intelligence. That Monday August 5, he directed that all intercepts were to be submitted to him undigested, in the raw. 'Major Morton will inspect them for me,' he ruled. 'He is to be shown everything.'

Göring optimistically asked for three fine days to fulfil Hitler's requirement for the destruction of Britain's air defences. Day 1 would be 'Eagle Day.' He issued these orders to his three air-force (*Luftflotte*) commanders on the sixth. Bletchley intercepted the directive and forwarded it to No. 10. The enemy plan was for strongly-escorted bombers to approach targets around London in broad daylight and overpower the fighters that rose to engage them. Göring favoured August 10 for Eagle Day, but the weather did not. He postponed it first to the eleventh, then fixed Eagle Day for the thirteenth.<sup>39</sup>

A buff box evidently brought this news to Mr Churchill immediately: a bracket was inked across three days on his appointment card beginning late on the thirteenth. Since Hitler had forbidden attacks on London itself he made no plans to leave the city.\*



R.A.F. fighter losses began rising steeply. Eighteen had been shot down on Thursday the eighth. That summer, the callowest youth in the English countryside could tell from its sounds, without a glance, which aircraft was pirouetting thousands of feet above, tracing vapour trails that tangled briefly and occasionally withered away as one or the other was hit and spiralled down.

Worried by the narrowing margin, Winston had driven out to Chequers that Friday evening, August 9, for a weekend with his generals. Eden brought Generals Dill and Wavell down to see him. Churchill was grow-

\* Martin Gilbert states (vol. vi, page 735) that 1,419 civilians were killed during the second week of August 1940, 1,286 of them in London; this is an error for September – in the circumstances, a serious error. No bombs fell in London before late August 24.

ing disenchanted with Wavell. He felt that the army in the Middle East was farflung and supine. At the end of July he had detained Eden after one meeting in the cabinet bunker and disparaged the general.<sup>40</sup> This nagging did not abate, because Churchill was oppressed with the future of the Middle East. He told Beneš that the enemy might well score in Egypt, because Wavell had only fifty thousand soldiers and the Italians two hundred thousand.

This is why Eden had ordered Wavell home. But Wavell was a grim, taciturn soldier – he spoke in single syllables. To a politician, to whom flummery was everything, such inarticulateness was almost a mortal sin. Over dinner Winston talked eagerly: how Britain would have ten armoured divisions in a year, how they could raid Holland, thrust into the Ruhr, seize the Cherbourg peninsula. Venturing out of the monosyllabic, Wavell added Norway to this euphoric list. 'We've had enough of that,' winced Churchill.<sup>41</sup>

That Saturday two more generals were at dinner – Pownall and Sir Robert Gordon-Finlayson who had returned from Egypt to take over the Western Command. Churchill knew how to handle generals, he told them affably – rather like a country farmer herding pigs along a road, forever poking and prodding them so that they would not stray.<sup>42</sup> His generals may not have liked the comparison with swine, but it was hard not to like the way Winston had said it.

That Saturday, August 10, 'C' sent word that Bletchley expected no invasion this month either.<sup>43</sup> Thus encouraged, Churchill decided to take the risk of shipping out to Egypt over half of Britain's tanks to reinforce Wavell. Back in London on Monday evening, using his familiar method, Churchill wrangled with Dill, Eden, and Wavell until two A.M. The navy, he felt, should risk fighting a fast convoy of tanks through the Mediterranean, under the open jaws of the enemy; his admirals were understandably more cautious.<sup>44</sup>

These further meetings with Wavell hardened Churchill's bad impression of him. He began gloomily pawing over the general's plans, moving battalions across the map. On the thirteenth he remarked to his staff that Wavell seemed short in mental vigour and resolve. Eden stood up for him, and marched into No. 10 that evening bringing Wavell and the C.I.G.S. to point out that what the Middle East lacked was equipment, not men.

Churchill still took a dismal view of Wavell: he was 'a good average colonel' who would make a good local Tory chairman – which said little for the prospect of holding Egypt against a numerically superior enemy.<sup>45</sup>

TUESDAY, AUGUST 13: this was Reichsmarschall Herman Göring's Eagle Day, the day when the three-day bracket on Churchill's appointment card began. The card shows that he regularly lunched at the palace on Tuesdays. King and first minister were warming to each other. It might ruffle royal feathers, however, when Churchill was down for an audience at six, postponed it by 'phone to six-thirty when delayed by de Gaulle, and then arrived at seven.<sup>46</sup> King George would soon admit to greater confidence in him, confess that there was 'no one even remotely as competent' as Churchill.

On this Tuesday the thirteenth he took Dr Beneš with him. Knowing of the former relations between Prague and Moscow, the king thoughtfully asked Beneš which he thought would prove the greater menace, Germany or Russia? 'I thought Russia would eventually be,' he wrote in his diary. His guests disagreed, suggesting that she could be 'organised.' Beneš described Churchill as 'emphatic': the United States would enter the war immediately after the presidential election; Russia would eventually come in too.<sup>47</sup>

As they emerged, London was still decked in insouciance: there was nothing to be seen of the aerial killing match that had begun – the combats were over England's southern countryside and Channel. Since six in the morning the heavily-escorted enemy bombers had been marauding across the southern counties. Their offensive was only at half strength because worsening weather had forced the recall of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's Second Air Force. Even so, by nightfall the enemy had flown fifteen hundred sorties, against which Fighter Command had managed barely seven hundred. At dusk the enemy airforce retired. Their losses were substantial – forty-five, compared with thirteen of the R.A.F. Churchill again visited the palace, returning to No. 10 for a further argument with Pound about convoying those tanks through the Mediterranean.

Something of the temper of that meeting emerges from Sir Dudley Pound's private letters on the fourteenth. General Wavell, he wrote, had faced a 'pretty stiff' argument with the P.M., who tried to 'impose some amateur strategy on him.'

'At the moment I am not quite sure,' admitted the First Sea Lord, 'how the argument ended.' Churchill wanted to risk sending the tanks straight through the Mediterranean to Alexandria, to arrive on about the third of September, since the Italians might invade Egypt at any moment. The navy preferred the longer Cape route, to arrive on the twenty-second. 'We have had a great battle today,' wrote Pound again on August 14, referring to the same argument – Hats or Bonnet, as the two routes came to be known. Wavell had been subjected to 'rather a rough and try-



ing time' as the P.M. disagreed with his troop dispositions. Winston wanted to put everything in the front line, even though Wavell pointed out that many units were not fully equipped.<sup>48</sup>

In the skies the battle for air supremacy had continued, though the scale of the enemy effort on this day had been smaller. Göring lost nineteen planes, Dowding eight. Knowing what the former had planned, the latter had good cause to be pleased.

Hitler was loath to continue this pointless battle. In Berlin that day, issuing the bejewelled, velvet-upholstered batons to his new field marshals, he made this quite plain.

Germany [he said] is not striving to smash Britain, because the beneficiaries will not be us, but Japan in the east, Russia in India, Italy in the Mediterranean, and America in world trade. That is why peace is perfectly possible with Britain – but not so long as Churchill is prime minister. That is why we've got to see what our airforce can do, and await a possible general election.<sup>49</sup>

The intercepts still mirrored Hitler's resolve not to invade. Churchill did not ease up on the scare-stories when Kennedy called round at four-thirty that afternoon, but the ambassador had heard it all before. His own feeling, which he cabled to Washington that evening, was that the Germans would not attempt any invasion until they had achieved greater supremacy in the air.<sup>50</sup>

IN FACT the scare-stories were no longer needed. Kennedy had brought a personal message from Roosevelt. It was the one Winston had been praying for ever since he had stepped up his campaign to 'drag the United States into the war.'

'What would I not give,' Pound had written to Cunningham, 'for another 100 destroyers.' Eight more had been lost at Dunkirk. Now Churchill had Roosevelt's response. The president, the message said, now agreed that it might prove possible to furnish him immediately with the fifty destroyers, motor torpedo boats and aircraft.<sup>51</sup>

Churchill summoned his colleagues to discuss the immodest price that Washington was asking: the freedom to use Newfoundland, Bermuda, certain Caribbean islands and British Guyana in the event of an attack on the American hemisphere – in fact the right to establish U.S. bases there right now. Moreover – and this hurt – Roosevelt wanted a written assurance that Britain would send her fleet overseas in the event of collapse.

His junior secretary John Colville remarked quite pertinently that these rather smacked of Stalin's recent demands on Finland. Churchill disagreed. 'The worth of every destroyer,' he replied with solemnity, 'is measured in rubies.'<sup>52</sup>

### 31: *In a Single Gulp*

WHAT HE WANTED, of course, was a token American commitment. By the time the first of the American destroyers arrived, it would be late autumn and they would have lost much of their purely naval relevance. They turned out to be barnacled with age, useless; they mounted one obsolete gun, and no flak at all. By the end of 1940, after extensive refits, only nine would be operational. The only one ever to see active service would be the *Campbeltown*, blown up as a blockship at Saint-Nazaire in March 1942.

Roosevelt moreover was striking a tough bargain. He would set terms so oppressive that Mr Churchill went to lengths to keep them from becoming public. True, as the P.M. declared to his colleagues that afternoon, August 14, 1940, the president was taking a long step toward coming into the war.

His colleagues had heard those words before, but now they were nervous, bemused by the very invasion psychosis that he had conjured up to entrap Roosevelt. 'We *must* give a very easy quid for the quo,' was how Sir Alec Cadogan expressed his relief, hearing of the deal, 'and I understand Winston now agrees.'

Since it was to prove a remarkable deal – allowing the first real, permanent inroads into empire territories to help ward off an imagined (and indeed non-existent) threat by Germany – the history of the Churchill–Roosevelt destroyers-for-bases deal deserves closer scrutiny from both the Washington and the London viewpoints.

Churchill had first asked for the destroyers a few days after taking office. Apprehensive of another Tyler Kent, he by-passed Kennedy and dealt through Lord Lothian, his ambassador in Washington. As France crumbled, he stepped up the pressure, spelling out Britain's destroyer losses in mid-June in a telegram to Lothian: in 1918 the British had had 433 destroyers in commission; they now had only 133, of which only sixty-eight were fit for duty. Thirty-two had been lost since the war began, he said, twenty-five of those since the beginning of February.

'Unless we do something to give the English additional destroyers,' Henry Morgenthau minuted in Washington, impressed, 'it seems to me it is absolutely hopeless to expect them to keep going.'<sup>1</sup>

That Roosevelt waited a full month before even replying alarmed Churchill. Those destroyers became a touchstone of American intent. But the war had awakened new interests in the Roosevelt administration which lay athwart Britain's. Washington could not see how Britain was going to pay. Informally, officials began to suggest that she relinquish her West Indian possessions to the Americans.

Churchill drafted a cable to Lothian on July 5 warning that unless he got these boats he could not defend the Channel against Hitler. The draft telegram talked of the 'grievous responsibility' the United States would bear if she 'failed Britain,' and claimed inventively that Eire was about to make common cause with the Germans – 'who they think are bound to win.' Halifax gave Kennedy an informal glimpse of this draft. The ambassador discouraged its transmission, and Churchill scrapped the telegram altogether.<sup>2</sup>

Roosevelt could hide behind his country's constitution and neutrality legislation. His next gambit was to argue that he was not permitted to send the destroyers unless the U.S. navy certify that it would serve America's defence.<sup>3</sup>

CHURCHILL GRIEVED that despite Mers-el-Kébir Roosevelt still discounted Britain's chances. He adopted an equally dog-in-the-manger stance. Roosevelt, he knew, also wanted to get his hands on Britain's most advanced military hardware. Broadly speaking, the scientists on both sides of the Atlantic were greedy for an unrestricted exchange. Sir Henry Tizard, the air ministry's principal scientist, had first suggested such an exchange late in 1939, but the admiralty had opposed it, lest the enemy also get hold of Britain's secrets. When the Prof. had put the idea up again on June 20, Winston decided to treat it as part of the 'larger issue.'<sup>4</sup>

In the second half of July, Roosevelt urged that a technical mission be sent, and soon. Apprehensive that Britain's secrets might go under with Britain, his officials began to harry Churchill to hand over the most advanced inventions. On July 17 Winston inquired in a note to General Ismay, 'Who is making a fuss? And what happens if we do not give an immediate decision?'<sup>5</sup>

It was at this stage that he made the acquaintance of a man shortly destined to head the American Foreign Intelligence Service. On July 21, Desmond Morton told him that an influential friend of Roosevelt, the Republican lawyer William J. Donovan, was in London, charged with a

somewhat nebulous mission – ostensibly to promote an exchange of naval inventions. Mr Churchill ‘might wish to find time to see him.’ In fact Donovan had been singled out a month previously by the new head of British covert operations in North America, William Stephenson; his trip had the political and financial backing of the secretary of the navy, Colonel Frank Knox.<sup>6</sup> According to what Stephenson told ‘C’ in December, Donovan had even more influence on Roosevelt than Colonel E. M. House had had on President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>7</sup>

Donovan was ushered into No. 10 at five-thirty on July 25. He was fifty-seven, blue-eyed, muscular. Incongruously, he had been something of an isolationist, and no champion of the empire. Meeting Winston evidently stirred him: by the time a British flying boat bore him away a week later he was putting Britain’s chances above fifty-fifty.<sup>8</sup> Churchill had instructed that he be shown everything; ‘C’ had even taken him round Bletchley Park. Shortly, Arthur Purvis, the remarkable Canadian handling Britain’s arms purchases in Washington, telephoned London that Britain now had a firm friend in the Republican camp.<sup>9</sup>

Softened by Donovan’s visit, Churchill approved the departure to Washington of a secret technical mission. He agreed that Tizard should head the mission and summoned the eminent scientist to his presence.<sup>10</sup> They had last met at the June meeting where the Prof., backed by his young air ministry protégé R. V. Jones, had predicted that the enemy airforce was using radio beams for target finding. Nettled by Churchill’s reliance on Lindemann, Tizard had scoffed, left the meeting and written out his resignation. ‘The fact is,’ he explained to a colleague, ‘that Winston is trying not only to be prime minister and commander-in-chief, but also, through his pets, to control in detail all the scientific work.’<sup>11</sup> Lunching with an editor at the Athenæum after that, he ridiculed Churchill. ‘He sees himself as another Marlborough,’ he observed, and described how with a theatrical gesture Winston had cried to his staff, ‘I command that this be done.’<sup>12</sup> Unhappily for Tizard, the command referred to was that Jones conduct an airborne search for the controversial radio beams. By nightfall the beams had been found, Tizard had been discredited, and the Prof. was triumphantly vindicated.

After that episode the back-stabbing scientific community declared war on the Prof., declaring him in one circular to be ‘completely out of touch with his scientific colleagues,’ and branding his judgement as ‘unsound’ and his influence as dangerous. There was a lingering odour of anti-Semitism in this campaign, although Lindemann did not regard himself as Jewish. Even Beaverbrook was heard to sneer about the Prof.’s French Jewess mother.<sup>13</sup> The main charge against Lindemann was that he

wasted time and resources on harebrained schemes like aerial mines and incendiary pellets to destroy enemy crops. The chiefs of staff pointed out that no planes were capable of carrying the former, and if the latter were used, Hitler would merely starve his subject peoples and blame Britain for the consequences.<sup>14</sup>

On the first evening in August, Churchill sent for Tizard to brief him. The unsightly little scientist was in his fifties, with untidy greying hair that would have seemed dyed auburn, if the moustache were not of the same reddish hue. Churchill made him wait, explaining through a minion that an archbishop had dislocated his timetable.<sup>15</sup> Tizard adjusted pince-nez, unhappily suspecting that this mission was the Prof.'s neat way of levering him out of the country. (It is worth noting that Churchill would make no attempt to see him on his eventual return.)

The prime minister competently dispelled such thoughts.

The P.M. [was] quite emphatic [the scientist wrote in his diary] that the mission was important and that he particularly wanted me to lead it. I asked if he would give me a free hand, and would rely on my discretion. He said 'of course' – and would I write down exactly what I wanted. So I said I would go, and went into the lobby and wrote out a paper which I left with his secretary.

ON THE previous day Churchill had resumed his nagging about the destroyers. 'It has now become most urgent for you to give us the destroyers, motor boats and flying boats for which we have asked,' he reminded Roosevelt in a rambling cable. 'I am confident, now that you know exactly how we stand, that you will leave nothing undone to ensure that 50 or 60 of your oldest destroyers are sent to me at once.' He concluded, 'Mr President, with great respect I must tell you that in the long history of the world this is a thing to do *now*.'<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile he toyed with the idea of blackmail. 'In view of the holding-back on the American side which has manifested itself in the last three days,' he counselled his staff, 'the question of the date of the departure of the [Tizard] Mission should be reviewed.'<sup>17</sup>

But in Washington things were moving. Navy secretary Frank Knox assured Lord Lothian that they would help, in return for proper consideration – naval bases in empire possessions close to the American coast. But when Knox raised the issue at the White House on August 2, his cabinet colleagues decided to add a second 'consideration' – 'that the British fleet be sent over here if Great Britain could not beat back the Germans.'<sup>18</sup>

Four more days passed before this was put to Mr Churchill in a telegram. His reaction was petulant and inconsistent. He was not averse to leasing bases in the West Indies, but he was angry at the demand on the British fleet.<sup>19</sup> He lectured Halifax on the seventh, 'We must not discuss the question of what to do with the fleet in the event of invasion.' He wired to Lothian that any such 'defeatist announcement' would have a disastrous effect.

Roosevelt, enjoying Britain's predicament, again took his time to reply. He finally settled the details of the cynical bargain with his principal secretaries – state, war, navy and treasury – on August 13. The resulting telegram handed to Lord Lothian at nine P.M. included rather more than the West Indies. 'The plan on the destroyers,' summarised Henry Morgenthau Jr, who had helped in the drafting, 'is to give us land in Newfoundland, Bermuda, Trinidad, and some other places in exchange for the fifty destroyers.'

Elated by these acquisitions, Roosevelt had gone further and suggested that they also let Britain have twenty speed boats and some long-range bombers. This was agreed, but there were limits to American generosity: when Morgenthau suggested throwing in the secrets of the highly-priced Norden bombsight he found that his colleagues 'didn't seem to think well of that.' And when someone mentioned sending 250,000 ancient Enfield rifles Henry Stimson, Roosevelt's secretary of war, objected that they must go to the Philippines.<sup>20</sup>

THIS WAS the telegram which Kennedy had brought to No. 10 at four-thirty on August 14. Simultaneously, British gifts of incomparably greater value left for North America, as a flying boat skimmed across Poole harbour in Dorset with Tizard and his mission, bound for Washington. In a cheap black-japanned metal footlocker the scientist was carrying the distillate of British genius – secrets that would give the more backward reaches of American science the means to make a quantum leap forward into the twentieth century.

Whether inspired by scientific ignorance, or impelled by selfless altruism, Mr Churchill had authorised Tizard to give the Americans blueprints of Britain's microwave radar, including the new air-to-surface vessel (A.S.V.) radar and an actual specimen of the cavity magnetron developed by Sir James Randall and H. A. H. Boot – the sophisticated device that increased radar power by one thousandfold at a stroke. (American radar development was in the Stone Age – no American plane had ever carried even airborne radar.) In Tizard's locker too were chemical warfare formulæ, details of the new RDX explosive, data on the rocket defence of

ships, on Bofors pom-pom predictors, on the proximity fuse, on Frank Whittle's jet engine, and on the enemy's magnetic mines. Along with the samples of the latest miniaturised valves went a pious wish from General Electric that Tizard consider the company's interests if ordered to lift the veil on these industrial secrets to the ravenous Americans.

It was the beginning of a torrential leak in Britain's scientific resources to the Americans – a leak which would reach full flood a year later when Mr Churchill voluntarily surrendered Britain's secrets of the atomic bomb.



Bases for destroyers. One cabinet member remarked to Joe Kennedy as he left No. 10 on the fourteenth, 'Is it not rather a hard bargain for you to drive?' Kennedy retorted that Washington was only asking Churchill to live up to his promise in the House on June 4 – to send the fleet abroad if the Germans invaded British waters.

Churchill was uneasy about possible bad publicity. Kennedy cabled his superiors, and the state department replied assuring him that the president did not contemplate making anything public. The P.M. thanked him for his 'untiring efforts to give us all possible help.'

You will I am sure send us everything you can, for you know well that the worth of every destroyer that you can spare to us is measured in rubies. But we also need the motor torpedo boats you mentioned and as many flying boats and rifles as you can let us have. We have a million men waiting for rifles.

He added that, as regards the bases, he agreed to the proposal to lease them to the United States for ninety-nine years, 'which is easier for us than the method of purchase.' He mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that he would now have to consult Canada about Newfoundland.<sup>21</sup>

Roosevelt now had to announce to Congress the dangerous step he was taking. On August 16 he conferred with attorney general Robert H. Jackson and Harry Hopkins on the best way of doing it. Morgenthau pencilled this note on the discussion:

It was finally R's idea to do it at his press conference and only handle what we were to receive, namely air bases etc. . . Jackson and I persuaded not to include the 20 speed boats at this time as Congress had turned it down once.



For understandable political reasons, Churchill wanted the destroyers to look like a gift. For procedural reasons, Roosevelt wanted a clear legal connection between the two halves of the deal – the destroyers and the bases. He had to establish that the bases were for America's protection. Lothian telegraphed to Downing-street that Roosevelt was insisting on a formal 'exchange of letters.' When Cadogan saw him on August 23 he found the P.M. at his surliest. 'Won't have an exchange of letters,' recorded the F.O. official. 'Says he doesn't mind if we don't get destroyers. Won't expose himself to a wrangle with Americans, having made us definite gift, haggling over the extent of ours.'

Churchill dictated a draft message to Roosevelt as he drove down to Chequers that evening. But he received a further message from Lothian reporting that Roosevelt had explained to Sumner Welles that he could only send over the destroyers in return for what he called 'molasses' – evidently some American jargon. And he wanted a binding contract. 'The constitutional position made it "utterly impossible" for the President to send them as a spontaneous gift but only as a quid pro quo.'<sup>22</sup> In fact, the bases must become sovereign American territory. He had the British over a barrel and he knew it.

From Chequers, Churchill telephoned Cadogan to say that this message put a different complexion on things, but Cadogan persuaded him to send the original draft.

In it, he grumbled to Roosevelt that in exchange for the war materials Britain was being asked 'to pay undefined concessions in all islands and places mentioned from Newfoundland to British Guyana as may be required in the judgement of the United States.' But suppose Britain found she could not agree? 'Your commitment is definite, ours unlimited,' he pointed out. Despite the anticipated destroyer gap over the next months, he now felt that Britain would not be justified in giving the United States 'a blank cheque on the whole of our transatlantic possessions,' merely to bridge this gap, 'through which anyhow we hope to make our way though with added risk and suffering.'

This confident tone differed markedly from the vulpine wails with which Churchill had until recently plagued the White House. He had, of course, now deduced from the intercepts that there was no longer an invasion risk, but he could hardly divulge that to Roosevelt.

Churchill had in mind a looser bargain, more like an informal exchange of gifts. He suggested a sly formula: 'Could you not say that you did not feel able to accept this fine offer which we make unless the United States matched it in some way?'<sup>23</sup>

The Americans would not budge from their terms. Two mornings later Churchill formally offered to Roosevelt ninety-nine-year leases on the bases.

THE VOICES in his cabinet were divided. Some welcomed the deal as entangling the United States in Britain's war. Others saw it in a harsher light. 'If we are going to make a gift,' groused Beaverbrook to Joe Kennedy, 'all well and good. If we are going to make a bargain, I don't want to make a bad one and this is definitely a bad one.' Reporting this to Roosevelt in a cable, Kennedy cheerily commented: 'England never gets the impression that they are licked, and consequently cannot understand why they should not get the best of a trade.'<sup>24</sup>

At 6:15 P.M. on August 29, after formally accepting Roosevelt's harsh terms, Winston received Kennedy and told him bitterly that Roosevelt had every right to be cockahoop. With those bases, he said, Britain had given America a ring of steel, and Roosevelt could always answer his critics in private by saying, 'At least I have carried on the affairs of the United States in such a way that we are able to get these necessary bases for ninety-nine years with no loss to America of anything worthwhile.'<sup>25</sup> He pleaded with the ambassador not to allow Washington to make public the humiliating terms – particularly the one speculating on a British defeat – as they would have a 'disastrous effect' on morale in Britain.<sup>26</sup>

Even now, years later, there are those who maintain that Mr Churchill's deal was the 'ultimate triumph' of British policy.\* This view is hard to sustain in the unflattering light of archives across the Atlantic. Discreet celebrations over the boondoggling of Churchill continued in Washington until the end of the month. Cordell Hull whooped at the state department that 'obviously' fifty destroyers worth perhaps three hundred thousand dollars each were 'no proper compensation' for very many valuable British bases. 'The British,' he explained, 'were therefore very anxious that it should not appear as a bargain.'

Listening to Hull's remarks was Assistant-Secretary Adolph A. Berle Jr, a man so anti-British that, according to one F.O. source, he took Dominion ministers to the window, showed them the White House and foamed, 'The British burned it in 1812.' Berle now allowed himself a cynical commentary on the deal: 'In a single gulp we have acquired the raw material for the first true continental defence we have had since the sailing ship days.'<sup>27</sup>

Those in the know in London kept an ashamed silence. Fleet-street was uneasy but did not criticise.<sup>28</sup> One editor, reading off the tickertape

\* Martin Gilbert, vol. vi, page 733.

what little Churchill did vouchsafe to the House, reflected that it marked the first step in Britain's retreat from the western hemisphere, just as her withdrawal from Peking, Tientsin and Shanghai had heralded her departure from the Far East. 'Don't let us deceive ourselves,' he added, 'They are withdrawals. And they are permanent.'<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps a government with less American blood flowing through its veins would have had second thoughts. Churchill now made the public assurances that Washington had asked for, about the future of the fleet.

In Washington, F.D.R. announced the bargain, and the terms, at a triumphant press conference on September 5. A journalist asked if Mr Churchill's announcement about the fleet was part of the deal. 'No,' said the president, smooth as an eel. 'It happens to come along at the same time.'

## 32: *The One Sinless Man*

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN had once reassured a colleague that Baldwin would never risk making Winston foreign secretary – ‘He would find himself waking up nights with a cold sweat at the thought of Winston’s indiscretions.’ The colleague, Leo Amery, had charitably defended Winston as being not so much rash as ‘picturesque.’<sup>1</sup>

Now, in mid-August 1940, Chamberlain was weakening to a cancer diagnosed two weeks earlier, and Winston had adopted toward him that rather distant and sympathetic manner that the United States was manifesting toward Britain. Behind the sympathy was a lingering contempt. ‘History will deal severely with Chamberlain,’ he would rasp, toward the end of the war, and add, after a well-timed pause, ‘I know – because I shall write it.’

It was now August 15, 1940. Through a series of his own indiscretions he had become prime minister of a country upon which an unwilling enemy would soon direct his combined airforces. That enemy’s cypher indiscretions alone enabled him to avoid defeat in the air, although neither he nor ‘Stuffy’ Dowding could later admit it. Bletchley was often reading the precise orders, naming the actual airfields to be attacked – names which would be graven in the battle’s history, like Warmwell, Little Rissington, Abingdon.<sup>2</sup>

By Thursday August 15 Göring was clearly baffled. He recalled his Second, Third and Fifth Air Force commanders to headquarters and censured them for their failure to reduce the British defences. He suggested precision attacks on aircraft factories at Birmingham. ‘Cities as such,’ he reminded them, ‘are not to be attacked yet – particularly not London.’<sup>3</sup>

That day, Thursday, brought the climax: from morning until dusk the rival squadrons brawled across England’s southern counties. Göring’s pilots flew 1,786 sorties. To exhaust the fighter defences, they threw seven great raids at southern England, staggered throughout the day, coupled with a Fifth Air Force punch at the north. The purpose was to catch half the fighter squadrons on the ground refuelling. Knowing this, the austere, wordless Dowding ordered restraint, and thus mastered the situation.

Aware that London itself was not on the menu, Churchill had stayed in town, on hot coals all that day. A secretary noted in his diary that he was perpetually telling them to ring up Dowding for the latest reports.

All three enemy air forces operated: from Norway one hundred bombers escorted by seventy fighter planes bore down on factories and harbours in northern England, while the Second and Third Air Forces tied down all twenty-two R.A.F. fighter squadrons in the south. But, forewarned, Dowding had retained seven squadrons in the north-east to ward off precisely this blow. Months later, Churchill recalled this as 'the decisive incident in the campaign.'<sup>4</sup>

He met his cabinet at noon, drove out once more to Fighter Command's operations bunker at Stanmore to savour the narcotic excitement there, then returned to his cabinet at five-thirty. Beaverbrook, now a member, was blue: the damage to aircraft factories was growing serious.<sup>5</sup> The evening score was telephoned to No. 10: Dowding had lost thirty-four; he still had 235 Hurricanes and Spitfires as replacements; and his pilots were claiming one hundred enemy destroyed.

Churchill bade a secretary inform the convalescent Chamberlain of this victory. 'The Lord President is very grateful to you,' the secretary told him, putting the phone down. 'So he ought to be,' was the prime minister's reply. 'It is one of the greatest days in history.'

The remaining August air battles were inconclusive. On the morning of the sixteenth the sirens sounded in London, but without event. Churchill was not surprised, having been telephoned routinely by Fighter Command around eight A.M. reassuring him that London was not due for attack. 'We had an air-raid warning at 12:20 as I was going to the cabinet,' recorded Lord Halifax, unaware of the P.M.'s secret information, 'but . . . I found that the cabinet was to be held as arranged. Winston thought that it was time enough to take cover when the guns started going off.' This was probably the afternoon that he drove out to the command bunker at Stanmore and watched from the gallery of this underground theatre as the tide of battle ebbed and flowed across the chart of southern England.

By dusk the coloured lamps indicated that every fighter squadron had been thrown in. Pug Ismay was ashen-faced, but the raiders withdrew, the coloured lights gradually flickered out, and the girls raked the squadron markers off the table in the manner of roulette croupiers on the Riviera. The enemy had flown seventeen hundred sorties and lost forty-five planes; Dowding claimed 161, and was invited to dine at Chequers.

Climbing back into his Humber, Churchill made no attempt to hide the tears flowing down his cheeks.

‘You’re a cold-blooded fish, Pug,’ he reproached Ismay, sitting next to him, ‘a typical office-stool soldier who can’t appreciate the great moments of history.’\* Ismay began a reply, but Churchill silenced him. ‘I have never been so moved,’ he said, and after a few minutes murmured something about so much never having been owed to so few.<sup>6</sup>

The margin was narrowing. Accompanying Churchill to a fighter station, Ismay watched the eager young men clamber into their Merlin-engined steeds, a strand of the Old Testament tugging at his memory: ‘And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels’ (Mal. 3:17).

Churchill recognised the danger now – that the enemy airforce was methodically wrecking Dowding’s sector and radar stations. But he was devising the salvation: he would divert the attack onto London proper by deliberately striking at Berlin – Hitler’s capital and one of Germany’s biggest industrial centres. He invited Sir Charles Portal to Chequers for dinner on the seventeenth to discuss it. It would be a cynical step, fraught with the utmost danger for the Londoners. Hitler had ten times as many bombers, and their bases were only one-sixth as far from London as the British were from Berlin.

Bomber Command had nearly triggered the deadly exchange that morning: Portal had ordered an attack on the Siemens factories in the heart of Berlin. While willing to wound, however, Churchill was still afraid to strike – or at least to strike *first*. He wanted to win American public opinion, not alienate it. Thus at 6:25 P.M., while Portal was still at Chequers, a cypher signal went to his headquarters postponing the Berlin attack indefinitely.<sup>7</sup> Hitler must seem to throw the first punch.

Sometime after midnight, a lone German plane droned high over Chequers, unaware that with one bomb it could have disposed of Mr Churchill, the chief of his Bomber Command, and their plan. That hot and summery weekend he had all his ‘family’ there – including the Prof., Beaverbrook and Bracken.

For General Sir Alan Brooke, now commanding Home Forces, Beaverbrook was ‘an evil genius, who exercised the very worst sort of influence on Winston.’ It was Brooke’s first weekend at Chequers. He savoured the boundless hospitality offered by the government mansion but found the weekend excruciating, recalling in his private notes the desperate longing for bed as the P.M. yarned on. Beaverbrook’s presence did not ally his enjoyment. ‘After dinner,’ Brooke recorded, ‘he sat at the writing-table, pouring himself out one strong whisky after another, and I was

\* Hitler also liked to call Franz Halder a typical office-stool (*Drehschemel*) general. *Hitler’s War*, page 416.

revolted by his having monkeylike hands as they stretched out to grab ice cubes out of the bowl.’<sup>8</sup>

Private secretary John Martin had twisted his ankle running to have the guard's wireless switched off (Churchill was hypersensitive to sounds). Martin's diary shows that the Halifaxes came for Sunday lunch, along with de Gaulle and his twin keepers, Spears and Morton. But Churchill did not show himself after that as he was dictating a brilliant new speech for the House.

DURING SUNDAY the eighteenth the enemy badly mauled the fighter defences. As Churchill dined with Clementine and Sarah, his Oracle reported that the Nazi airforce commander Hermann Göring had warned his commanders to prepare 'a large-scale operation' on Monday.

Bad weather closed down air operations that Monday. 'C' reported that Göring had summoned every commander down to squadron level to a meeting where, the British learned, he ordered the ratio of fighters to bombers increased and authorised a night attack on Glasgow. It cannot have pleased Mr Churchill to see that London was still embargoed.<sup>9</sup> He retired to bed and was still there when Lord Halifax arrived at eleven A.M., 'surrounded,' the foreign secretary found, 'by papers, secretaries, and all the appurtenances of writing and working, with a large cigar and a beautiful many-coloured gaudy silk dressing gown.' Halifax marvelled: 'It is amazing how he gets through the work.'

Later that Monday, August 19, Churchill reported on the battle to the House – a memorable speech, dazzling with the facets and bezels he had been polishing all weekend. 'Never,' he declaimed, 'in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.' He praised Lord Beaverbrook too, whose genius had produced their planes – 'It looks like magic,' he admitted. He talked of rapidly overtaking Germany in the air.

As a secret American military mission – two generals and an admiral – listened in the gallery, Churchill talked of Britain's own attack on Germany. The R.A.F., he said, was bombing targets 'with deliberate, careful discrimination.' Reverting to what he privately called 'the fire in Hitler's backyard,' he dropped a hint that Germany might yet turn against Russia. 'Even if Nazi legions stood triumphant on the Black Sea,' he declared, 'or indeed the Caspian, even if Hitler were at the gates of India, it would profit him nothing if at the same time the entire economic and scientific apparatus of German war power lay shattered and pulverised at home.'

Defending the bargain over the Caribbean bases, Mr Churchill assured the house that sovereignty would not be transferred. It was all part of the process of mixing the two English-speaking democracies, a process which

no man could stop. 'Like the Mississippi,' he declared emotionally, 'it just keeps rolling along. Let it roll. Let it roll on full flood, inexorable, irresistible, benignant [*sic*], to broader lands and better days.'

As the Humber drove him from Parliament back to No. 10 – he never walked those few hundred yards – he carolled 'Ol' Man River' to the private secretary sitting with him, as though to underline that peroration.<sup>10</sup>



He viewed the 'mixing process' without misgivings. Had he been a British admiral who dined at the White House some months later, perhaps he might have felt misgivings after all. 'Oh yes,' Roosevelt would drawl, 'those West Indies islands; we're going to show you how to look after them, and not only you but the Portuguese and Dutch. Every nigger will have his two acres and a sugar patch.'<sup>11</sup>

Churchill's own attitude to His Majesty's coloured subjects was no less old-fashioned. He had opposed Indian sailors joining the navy, arguing that 'theoretical' racial equality would in practise cause great inconvenience, so 'not too many of them, please.'<sup>12</sup>

His interest in Britain's paupered and neglected colonies was limited. On the day that France collapsed it occurred to him that a West Indies regiment might be raised 'to give an outlet for the loyalty of the Negroes, and bring money into these poor islands.'<sup>13</sup> When Lord Cranborne reported that a Black member of the colonial office could no longer lunch at a certain restaurant because it was patronised by U.S. officers, he would look up from the papers he was reading and suggest unhelpfully that he take a banjo with him – 'they'll think he's one of the band!'<sup>14</sup>



On the evening of his speech he invited the American mission to a stag dinner, provided cigars and victuals, but failed to impress: the military attaché found him 'little, fattish, un-handsome, stoop-shouldered, baldish,' but jotted in his pocket diary:

10 Downing Street = powerhouse. Churchill knows people better than Chamberlain. Tells them facts: trouble, work, anguish. After nothing but defeat they are in better spirit.

This was true: with the realisation that the enemy was not invincible his popularity soared. He professed himself puzzled by it – he had brought only disasters, and promised nothing but blood, sweat and tears.<sup>15</sup> The



Spanish ambassador reported that a wind of optimism was blowing. 'The military measures adopted,' the Duke of Alba stated, 'the sturdy defence put up by the British airforce, the propaganda personally inspired and directed by Churchill have all had remarkable results.'<sup>16</sup> He would cable to Madrid on the twenty-sixth a further flattering picture of Churchill with his eccentric hat – of a type that a doctor might have sported thirty years earlier – touring suburbs, ports and airfields. 'Churchill's prestige,' he reported, 'is increasing all the time.' 'As viewed from Britain, the figure of Churchill bulks larger every day.'<sup>17</sup>

THAT WEEKEND a turning point in the life and death of a million Europeans arrived. During Saturday August 24 the enemy began using the new fighter-saturation tactics, with bombers taking part only as bait to lure the defences into combat. Warned in advance, Dowding refused to be drawn.

That evening the bombing continued. The targets included oil tanks and aeroplane component factories on the very periphery of London. One bomber overshot its target – oil tanks in Rochester – and its stick of bombs fell inside Greater London. Nobody was killed, but a hundred people lost their homes in the working-class East End.

Churchill learned of this on Sunday morning. It was the break he had been waiting for, as his immediate intervention – revealed by Bomber Command's telephone records – shows. By-passing both Sinclair and the chief of air staff, he telephoned Bomber Command just after nine A.M., learned that Portal was away, told the senior air staff officer there, Air Commodore Norman Bottomley, that he had discussed with Portal 'a certain projected attack on a target in the east of Germany' and was anxious that it be bombed that night.

The order when given [Bomber Command recorded him as saying] would come through the Air Ministry in the usual way; but he wished us to be fully prepared and hoped we had adequate resources 'in the bag' and that there would be no difficulties. He felt that it was no good tackling this job with small forces and was averse to administering 'pin pricks.'<sup>18</sup>

The three group commanders, who took seriously their responsibility for their young aircrews' lives, contemplated the unhelpful weather conditions forecast for Berlin that night, and reported from their respective headquarters that it might 'go off at half-cock.' Bottomley warned them that Mr Churchill was 'most anxious' for a really heavy attack as an immediate reprisal for 'the attack on London.' But then the chief of air staff in-

tervened. Unaware of Portal's private discussion a week earlier with Churchill at Chequers, Sir Cyril Newall decided the Command must go ahead with its long-prepared attack on Leipzig instead. Ordering this by cypher telegram at four P.M., he postponed Berlin by twenty-four hours, even ordered his crews to avoid 'indiscriminate bombing of the civil population.'

This was not what Winston wanted at all. Air Vice Marshal Arthur Harris, standing in that day for Portal, felt that this night was likely to be as favourable as any other and, in a telephone conference with the other commanders at four P.M., argued strongly that this opportunity to attack Berlin was unlikely to return for some time. Newall approved, reluctantly, at 4:25 P.M.

As feared, the raid went off at half-cock. Eighty bombers were sent that Sunday night; fewer than thirty claimed to have found Berlin; nobody was killed; the flak put up a noisy barrage.

On Monday morning Newall assured Bomber Command that he would not tolerate any more such last-minute changes of plan and target. He proposed that on Tuesday night they attack Leipzig as planned. Churchill disagreed. 'Now that they [the Germans] have begun to molest the capital [London],' he told the chief of air staff, 'I want you to hit them hard, and Berlin is the place to hit them.'<sup>19</sup> Newall telephoned Bomber Command at 5:40 P.M. The P.M., he said, had demanded a renewed attack on Berlin that night:

the prime minister had pressed him for these attacks to be repeated but . . . he has resisted the demand for a change of programme at a late hour of the day. It was likely however that we shall be required to undertake the operation on the night of 27th/28th.

Winston's staff were becoming accustomed, as one wrote on the first day of September, to ceaseless air warnings. They lost count of their number. By day they yielded little except an occasional distant and muffled explosion; by night the lone planes were more of a nuisance, prowling overhead aimlessly with only very rarely 'a dull boomp' as a distant bomb fell.<sup>20</sup> The private secretaries, not privy to the utterances of Bletchley's Oracle, did not know that London was still on Hitler's embargo list for attack. They quietly marvelled as their master stalked out into the garden at No. 10, when the sirens sounded, to pace the lawn, helmet in hand, before retiring to his bunker for the night.

PERHAPS IT is a truism that the successful warlord has to be an artful liar too; but even at the admiralty Mr Churchill's record had shown no deficiency in this respect.

Not everybody grasped the importance of this. On August 28 Mr Frank Pick, the new director-general of the ministry of information, had visited No. 10 to urge the importance of truthful reporting. To the amusement of his colleagues, Churchill walked round the cabinet table and put out his hand to the dazed civil servant. 'To-day,' he announced, 'I'm going down to Dover to watch the air battles. Perhaps tonight I shall be in Hell, and if so I should like to tell the people there that I have shaken hands with the one sinless man since Jesus Christ.'

Sarcastically, he demanded, 'Shake my hand, Mr Pick!'<sup>21</sup>

That day he did indeed go down to Dover, after ordering the chief of air staff to lay on 'a large scale of attack' on Berlin that night.<sup>22</sup> He joined the visiting American military mission at Victoria, sporting bowler and cigar, sipped sherry, retired for an hour, emerged for a 'real' drink, and orated until they reached the Channel coast. One American suggested that the Germans might slip ashore under cover of fog. 'With mists,' the P.M. pointed out, 'come storms and rough seas.'

They scoured Dover for signs of devastation, but in vain: 'Hellfire Corner' was a product of American journalism. After a while he drove on alone to Ramsgate, returned angry, described how small traders were losing their livelihoods in the bombings. He was going, he said, to hammer Berlin again that night; to the visitors he seemed not to care if London was bombed in reprisal.

At nine p.m. their train pulled back into Victoria. The platforms were in darkness. The visitors heard the top-hatted stationmaster announce to him, 'There's an air-raid warning on, sir. Will you take cover?'

'Not at all,' said Churchill, plucking the cigar from his mouth. 'It's only a Red, isn't it?' A Red alert indicated enemy bombers right overhead. They were not, and he knew it. Winston may well have stage-managed this harmless drama for the naïve, unblooded Americans, just as their arrival in London a week earlier had been met with the fruitless wail of sirens.

Summarising impressions, one of them would note that he was an unscrupulous 'rough-and-tumble' fighter. He added the ambiguous tribute: 'He is perfectly at home in his dealings with Hitler and Mussolini.'<sup>23</sup>

HITLER, NO great respecter of the truth either, a man whose patience had been readily exhausted in the past, had not flinched as the first raids hit Berlin. His airforce had continued to batter the R.A.F.'s sector and fighter stations. On the twenty-ninth, however, as Churchill had promised the

American mission, his own bombers returned to Berlin and this time they drew blood: ten people were killed. The Nazi leader flew north to his capital. He ordered Göring to prepare – but not execute – massive retaliation. Thus, while Churchill was fortifying himself with 1911 Bollinger at Chequers on the last day of August, the Reichsmarschall attacked southern England with the largest force of bombers yet – 380 by day and 260 by night.

But still the city of London was embargoed.<sup>24</sup>

Evidently the new bombing policy hatched between Churchill and Portal, over whisky and victuals at Chequers, evoked consternation among the air marshals at intermediate levels between them. But Portal now had the higher authority he needed to start a holocaust. ‘We have not yet reached the stage of desiring to burn down a whole town,’ he coolly wrote to those intermediate officials on Monday September 2. ‘But when this stage is reached we shall do it by dropping a large quantity of incendiaries first and then [following with] a sustained attack with high explosive to drive the fire-fighters underground and let the flames get a good hold.’<sup>25</sup>

Hitherto the death of civilians and destruction of hospitals, churches and cultural monuments had been regarded as a by-product of bombing. But, in the opinion of the official historians, in Portal’s mind these now became a desirable end-product.<sup>26</sup> Churchill echoed this new heroism. ‘The Navy can lose us the war,’ he summarised in a treatise circulated to the cabinet on Tuesday September 3, ‘but only the Air Force can win it.’ Narrowing the strategic focus still further, he added: ‘The fighters are our salvation, but the bombers alone provide the means of victory.’<sup>27</sup>



His chiefs of staff knew of other alternatives. Issuing their first strategic review since June, they would add to bombing the methods of economic warfare and subversion.<sup>28</sup> Dr Dalton, the tall, forceful minister who handled both, came round to No. 10 to report that evening, September 3. But Churchill wanted to talk, not listen. He was fulminating against the secret service for declining to convey a clandestine message to his old friend, the bumbling General Georges, now under house arrest in occupied France. ‘It would be quite a short letter,’ Winston grumbled, misquoting famous words of Leon Gambetta spoken in 1870: ‘*On pense toujours! On parle jamais!*’

Dalton tried later to recall the pearls of Winston’s wisdom, uttered as he paced the floor. ‘This is a workman’s war,’ was one, ‘the public will stand everything except optimism.’ Even in their rough-cut form, his pronouncements still glowed and sputtered incandescently. He muttered

about not being like the knight 'who was so slow in buckling on his armour that the tourney was over before he rode into the ring.'

Comforted by the familiar sound of his own rhetoric, he commanded John Peck, one of his more able secretaries, to darken the room and throw onto a screen the latest aerial photographs of dockyards in northern Germany and Hitler's big guns at Cap Gris Nez. On one photograph he espied a car travelling the road to a gunsite, and jabbed a childish finger on the screen as if squashing an insect. 'Look,' he cried. 'There's a horrible Hun! Why don't we bomb him!'

'Peck,' he exclaimed, 'you must get some new photographs every day and show them to me every evening.'<sup>29</sup>

ON THE following day his foreign secretary expressed private surprise at the German restraint in the air. 'I cannot understand,' he mused in his diary, 'why Hitler, if he has the immense reserve air strength that we are told, doesn't throw it in?'

But Hitler's temper was fraying. That night, September 4, he delivered a major speech in his capital. After a sarcastic mention of 'that noted war correspondent' Mr Churchill, he suddenly referred to the repeated British raids on German cities.

For three months I did not answer because I believed such madness would be stopped. . . We are now answering night for night. If the British airforce drops two or three or four tons of bombs, then we will in one night drop 150, 250 or 300 tons. [*Hysterical applause.*] If they declare that they will increase their attacks on our cities, then we will raze their cities to the ground.

A few hours later he secretly lifted the embargo on London; flare aircraft illuminated the English capital that night as a warning of things to come.

Portal's bombing offensive against Berlin continued.

In full view of British watchers, German barges massed and other munitions of war were rattled on the far coast of the Channel. In the first six days of September the barges at Ostend multiplied from eighteen to 205; Churchill did not take them seriously. On the seventh day, four Dutchmen landed by dinghy and were arrested. When, after the war, the government was asked what proof there was that Hitler had ever planned to invade, Mr Attlee would solemnly refer to the capture of these four spies.<sup>30</sup>

MR CHURCHILL had withdrawn to Chequers on Friday the sixth, inviting General Brooke to dine with him there again. After an all-evening snooze

he went downstairs at nine to polish his wit on the owlish, bespectacled general. In Brooke's description, he was 'most entertaining' for several hours. 'He placed himself,' he wrote that night, 'in the position of Hitler and attacked these shores while I defended them.'

Fortunately, they were still at Chequers on Saturday September 7. Only a few days before Winston had remarked to Dalton that the nation was finding the war less unpleasant than feared. 'The air attacks,' he had explained, 'are doing much less damage than was expected before the war began.' At five p.m. the unpleasantness began. The sunlit estuary of the Thames filled with the roar of three hundred enemy bombers escorted by twice that number of fighter planes, droning in at high altitude from the east to the docklands, where the river begins to snake.

This was Hitler's reprisal for the Portal raids on Berlin – the first mass attack on targets in London. For once, Dowding – his communications tattered, his radar systems damaged, his fighter airfields cratered – fumbled the response. Bombs began falling on the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich and on munitions factories. More formations were approaching from due south, over the Channel. Running battles could be seen over the city itself as the massed bombers clawed their way forward to the Millwall and Commercial docks.

Londoners who had never seen such a thing before crowded into the streets, craned their necks to follow the thunderous spectacle, then broke for cover as the bombdoors opened directly overhead and the first dark spots hurtled down.

Immense blazes raged through the dockyards and the adjoining East End slums – fires too vast to douse by duskfall. Off-duty that weekend, John Martin found himself among crowds on the Thames embankment at Charing Cross, hypnotised by the smoke rolling upward from the dockland.

Around eight-thirty, as flickering searchlights fingered the darkening pall, the bombers returned, guided by the glowing inferno in the East End. The city was an easy target – its famous ribbon of river fringed by flames. Bombs bracketed Battersea power station, plunging the West End into darkness; another power station was hit at West Ham. Martin, returning from an early dinner to the back entrance of No. 10, heard the Red alert, and almost immediately the shriek and dull thud of a bomb not far away.

The cat was waiting at the garden gate to take refuge with me. Things became too lively to remain upstairs, so we all went down to our underground shelter and I spent the night there in my

clothes on a bunk. We had occasional explosions and at one moment the light went off for a while.

THUS AT the crucial moment Churchill had tricked Hitler and Göring into shifting their aim from the fighter defences to the capital city. We have no eye-witness account of how he responded to this deadly triumph. 'Each night,' he admitted to his duty secretary, 'I try myself by court-martial to see if I have done anything effective during the day. I don't mean just pawing the ground.'

This time he had not just pawed the ground. He had saved Fighter Command. Five forward airfields and six of the seven sector stations had been seriously damaged; London would soon have been defenceless.

There were added bonuses. American newspapermen were already reporting the bombing to their editors; and this Nazi *Schrecklichkeit* would hammer into a frustrated silence all those Englishmen who voiced doubts about the wisdom of his war. For the first time, moreover, he had forced Hitler to dance to his tune. It was just as he had wanted, though he could hardly tell his public that.

This first attack had killed 306 Londoners. It was the first lurch toward the holocaust. Now Churchill and Portal needed no further justification for what they proposed – to unleash a new kind of war, in which ultimately one million civilians in Germany as well as hundreds of thousands of French, Poles, Czechs and others would die under the trample of the Allied strategic bomber forces.

### 33: *Good Ol' Winnie*

UNTIL NOW he had scarcely known personal popularity. Now, with each new ordeal, it soared. Newsreels showed him touring troops, stumping warship gangplanks, inspecting gigantic guns, acknowledging with flamboyant upward sweep of square porkpie hat the cheers of bystanders. Recently, enemy transmitters had begun to rouse the workers against him. But these violent air raids gave him the chance to drive to their stricken suburbs and show himself to the newly bereaved and homeless, flicking Havana ash onto glass-strewn sidewalks and waving his walking stick. Seven thousand would die during the remainder of September 1940, including seven hundred children.

He had gauged the British mood exactly. By October Gallup pollsters would see his popularity soar to eighty-nine per cent. Of course this stoical, suffering people could not know that for reasons of grand strategy he and Bomber Command had done their utmost to induce this very outrage; nor that there was worse to come; nor that the carnage would last for four more years.

Until that first Saturday, September 7, Londoners had had little contact with war – a single tank rattling down the Strand had brought gaping crowds to the kerbside.

But for the rest of the winter the capital was a nightmare by day and an inferno by night. The grinding, unsynchronised drone of Daimler-Benz and Jumo aero-engines clashed with the smoother Rolls-Royce Merlins. This was punctuated by the scream of bombs and the shower of broken glass as windows were sucked into the streets; this curtain of sound was riven by the crack of the anti-aircraft guns. Braver souls crowded rooftops to watch the flak shells flash two or three miles above them, heard the fragments rain down with a vicious hum, striking flinty sparks wherever they impacted, and then the clangour of fire-engines passing through the streets. The fireman became Britain's first real hero, together with the elderly air-raid warden who patrolled the streets with only a tin hat between himself and eternity.



The summer's hit was 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley-square'; but the nightingales had flown. A typical London dawn, as autumn came, found cranes, mechanical shovels and ambulances foregathered around new ruins and disposal squads digging down to unexploded bombs. Freshly-erupted craters might be closing Park-lane and Oxford-street.

A time-bomb closed Regent-street for two days; Selfridges lost its windows; John Lewis was burnt out. Everybody was at risk. The richer homes collapsed into larger heaps of rubble – that was the only difference. Their Majesties no longer slept in town but in Windsor Castle; which was as well, because on September 9 the first bomb hit their London palace. Most nights, a fresh draw was held in this lethal lottery, and it unified those brave enough to remain in London. A newfound courage in adversity pervaded them, transcending class barriers and obscuring the old party distinctions.

Through this rising chaos came, lisping and snuffling, the familiar voice of Mr Churchill, broadcasting bravely to the nation, steady and reassuring, promising victory and crying for revenge. 'It would take ten years at the present rate for half the houses of London to be demolished,' he calculated. 'After that, of course, progress would be much slower.'

EVEN THE American ambassador, wiser than most to Mr Churchill's methods, was swept up by the spirit of bravado. He climbed to the roof of his chancery and blinked through circular, horn-rimmed glasses into the London night. 'On Sunday night,' he reported to Roosevelt after the first four days of the ordeal, 'a high explosive made a direct hit on a house twenty yards from [First Secretary] Herschel Johnson's house, killing six people, but he is well and hearty. Today, coming back from the foreign office, a delayed time-bomb near Bond Street and Piccadilly blew up about fifty yards from my car. Boy, this is the life!'<sup>1</sup>

Churchill's colleagues – happily unaware of the private arrangements he had reached with Portal at Chequers two weeks earlier – took a dimmer view. Shocked at reports that the bombing had been 'quite indiscriminate,' his cabinet decided on modest retaliation. Bombers attacking Germany, they decided, must 'not return home with their bombs' if aborting an attack.<sup>2</sup>

The bombing was widely covered in American newspapers. The *New York Times* headlines were: 1,500 NAZI PLANES BOMB LONDON; INDUSTRY AND SERVICES DAMAGED ON Sunday, and MIGHTY NAZI AIR FLEET AGAIN BOMBS LONDON – DOCKS AND PLANTS HIT, FIRES RAGE, 400 DEAD ON the day after.

Visiting the South Coast seaside resorts with the American military mission, Churchill's heart had bled briefly for the widowed landladies who had sunk their savings into little hotels, only to see the beaches mined and closed, their families killed, and their properties wrecked.<sup>3</sup> Believing that money – awards of up to £2,000 – would redeem the injury, he announced a compensation scheme in the House on the fifth.<sup>4</sup> It smacked perhaps of the Anatole de France minister who advised his monarch that a particular war would cost £5 million. 'But what about the cost in human lives?' the king had asked. 'Your Majesty, they are included in the £5 million,' was the reassuring reply.

Raids on this scale presented him with new problems. The very first had closed Victoria and a dozen other London railroad stations, as well as Vauxhall bridge and a highway tunnel under the river. But they also gave a pretext for delaying the American mission's departure: he wanted them to get an eyeful of the Nazi frightfulness.

Ancient London, the London of Christopher Wren and John Adams, was collapsing in ruins. Churchill arranged for the paintings – including his own – to be removed from No. 10 and stored beneath the National Gallery. 'I do not think much will be left of Downing-street after a few weeks,' he observed without perceptible regret on the twentieth, and on the following day he sent the rest of his personal property to safety.

'I propose,' he wrote to the worried wife of the former prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, 'to lead a troglodyte existence with several "trog."<sup>5</sup>



On Sunday the eighth, the evening after that first raid, he deemed it safe to return to London. Accompanied by carloads of photographers and his brother Jack – who had moved into No. 10 – he toured the stricken docklands. The Humber was a big car to manipulate in these narrow Dickensian slums and it was slow going but worthwhile, because he drew fresh strength from the guileless enthusiasm of the simple people.

Ragged-looking neighbours were raking over the rubble where forty people had been killed in a shelter, and they mobbed him as he stepped out of his Humber. There were shouts of, 'Good ol' Winnie! We thought you'd come! We can take it! Give it 'em back.' Of course, there were other shouts as well – 'You've got to make them stop it!' was one – but he turned on them the same ear he had earlier applied to the late Countess de Portes.

Propaganda officials had handed out paper Union flags shortly before the P.M.'s arrival. Lump a-throat, he marched through the slums and

found this pathetic bunting fluttering everywhere from the powdery heaps. Tears moistened his eyes. Pug Ismay nearly cried as well, although the P.M. had perhaps larger grounds for remorse than he. 'You see,' the general heard one old biddie say, 'He really cares. He's crying.'<sup>6</sup>

'What fellows they are,' he declared to Ismay. 'D'you hear them! They cheered me as if I had given them a victory, instead of getting their houses bombed to bits.'<sup>7</sup>

HE MADE another journey that day, to Dollis-hill in North London. Here, bombproof arrangements had been made for his own safety.

Archie Sinclair, who had fawned shamelessly on Winston – his battalion commander in the Great War – had privately written to remind him how in 1916 Churchill had insisted on having 'the best shelter that was available' at their farmhouse headquarters on the Western Front. He demanded that Winston now again put his own safety above all else.<sup>8</sup>

It was a theme never far from Mr Churchill's mind. Up here in Dollis-hill he had prepared a suite of rooms at Neville's Court for his family should Whitehall become uninhabitable, while in the General Post Office's new research centre nearby he had installed an underground command bunker, with twenty-five rooms for himself, his closer cabinet colleagues, and their staffs.

On September 9 and 10 there were more attacks, killing four hundred more Londoners. After touring the city on the morning of the tenth, he invited Halifax and Cadogan to come and discuss the situation with him while he was taking his afternoon rest. 'I must say,' noted the foreign secretary afterward, 'he is a person of wonderful courage and determination. He says the scientists are very hopeful indeed of getting on to the secrets of night interception.' Belatedly, he set up a Night Air Defence Committee with himself in the chair. By the eleventh the capital's gun defences would have been doubled at the expense of the provinces.

After the Germans attacked again that night, killing 235 Londoners, his private secretary wrote:

There was an intense and continuous barrage from the AA guns which had hitherto seemed oddly inactive, and this had an immense effect on people's morale. Tails are up and, after the fifth sleepless night, everyone looks quite different this morning – cheerful and confident. It is a curious bit of mass psychology, the relief of hitting back.

On the following morning, he drove into the city with the prime minister: both were surprised to see how localised the damage was. 'There was great enthusiasm,' the secretary observed, 'from the crowds.'

MINOR INVASION scares continued to bubble to the surface throughout September and October, mostly at weekends – the Führer was known to favour Saturdays. Churchill was nonchalant. More than usually clairvoyant, thanks to his Oracle, he spent leisurely weekends at Chequers, displaying an aplomb that Sir Francis Drake would have admired.

Once A. V. Alexander, the First Lord (who was not trusted enough to receive all of Bletchley's 'golden eggs'), nervously telephoned with word of German ships approaching from the Dutch coast – this might be the invasion. It wasn't.<sup>9</sup> Air Intelligence dutifully reported every straw that floated in the æther – preparations at fifteen airfields across the straits from Dover to accommodate dive-bomber and fighter squadrons from September 4, the transfer of Stukas from Norway to France on the sixth.<sup>10</sup>

On the seventh the Joint Intelligence Committee felt that, given the favourable moon and tides, these intercepts and the increase of invasion barges might indicate invasion within twenty-four hours. After all, it was Saturday again.

The chiefs of staff met that evening as the violent air raid began and General Sir Alan Brooke sounded the invasion alarm a few minutes after eight P.M. But on Sunday the war office concluded from the raw intercepts that the enemy's training was incomplete and that there was no 'hard and fast decision' to invade.<sup>11</sup>

The naval staff remained nervous. 'Invasion information,' Captain Edwards wrote on the tenth, 'has assumed most alarming proportions. Ships in vast numbers moving down the enemy coast and concentrations of barges everywhere. . . . An intercept shows German troops are about to embark at Ostend.'

Intercepts like this should subsequently have been subjected to rigorous analysis. Since no German troops ever embarked, the signal can only have been intended to deceive the British, and this in turn implies that the enemy suspected that at least this cypher had been broken.

Churchill was sure the invasion talk was bluff. (While we have no proof, he may have been privy to signals *like* one just issued by General Jodl ordering the Nazi Intelligence service to camouflage troop movements to the east 'as the impression must not be allowed to arise in Russia from these deployments that we are preparing an eastern offensive.'<sup>12</sup>) Of course he concealed this from the American ambassador. After talking with him on the eleventh, Kennedy reported to F.D.R on Winston's belief

that Hitler was about to invade. But the astute diplomat was puzzled nonetheless: 'He does not usually tip off his punch before he delivers it.' Kennedy also referred to the movement of German divisions to her eastern frontier. Eden, he said, anticipated that they would roll through Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey 'to sweep into Syria and Iraq and hit Egypt on the other side.' As for Churchill's popularity, Kennedy explained that the media were keeping the public ignorant of Britain's plight. Churchill and his men were just 'holding their breath,' as he put it, until the presidential election. Again he warned that the United States must not 'sign a blank cheque' to help Churchill out of his difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

WITH THE onset of mass air raids Churchill's political difficulties shrank. He could turn the blandest gaze on fresh peace emissaries like the one – behind which the British legation correctly detected Hitler's hand – that now arrived in Sweden.<sup>14</sup>

A Berlin lawyer, Ludwig Weissauer, had travelled to Stockholm to contact Sir Victor Mallet through a senior judge and friend of the Swedish monarch, Professor Lars Ekeberg. But now Churchill was running Britain's foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> Through Halifax, he forbade Mallet to meet Weissauer. The British envoy, who sincerely desired a negotiated peace, ascertained Berlin's terms nonetheless. They were as before: for Germany, the continent; for Britain, her overseas empire. Ekeberg asked for an answer by the eleventh.

Halifax and Cadogan brought the resulting Stockholm telegram over to No. 10 on the tenth and left Churchill to think it over. 'If you want any more questions asked,' Mallet had promised in it, 'I can easily get them put by Ekeberg, again without committing anyone and as though coming from me alone.'

Churchill tossed the telegram aside. When the F.O. mandarins returned at seven-thirty P.M., he had drafted a rejection and was sprawled in bed in his flowered Chinese dressing gown, drawing on a Havana cigar.<sup>16</sup>

Kennedy learned of this episode and revealed it to former President Herbert Hoover. Told Hitler's terms, the former president gasped: 'Why didn't the British accept?'

'Nothing but Churchill's bullheadedness,' replied Kennedy.<sup>17</sup>

THE INVASION scare had served its purpose. While he divulged to Kennedy his firm opinion that the armada photographed by the R.A.F. indicated 'imminent invasion,' in private he deployed more double-negatives than Hitler was deploying barges. He told his cabinet colleagues on Wednesday September 11 that it was 'by no means impossible that the Germans would

in the end decide not to launch an attack on this country because they were unable to obtain the domination over our fighter force.'

General Brooke believed that Saturday the fourteenth was Hitler's D-day. His headquarters now ordered a Lanchester armoured car and driver to Chequers, equipped with special orders and a pass that would get him through any roadblock outside London. 'You will be responsible for getting him through. You will ride in front, show your identity card at any roadblock where it is required. . . Do not say the prime minister is in the car.'<sup>18</sup> 'This order,' the pass stated, 'will be valid from 14th to 16th September inclusive.'

Mr Churchill did not share these invasion fears, although he certainly intended to proclaim that he, with the assistance from 'the Few,' had momentarily thwarted Hitler's invasion. He would confide to Hearst journalist H. R. Knickerbocker two weeks later that the enemy had planned to invade on the thirteenth, but had been frustrated.<sup>19</sup>

He carefully bricked-in the foundations for this propaganda claim in a broadcast on the eleventh. 'We cannot be sure that in fact they will try at all,' he admitted, 'but no one should blind himself to the fact that a heavy full-scale invasion of this Island is being prepared with all the usual German thoroughness and method, and that it may be launched at any time now.'

To put his own achievement in historical perspective, he compared the coming week with the greatest moments in Britain's history. 'It ranks,' he claimed immodestly, 'with the days when the Spanish Armada was approaching the Channel, and Drake was finishing his game of bowls; or when Nelson stood between us and Napoleon's Grand Army at Boulogne.' Through the loudspeaker grilles of wireless sets behind the barricaded and blacked-out windows growled the voice of Churchill calling on every man and woman 'to do his duty.'

He went centre-stage to the Channel Coast on the twelfth, taking generals and admirals with him. Like his opponent, he had succumbed to the fascination of big guns. He inspected twelve-inch railway guns and 5.5-inch coastal batteries. Hitler might have his Todt battery in Calais, but Churchill's newspapermen could admire the erection of his 13.5-inch monsters, Winnie and Pooh, capable of firing into France. He had ordered them himself, when minister of munitions in 1918.

Brooke sighed at these guns. They were Winston's 'pets,' but the trained military mind despaired at the manpower they wasted. The P.M.'s popularity continued to astound him. Several times local people rushed forward and cheered him: 'Stick it!' He took this to be a sign of encouragement.<sup>20</sup>

IN HIS broadcast on the eleventh he had dwelt upon the Blitz.

These cruel, wanton, indiscriminate bombings of London are, of course, a part of Hitler's invasion plans. He hopes, by killing large numbers of civilians, and women and children, that he will terrorise and cow the people of this mighty imperial city, and make them a burden and anxiety to the government and thus distract our attention from the ferocious onslaught he is preparing. Little does he know the spirit of the British nation, or the tough fibre of the Londoners, whose forebears played a leading part in the establishment of parliamentary institutions and who have been bred to value freedom far above their lives.

'This wicked man,' he continued,

the repository and embodiment of many forms of soul-destroying hatred, this monstrous product of former wrongs and shame, has now resolved to try to break our famous Island race by a process of indiscriminate slaughter and destruction.\* What he has done is to kindle a fire in British hearts, here and all over the world, which will glow long after all traces of the conflagration he has caused in London have been removed.

The American ambassador remained unimpressed. 'First of all,' he cabled secretly to Roosevelt, 'I don't believe that the bombing of the Germans is all indiscriminate. . . They are principally after railroad installations, docks and power plants and regardless of what anybody writes or says they are doing a terrible lot of damage.'<sup>22</sup>

But Churchill had assessed the mood of the British well: London could take it. Lady Spears watched one Cockney woman pick over the wreckage of her home, and heard her exclaim: 'I don't fink much of them Germans. Why, if one of 'em should land right 'ere in this street with a parachute, I don't believe I'd even offer 'im a nice cup of tea.'<sup>23</sup>

One Whitehall witticism was that the air ministry had protested that the Germans were hitting 'non-military targets' like the war office. On Friday the thirteenth the palace was again dive-bombed: King George glimpsed the two bombs hurtling past his window. 'A magnificent piece of

\* Hitler rejected repeated requests by General Hans Jeschonnek, his chief of air staff, to authorise 'terror bombing.' The most restrictive orders bound German crews. On September 14 the Führer again prohibited 'terror attacks' on London's population.<sup>21</sup>

bombing, Ma'am, if you'll pardon my saying so,' the duty constable remarked to the queen.

FEARING THAT the enemy might have similar designs on No. 10, Mr Churchill had taken some precautions since Chamberlain's departure.

Having seen blitzed dwellings in the East End where the whole fabric had pancaked into the basement, the P.M. was not sanguine about No. 10, despite the tiny air-raid shelter built below stairs and the reinforced lounge and dining room that had been converted from old offices by putting steel shutters on the windows and shoring up the ceilings. He ordered his living quarters shifted to the Annexe – a street-level apartment converted from two typists' rooms in the solid government building at Storey's Gate, right above the C.W.R. bunker.

Clementine began to decorate this apartment, with its drawing room, dining room, and study, in pastel shades, and hung paintings and cosy furnishings. Winston began to live here on the sixteenth.

Part of the urgency for the move was inspired by Bletchley. That Friday, September 13, they had intercepted orders for nine hours of very heavy attacks on 'a target believed to be London' beginning at six p.m. 'If the weather permits,' Intelligence warned, 'long-range bombers will be employed.' Shortly a further intercept revealed that the bombing offensive would continue into Saturday morning and probably into the afternoon as well.

Since the Annexe would not be ready by then, Mr Churchill felt it would be appropriate to leave London; it was nearly the weekend anyway. He again visited Dollis-hill on the way, and upon arrival at Chequers he ordered the evacuation prepared of the first three hundred officials, including the war cabinet, its secretariat, chiefs of staff committee, and General Brooke's headquarters to this bunker. 'Publicity must be forbidden.'<sup>24</sup>

Nothing much came of the predicted air raid. Thirty-one Londoners died in scattered bombing. Saturday was also ominously quiet. General Brooke suspected that the invasion scare was a bluff to pin troops down in this country, since Italy's invasion of Egypt had just begun. Churchill drove back to No. 10 that afternoon, and spent his first night in the Central War Room bunker.



His first amphibious landing operation since Namsos was about to begin. A British naval taskforce with General de Gaulle would, he hoped, shortly put ashore six thousand British marines and French legionaries at



Dakar. But there were bad auguries. The British governor of Nigeria, Sir Bernard Bourdillon, had warned that 'General de Gaulle's name cut no ice in West Africa.' And six French cruisers loyal to Marshal Pétain had left Toulon on September 9 and steamed out of the Mediterranean.

In fact they were bound for Gabon, carried no troops, and had no connection with the Dakar operation. The French admiralty had even formally notified the British attaché at Madrid of the sailing, and his IMMEDIATE signal reached London at 11:50 P.M. on the tenth. It was not drawn to Admiral Pound's attention until the eleventh.

Later, searching for scapegoats, the prime minister would make capital out of this delay. That morning he presided over the chiefs of staff meeting, and learned that the French squadron had been sighted off Gibraltar. Pound ordered *Renown* to raise steam. At noon-thirty on Thursday the twelfth the cabinet ordered that a naval squadron confront the cruisers off Casablanca and impede their advance on Dakar – wrongly presumed to be their final destination.

For the next three days Churchill had other occupations on his mind. It was not until he returned to Chequers at four-thirty on Sunday afternoon, September 15, that the bad news hit him: this powerful French cruiser squadron had put into Dakar undetected. *Ark Royal's* aircraft had sighted them there.

It was pure coincidence, of course. But seizing a map of West Africa, Churchill telephoned Downing-street around five-fifteen P.M., ordered his trusty Major Morton to convoke the military staffs: cancel Dakar and replace it with a landing further south at Conakry, followed by an overland march to the north-east. De Gaulle could then invest Dakar by land while the British blockaded it by sea.<sup>25</sup>

THAT CLEAR, bright Sunday afternoon a thousand enemy planes – two hundred of them bombers – had attacked London. Again Churchill must have had warning, because he hurried out to Uxbridge taking Clementine and a private secretary to follow the battle from No. 11 Group's bunker.

From a gallery of this totally silent underground room, he watched as Air Vice-Marshal Kenneth Park marshalled twenty-five fighter squadrons for London's defence. Cigar unlit, he thrilled at the vibrant gadgetry – the multicoloured bulbs, the duty officers plotting the avalanche of reports from the fifty thousand members of the Observer Corps, and the radar stations tracking the inward march of the enemy formations. The controller that day was a deceptively young-looking R.A.F. officer, Lord Willoughby de Broke.

Park told him afterward that more than once the switchboard had been overwhelmed; every reserve squadron had been thrown in. But at 3:50 P.M. the unwavering tone of the All Clear had relieved southern England. It was on Churchill's arrival back at Chequers at about four that he was shocked by the admiralty's report that the French cruisers were inside Dakar. After telephoning his instructions to Morton, he went upstairs for his afternoon siesta.

After three hours of troubled sleep he was wakened by John Martin with an update on the war. As he peeled the black silk mask from his eyes he heard Martin's concluding words, spoken in a conscious parody of his own style: '. . . however, all is redeemed by the air. *We have shot down one hundred and eighty-three.*'

Churchill did not investigate that figure too closely. It was a great victory. Hours later he emerged from his study and found his bodyguard, Inspector Thompson, still draped against the door. 'You're tired Thompson,' said the P.M., putting his arm affectionately round the Scotland Yard man's shoulder. 'It will be worth it in the end. We're going to win, you know.'

Out in the darkening countryside, England was picking up the pieces of that shattered Sunday. Delayed trains were being slotted back into timetables, unexploded bombs defused, crowds watching as the cadavers were gingerly prised out of a Dornier bomber which had hurtled down onto the roof of Victoria station. True, R.A.F. investigators could find the wrecks of only thirty-five German bombers and twenty-one fighters, which did not add up to 183. But to Churchill it was enough. Back in London on Monday morning he decided he did not like Dollis-hill after all; he sent a note to Sir Edward Bridges, his overworked cabinet secretary, saying: 'The time has not yet come to move.'<sup>26</sup>

He also released the cooped-up generals of Roosevelt's secret mission, adjudging that they had seen enough. At four P.M. Sinclair bade them farewell at the station on their way back to Washington D.C.



Churchill's initial instinct to abort Dakar had been right, though for the wrong reasons. On Monday September 16, he drafted an instruction to the commanders of the taskforce, Admiral Sir John Cunningham and General N. M. S. Irwin, to reconsider the whole position with de Gaulle. 'Arrival of French cruisers,' he explained, 'possibly with troops on board, seems to me to destroy hope of a bloodless capture of Dakar.'

Having written this, however, he retained the draft. 'Show me later,' he scribbled on it. In cabinet at mid-day he expressed the hope that this

'fiasco' would escape attention. Not anxious to offend Vichy further, his colleagues agreed. 'The French have forestalled us in Dakar,' noted Cadogan afterward, 'and so [it] is off! I cannot truly say I am sorry!'

In the event, Churchill never sent off the signal because the taskforce commanders radioed their opinion that they should go ahead.<sup>27</sup> More tellingly, de Gaulle insisted 'personally and formally,' in a message which reached Churchill at noon on Tuesday, that the plan proceed. For him, even more than for Mr Churchill, it had become a matter of prestige.

The matter went back to the cabinet at nine P.M. Cadogan warned that they might be risking another Mers-el-Kébir, even a bloodbath. Recent Intelligence from Senegal was clear: de Gaulle would not be welcome. Eden backed the taskforce commanders, as did a gaunt and ailing Neville Chamberlain.

Mr Churchill, encouraged by this unusual line-up, had the face to remind his colleagues that they had lived to bless the day on which 'they had decided' on Mers-el-Kébir. He was appalled by the derision that would greet an expedition returning 'with its tail between its legs.'

In this vainglorious mood he appointed a new D-day six days hence, and authorised the taskforce to land wherever they thought best.<sup>28</sup>

De Gaulle realised that there would be shooting – that he would be killing fellow Frenchmen – but recklessly accepted this responsibility.

A few doubting voices were heard, pointing to signs that Vichy opinion was tilting in Britain's favour. Churchill dismissed them. 'The odds,' he cabled to General Smuts on the twenty-first, 'are heavily against any serious resistance.' Nor was he overlooking the £60 million of Belgian and Polish gold 'wrongfully held' in Senegal, nor the fine French battleship *Richelieu*. He advised Roosevelt: 'We have decided to accept the risk . . . of such action leading to declaration of war by Vichy France.'

When Churchill wrote 'we,' he meant himself: if his cabinet colleagues were at odds with him they seldom showed it. On the twentieth, the First Sea Lord had written privately, 'I have pretty difficult times with W.S.C. occasionally as he is quite impervious to arguments and sweeps them aside as if they did not exist.' He mentioned the controversy over the armoured reinforcements being rushed out to Egypt as one such instance. 'I felt that it was so vital that these tanks should reach the Middle East that I held out against their going through the Mediterranean.' Here, Pound had prevailed. 'However,' he mistily added, explaining why he so seldom rebelled, 'W.S.C. is so magnificent in many ways and the ideal leader of the nation in these times that one must put up with his idiosyncrasies.'<sup>29</sup>

STEPPING UP the bombing, the Germans had begun dropping chunky eight-foot naval mines over London. Since these drifted down on parachutes – whatever Hitler’s veto on ‘terror bombing’ – they could hardly be aimed with discrimination. Their blast sucked windows and walls outward, toppling buildings into crowded lower floors. One typical air mine in Battersea blasted fifteen hundred people out of their homes.

Churchill, receiving these reports in his War Room bunker, declared that Hitler was trying terror; he challenged whether the German morale would withstand terror as well as the British. ‘My inclination is,’ he minuted Ismay, ‘that we will drop a heavy parachute mine on German cities for every one he drops on ours.’ He suggested they single out German towns hitherto undamaged.<sup>30</sup>

By so doing, of course, he was returning the strategic initiative to Hitler’s hands, but the primal hunger for vengeance was greater than the cool power of logic. As he drove down to Chequers for another weekend he was still mouthing Freudian malevolence toward the Germans, and talked of ‘castrating the lot.’<sup>31</sup> \*

Throughout that summer, Churchill had telephoned the commander-in-chief of Fighter Command at 7:45 each morning for a briefing on the night’s battle and the coming day’s prospects. He defined that the C-in-C, Air Chief Marshal Dowding, had a ‘personal responsibility’ for his protection. On September 19 Churchill issued a blanket directive to Fighter Command that during daylight hours there was to be no (Red) air-raid alert if just one enemy plane was approaching; London areas were regarded as ‘sensitive’ only when Parliament was sitting – which was not at present the case.<sup>32</sup> The government and its members were thus in a privileged position now that the raids had begun. Unable or unwilling to flee their city, London’s artisan population and their families now surged helplessly into the underground Tube stations, basements and warehouses every night. From four o’clock they stood in line waiting to get in. The shelters were wet, lice-infested, and dark; they stank of excreta.

‘Saw and smelt the horrible conditions inside,’ wrote one lady of Churchill’s circle who did not usually venture this far east of the Savoy. ‘It was like a scene from Dante’s Inferno.’ But morale seemed good and, contrary to expectation, ‘inquiry elicited no sign of anti-Semitism.’<sup>33</sup>

\* In May 1945, considering Soviet demands for slave labour from the Germans, Roosevelt’s legal adviser Sam Rosenman disclosed that at Yalta the president ‘even discussed sterilisation and more or less in fun had devised a machine to perform the operation on a mass production basis.’ (Justice Robert H. Jackson’s diary, May 12, 1945; in author’s possession.)

A week later Ambassador Kennedy rendered an uglier picture. 'The government tells me,' he told Washington, 'they have discovered definite communistic propaganda being spread during the last three nights in the air-raid shelters, and again there is great criticism of the Jews.'<sup>34</sup>

His military attaché found out about a 'select' shelter under the Dorchester, 'reserved for Lord Halifax, Duff Cooper and others.' The modern hotel was considered bombproof, with shatterproof windows. When the sirens sounded the upper classes assembled in its lower tiers – noble foreign secretary and squinty-eyed minister of information rubbing shoulders with Lord Melchett, Chaim Weizmann, and other wealthy notables like Somerset Maugham, Cicely Courtneidge, Leslie Howard (the film actor and S.I.S. agent), Oliver Stanley and their ladies, all in night attire. 'Apparently a lot of jittery people . . . have moved in there,' observed Cecil King. 'At eleven P.M. [an] astonishing mixed grill of people, mostly women with knitting, assemble in the hall to spend the night.'<sup>35</sup>

After being trapped once in their august company, the director of naval Intelligence would write that – if one did not mind being 'thoroughly nauseated by the ways of the rich' – there was no better education than to visit the Aldwych deep Tube shelter, crowded with men, women and infants, some sleeping slung between the rails in tiny hammocks, and then proceed at once to 'the luxurious basement rooms of the Dorchester, where those who could afford it continued to rough it on the softest settees in pleasantly warmed rooms.'<sup>36</sup> During the next months it became a public scandal, and lent to the phrase 'the Few' a meaning about which Mr Churchill's colleagues – given their own shelters, the War Room bunker and Dollis-hill – could scarcely complain.

THE DAKAR operation was launched at first light on September 23.

It was a humiliating fiasco. The assault forces never got off their troopships. De Gaulle's aviators landed on the airfield and were arrested by the local gendarmerie. His emissaries were fired upon as their boat entered port, and turned back. The *Richelieu*, which Churchill had covetously described to Smuts as 'by no means permanently disabled,' opened fire through the gathering fog with her new fifteen-inch guns, as did the Dakar fortress batteries, which hit the cruiser *Cumberland* amidships and put her out of action.

A gloomy cabinet in London considered these reports at mid-day. De Gaulle was attempting an alternative landing at Rufisque, just to the east of Dakar, but Vichy's cypher messages revealed that the defenders 'had been ordered to resist.'

By eight P.M. Churchill had word that his taskforce was withdrawing. It was Gallipoli, Namsos, Dunkirk all over again. Frantic at the thought, he wirelessly his commanders that night: 'Having begun, we must go on to the end. Stop at nothing.'<sup>37</sup> He scrawled a muddled telegram to the White House too. 'It looks as if there might be a stiff fight,' he told Roosevelt. 'Perhaps not, but anyhow orders have been given to ram it through.'

The next day's brawling off Dakar was equally messy. The British sank a French submarine, while the shore guns savaged *Barham*. The following day General Spears, accompanying de Gaulle, radioed that the latter had thrown in the sponge and would proceed to Bathurst, a British colony a hundred miles down the West African coast. At nine A.M. a French submarine slapped a torpedo into the battleship *Resolution* and she too beat an undignified retreat. Morale among the French defenders was high. Churchill dithered, while his ministers demanded they cut their losses.

Just before one-thirty P.M., frustrated and furious, he called the operation off. To Roosevelt he offered an invented excuse for failure: 'Vichy got in before us and animated defence with partisans and gunnery experts. All friendly elements were gripped and held down.' He made a similar claim to the House on October 8: that the six French cruisers had 'carried with them a number of Vichy partisans . . . sent to overawe the population, to grip the defences and see to the efficient manning of the powerful shore batteries.'

Both claims were lies,<sup>38</sup> and the naval staff were shocked. Captain Edwards recorded privately that Winston had blamed 'some unspecified naval authority' for the failure.

There is very little truth in any of his statement. The expedition was ill-conceived & therein lies the whole trouble. W.C. is really the evil genius of the party.

Knowing Churchill as he did, Cadogan wondered where the buck would stop this time. He considered both the F.O. and S.I.S. to be blameless, as Winston had taken the decision without consulting or informing either. Churchill's reaction to the fiasco was savage and vindictive. He found the first scapegoats in the admiralty. First to feel the lash was the director of operations (foreign) duty officer on the night that those French cruisers had passed through the straits: Captain Robert Bevan had delayed showing the Madrid attaché's signal to Admiral Pound. True, but even when shown it the next morning, Pound had not taken it seriously. Still, Churchill regarded it as the origin of the disaster.

He demanded exemplary action, but now learned that their Lordships had already notified this officer of their 'displeasure.'<sup>39</sup> No doubt Pound had issued the mild rebuke to preclude further punishment; but Churchill demanded that nonetheless.

At this even Alexander demurred, fearing, as he warned Churchill, 'a sense of injustice in the fleet.' Churchill insisted, replying in biting language on October 23: 'I consider the officer should be placed on half pay and trust you will be able to meet my wishes.'<sup>40</sup> There was no legal way of penalising the man twice, and the First Lord put this to Churchill while applying soothing libations of oily words. 'I am sure,' he wheedled, 'you know that there is nothing that I would like to do more than to meet your wishes at all times.'<sup>40</sup>

Thwarted here, Churchill hurled his barbs at Gibraltar instead, at Admiral Sir Dudley North, flag officer commanding North Atlantic – known to the lower deck as 'Don't-do-it Dudley.' Churchill blamed him for letting the French cruiser squadron through.

In mid-October the First Sea Lord notified Admiral North that he had lost 'their Lordships' confidence,' and dismissed him. True, the same Admiral Pound had written him earlier that year in terms of the warmest confidence.<sup>41</sup> True, he had thwarted Winston's recent desire to dismiss North for daring to criticise Mers-el-Kébir. True, moreover, North could argue that, after that massacre, the admiralty had specifically directed him that 'if and only if' Britain became involved in war with France were inferior forces to be stopped and ordered into British-controlled ports.<sup>42</sup> True, also, that as recently as September 22, *after* the French cruiser incident, Pound had written him a further amiable letter. If somebody had now prevailed on him to make a scapegoat of North, that can only have been Churchill.

North was dismissed. But that was not the end of the story. He pressed repeatedly to be honourably court-martialled. In November 1943 he wrote to Pound's successor asking for the case to be reopened. A. V. Alexander intercepted and halted the letter. After the war, supported by five admirals of the fleet, North called for his name to be cleared. During Churchill's second administration in 1954 the official history magnificently lifted the slur from the admiral's name, but it was not until 1958 that Sir Winston's successor cleared him entirely of the allegation of dereliction of duty.

\* There was an identical scene at Hitler's headquarters in November 1942 when a plea for help from Rommel was withheld from him overnight; he equally unjustly ordered the dismissal of the O.K.W. general concerned, Walter Warlimont.



From Australia's far-sighted prime minister Robert Menzies came a vehement protest at the manner in which Churchill had authorised Dakar without consulting the Dominions.<sup>43</sup> And the fiasco rendered American intervention less likely than ever. Journeying to Dover with H. R. Knickerbocker two days after he called it off, Churchill admitted that it had been 'unfortunate.'

Their conversation turned to American isolationism. 'Your entry into the war,' remarked Churchill to the American journalist, 'would change history.'

'I should have liked it a little better,' admitted Knickerbocker, 'if the bargain over the destroyers had not been so one-sided.'

'The vessels are so old,' admitted Churchill, off the record, 'they would not be used by anybody except in extremity such as ours . . . dire extremity.'<sup>44</sup>

At nine p.m. that evening Ambassador Kennedy cabled his dismal views to Washington. 'The Dakar situation,' he informed Roosevelt, 'is a bitter pill for the entire cabinet.' Newspapers had not skimmed on criticism. 'It is the first real break in the Churchill popularity.' Kennedy warned that production was falling, regardless of what reports the president might be getting. Churchill was 'hoping and praying every minute that something will happen that will bring the United States in.'

I cannot impress upon you strongly enough my complete lack of confidence in the entire conduct of this war. If by any chance we should ever come to the point of getting into this war we can make up our minds that it will be the United States against Germany, Italy and Japan, aided by a badly shot to pieces country which in the last analysis can give little, if any, assistance to [the] cause. It breaks my heart to draw these conclusions about a people that I sincerely hoped might be victorious but I cannot get myself to the point where I believe they can be of any assistance to the cause in which they are involved. Kennedy.<sup>45</sup>



# LE COURRIER DE L'AIR

APRÈS PAR LA R.A.F.

LONDRES 11 NOVEMBRE 1942

## Winston Churchill réaffirme sa foi dans la France

*M. Winston Churchill a prononcé le 10 novembre le discours qui fut tenu au Mansion House dans la Cité de Londres.*

*Le Premier Ministre a rapidement brossé un tableau des événements qui se déroulent actuellement en Egypte et en Afrique du Nord, indiquant qu'il réservait à la Chambre des Communes un exposé détaillé de la situation.*

**L**ES épisodes dans nos guerres sont généralement défavorables mais jusqu'ici, le résultat final a toujours été satisfaisant. Les vagues déferlent sur nous, les courants tourbillonnent autour de nous, mais le flux de la marée nous porte en avant.

"Nous remportons une victoire, une victoire remarquable et nette: un rayon de soleil a frappé les casques de nos soldats et a réchauffé nos cœurs.

"M. Venizelos déclara que dans toutes ses guerres l'Angleterre — il aurait dû dire évidemment la Grande-Bretagne — gagne toujours une bataille — la dernière. Cette fois-ci, me semble-t-il, nous avons commencé un peu plus tôt.

"Le général Alexander et son brillant camarade et lieutenant, le

général Montgomery, ont remporté une victoire glorieuse et décisive dans ce que j'estime devrait être nommée la Bataille d'Egypte. L'armée de Rommel a été vaincue; elle a été mise en déroute; elle a été en majeure partie détruite en tant que force combattante.

### Le but de la Bataille d'Egypte

"Cette bataille n'a pas été livrée dans le but de nous emparer de positions ou d'une superficie quelconque de territoire désertique.

"Les généraux Alexander et Montgomery ont livré cette bataille dans un seul but, c'est de détruire la force armée de l'ennemi, la détruire à l'endroit même où le désastre

serait le plus complet et le plus difficile à réparer.

"Tous les éléments de nos forces ont joué leur rôle — troupes de l'Inde, de la France Combattante, de la Grèce, des représentants de la Tchecoslovaquie, tous y ont pris part.

"Les Américains ont rendu des services inestimables dans les airs, mais les hommes qui ont livré cette bataille, du début à la fin, sont presque tout d'une part, des Britanniques venant de la métropole ou des Dominions, et de l'autre, des Allemands. Quant aux Italiens, ils ont été abandonnés, dans le désert aride pour y périr ou pour se rendre, comme ils le font par dizaines de milliers. Mais la lutte entre Britanniques et Allemands a été d'une extrême intensité. C'était une lutte à mort. Les Allemands ont été surclassés et battus par les armes mêmes dont ils se sont servis pour écraser tant de petits peuples et aussi de grandes nations, prises au dépourvu.

"Ils ont été battus par exactement le même appareil technique par lequel ils avaient espéré atteindre à la domination du monde. Ceci est particulièrement vrai en ce qui concerne les avions, les tanks et l'artillerie — une arme qui a repris la place qui lui revenait de droit sur le champ de bataille.

"Les Allemands ont vu se retourner contre eux la mesure de feu et d'acier qu'ils ont si souvent

247

*In a wartime propaganda leaflet, Churchill 'reaffirmed his faith in France.'  
In private he was blistering about the French 'betrayal.'*

34: *The Fixer*

**B**RENDAN BRACKEN was a self-educated Irish bachelor with carrot-red hair and a tongue and temperament to match. Brash and ambitious, he had wormed his way into Churchill's confidence at twenty-two and clung on through the wilderness, earning Winston's undying loyalty while harvesting Clementine's disdain.

The two men had much in common: both sought solace in the bottle, both were bold and imaginative liars, both were driven by the same lust for power over the lives and destinies of their fellow humans. They inspired fierce hatreds too. When Bracken lost his seat after the war, Hugh Dalton would smirk to an American diplomat that Labour had got rid of him, a 'most malevolent influence upon Mr Churchill' and a 'force for evil' who was 'not even good enough to black his boots.' Like Winston's other enigmatic aide Desmond Morton, Bracken would leave no papers: he gave orders to burn them on his death.

He talked with an unstoppable booming voice, though never about his past. We know that he entered Sedbergh after writing out his own cheque for the first term's fees and claiming to be of school age, and we know that he died a viscount in 1958. By twenty-eight he had founded one banking newspaper and bought two more – *The Economist* and *Financial Times*. A year later he was an M.P.

By the time of the Battle of Britain he was turning forty, but the venom lingered on. He was 'Winston's jackal' and rumoured – to the distress of Mrs Churchill, whom he nonchalantly addressed as 'Clemmie' – to be Winston's bastard son as well, a fiction which Winston took pains not to deny. He included Bracken in his favours; he had unsuccessfully pressed Chamberlain to appoint Bracken to the ministry of information<sup>1</sup> and upon becoming P.M. he had bullied the king into appointing Bracken to the Privy Council – although he had held no office of state. Churchill claimed that Bracken's unswerving support was service enough and he had his way.

Brusque and dogmatic, Bracken seldom came out to weekend at Chequers – it was Clementine's domain. But he ministered to Winston with something like the wiles of a spouse, taking care to delay the breaking of bad news until after the P.M. had spent a restful night. He won pow-

erful influence over him, being a fount of boisterous optimism even when the P.M.'s spirits were at low ebb. He would chide him, 'Now you are behaving like Mr Sparrow,' a petulant bird featured in a Sunday newspaper. He was a connoisseur of his own wit, and did not care who knew it. He heartlessly mocked even Churchill's most intimate companions. He dubbed Anthony Eden 'Robert Taylor,' meaning this comparison with the film actor unkindly. On making Bracken's acquaintance, one Canadian statesman was struck by his evident knowledge. 'He talked straight ahead all the time,' wrote that observer in a diary, 'having I think at least five if not six different drinks of Scotch.'<sup>2</sup> Another noted that Bracken was rarely sober after eleven p.m., was 'partly alcoholic,' and was 'another victim of the P.M.'s passion for late hours and alcohol.'<sup>3</sup>

He had become Churchill's right-hand man, tirelessly managing internal affairs while Winston directed his war. Drawing on Bracken's encyclopaedic memory, Churchill turned to him when he had to appoint, patronise, promote or honour. While Churchill rigged his ministerial and military apparatus, Bracken was the fixer of church and civil service. Bracken would reveal to the startled Canadian premier that he was the one who made ecclesiastical recommendations and drew up the honours lists. 'D'you want to make the whole honours list a joke and farce?' snorted Churchill, seeing that he had marked a B.B.C. announcer for the Order of the British Empire. 'I'll see this never happens as long as there's an England. Announcers!' Then, after a pause – 'Well, I suppose I can't be responsible for what happens when I'm gone, but I'll take very good care to leave a paragraph about it in my last will and testament.'<sup>4</sup>



To Winston, Bracken was as much 'family' as his four grown children. And like many dictators he bestowed a shameless favouritism on his kin which provoked incredulity and anger among the less fortunate. Clementine long-stopped the worst excesses – like when she prevented one infant Churchill from being evacuated to Canada at the height of the Blitz.

Except for the youngest daughter Mary, all his children suffered from this patronage. Mary was sent out of London to the Norfolk countryside, and then more permanently to Chequers. But Sarah's marriage to comedian Vic Oliver was already steering toward distant rocks: her Viennese-born husband had opted for American citizenship to avoid nationality problems. Diana had married an able artillery officer, Duncan Sandys, who as an M.P. had fought in the House on Winston's behalf before the war. Sandys suffered little from having a powerful father-in-law, accom-

panying him on his foreign trips as First Lord, although neither he nor Randolph had real cause to be in Paris when Winston was attending the Supreme War Council.

Winston had spoiled his only son rotten: by 1940, Randolph was pugnacious and articulate, but wilting in his father's reflected glory. A handsome man with clever grey eyes and thinning, sandy hair, he would pay for his father's indulgent folly for the rest of his life. He became a raucous know-all, a strident and often alcoholic critic of government policy and strategy whenever at his father's table. Winston smiled on his son's unmannered bickering, but every guest at Chequers or No. 10 winced at it anew.

Since Randolph had split the Tory vote at one prewar election and supported Sandys's opponent at another, he had not been acceptable as a Tory candidate until now. But in 1940 his father was P.M., and the son was given Preston and returned unopposed to Parliament. Winston introduced him on October 8 to loud if not unanimous applause.

The muttering was often audible. When he shortly announced a further appointment for his son, a Conservative who had won his seat the hard way challenged his qualifications for the job and added under his breath to loud titters, 'And what has Mr Vic Oliver done to be left out!' Churchill purpled with anger and bore down on him afterward. A Labour legislator saw the P.M.'s knuckles whiten as he clenched his tiny fists, then he brought himself under control and stumped out.<sup>5</sup>

HITLER'S ANGRY switch in target strategy had saved Britain's fighter defences, but had cost seven thousand lives in London during September. Low in spirit, grumbling about de Gaulle, and still smarting from Dakar, Churchill retreated to Chequers and reconstructed his government. Bracken now emerged more clearly as Winston's 'fixer,' often blueprinting the changes and leaving Churchill to rubber-stamp them. The P.M. provided the personal touch: he invited the fast-fading Neville Chamberlain to accept the Order of the Garter as a parting flourish to this old friend and enemy. But the peace-loving politician stood on his dignity, remarked modestly that he preferred to die 'plain Mr Chamberlain' like his famous father, and rejected this honour just like the peerage Winston had previously offered.<sup>6</sup>

It was Chamberlain's resignation as Lord President of the council that had permitted this reshuffle. For a while Churchill tried to shoehorn Anthony Eden back into the foreign office – he would prove more complaisant in cabinet than Halifax. (Attlee, appraising Eden dismissively, would later say, 'He's got no status of his own. He's only a private secretary to

the P.M.'<sup>7</sup>) Churchill suggested to Halifax that he transfer to Chamberlain's former office: Lord President was, he suggested unconvincingly, the second position in the government.<sup>8</sup>

Undeceived, Halifax recommended the present home secretary instead, remarking that Sir John Anderson had the same kind of orderly mind as Neville – 'which I don't think Anthony has.' It was true that the East End population disliked Anderson, feeling that he was a dry old stick; besides, in their present plight, they wanted a man of their own class. Beaverbrook had the idea of giving the home office to the Cockney politician Herbert Morrison, currently minister of supply. Winston had little liking for this Socialist minister but agreed.

At Bracken's suggestion he now offered Morrison's old job to Beaverbrook. But the minister of aircraft production declined with the usual pathetic recital of woes – his crippling asthma brought him a procession of sleepless nights.

When the music stopped, the game left Halifax and Eden in the same ministerial chairs as before. On the last day of September Churchill sent for Eden and apologised. Knowing what really mattered to the young man, however, he reassured him that Anderson was not in the running for the succession as P.M. Eden sent over two hopeful messages brimming with higher aspirations but heard nothing more until after midnight when Churchill sent for him again. Eden arrived hotfoot in pyjamas only to hear Winston dismiss his two 'very sweet letters, generous and worthy of the occasion' and order him to stay on at the war office.

Before letting him out into Downing-street again, Churchill reassured the young pretender: 'We shall work this war together.'



Everybody had joined in the game – Bracken, Lindemann, even Churchill's secretaries. John Colville recorded on October 2 that there would also be changes in the plodding chiefs of staff, and in the navy because of the unchecked merchant shipping losses. Eric Seal talked with the Prof. and wrote to Winston on the third about ways of counteracting the 'menace of night bombing.' By this he meant personnel changes, and mentioned one officer by name: 'Dowding,' said this secretary, 'has the reputation of being very conservative, and of not being receptive to new ideas.' That said, Seal referred to the admiralty as needing 'galvanising' in the anti-submarine campaign. 'I do hope that you will forgive this note, but I always said that I would speak plainly when I felt strongly.'<sup>9</sup>

Disgruntled air marshals and a small number of fighter pilots had begun campaigning against keeping the over-age 'Stuffy' Dowding at Fighter

Command. It had been a long battle.<sup>10</sup> Since August 1938, when the Air Council first notified him that he was due to retire a year later, he had four times been informed that he was to leave and four times reprieved. In July 1940 Newall formally proposed he retire at the end of October. 'Before the war,' replied Dowding haughtily, who now asked to stay on until 1942, 'I should have been glad enough to retire; now I am anxious to stay.' Nobody would fight like him, he said (recalling the fraught cabinet meetings of May and June), when 'proposals are made which would reduce the defence forces of the country below the extreme danger point.' Newall however felt obliged to lever the more senior officers out of office, in order, as he apologised to Dowding on July 13, to maintain an adequate flow of promotions.

This was what Churchill very aptly called Buggins's Turn. 'Personally,' he had written to Sinclair, 'I think he is one of the very best men you have got.' He had invited the commander down to see him on the thirteenth. 'Last night the prime minister asked me to dine at Chequers,' Dowding wrote triumphantly to Sinclair. 'He was good enough to tell me that I had secured his confidence, and that he wished me to remain on the Active List for the time being without any date for my retirement being fixed.' He assured the seething politician that he had done nothing to bring this about. Another month passed, and it would be the very eve of Eagle Day, August 12, before Newall grudgingly wrote him that circumstances had changed in his favour. 'It has been decided,' he wrote, 'to cancel the time limit to the period of your appointment as C-in-C, Fighter Command.'

This unleashed a political witchhunt against Sir Cyril Newall. In mid-August a woman M.P. sent to No. 10 an anonymous report accusing the air chief marshal of weakness in tolerating Dowding despite his slow brain and mental inadequacy, and for procrastinating over the replacement of Ludlow Hewitt by Sir Charles Portal at Bomber Command. Churchill gingerly forwarded this ugly document\* with a scribbled minute instructing Archie Sinclair, 'Let me have this back.'<sup>11</sup> Sinclair did nothing. He was completely in the P.M.'s pocket, a weak and loathsome Liberal subaltern, and Churchill treated him with only bantering levity and bullied him mercilessly to get his way. Not receiving any reply, the woman M.P. sent a

\* It was probably originated by Beaverbrook – there is a copy in his papers. After one Dorchester dinner party in September an American colonel made a note of the 'dwarfish and prickly' Beaverbrook's obvious dislike of both Newall and Sinclair. When Newall was posted to New Zealand as governor general, the same colonel wrote: 'I am sure the moving spirit in ousting him is Beaverbrook, to whom Newall never conceded an inch; and he is a violent, passionate, malicious and dangerous little goblin.'<sup>12</sup>

further copy to Bracken on the day of the first September mass air raid on London, and this time she urged Newall's replacement by Sir Charles Portal. Bracken took the matter up, and his influence was evidently the clincher, because Sinclair had only recently told the nagging M.P. that Newall enjoyed Churchill's confidence. On October 4 Portal would replace him as chief of the air staff.

'Peter' Portal would remain effortlessly in this position until the end of the war. This beaky air chief marshal was ineffably boring and unsociable, but had undoubtedly impressed by his willingness to fall in with Churchill's grand strategy. He was a decade younger than Dill or Pound and a beaver for hard work. He avoided small talk, as though he had no family or private life at all. He was unreasonable, callous and inconsiderate. He barked orders at his female secretaries as though they were squaddies paraded before him. But he had a clinical efficiency which appealed to the prime minister. Like Chaim Weizmann, Duff Cooper and others deemed irreplaceable, Sir Charles Portal was found a billet in the bomb-proof Dorchester.

The reshuffle virtually complete, on October 3 Churchill invited his junior colleagues to meet him at Dollis-hill to see the bunker accommodation. 'A meeting of ministers, to whom P.M. explains present situation,' dictated Hugh Dalton into his diary afterward:

Invasion 'menace' still remains and will, so long as Germans have in that long row of ports transport enough to put half a million men on board and in the Channel and North Sea on any night they choose. But, as the weather breaks and the season advances, the invasion must surely seem to them more and more difficult. (It seems clear that it was definitely projected for September 15, but that at the last minute they decided that they had better not.) As my driver says his daughter says, 'Hitler's got the words, but he can't get the music right.'

'I had a date with the P.M. after this ministers' meeting, at which I wished to speak to him on S.O.E. . . and then leave documents with him. But he asks me to let him off until next week, being pressed and weary, though smiling and friendly.'<sup>13</sup> They celebrated this rare visit to the bunker with what the P.M. called 'a vivacious luncheon,' then he returned to No. 10. In his absence a sense of calm had descended which historians can compare with the equal tranquillity which enveloped Hitler's headquarters each time he too departed for the front. 'John Martin and I remained alone at No. 10,' Colville recorded that day, 'dealing placidly with our

business.’ They missed the ringing of the P.M.’s bell and the general ‘atmosphere of rush.’

In the seven days prior to October 21, Hitler’s airforce had killed seventeen hundred in London in response to Bomber Command’s attacks on Germany. Even the Dorchester now offered little luxury. Dining with a blissfully hard-of-hearing Lord Halifax on the sixth floor, Cadogan deprecated the accompaniment of 4.5-inch guns which, he wrote with uncustomary hyperbole, ‘knock the glasses off the table, tear your eyebrows out and snap your braces.’<sup>14</sup> Numbed resignation descended on the less privileged, even though shelter conditions were improving. Scouring the Tube with the *Daily Mirror* editor, a newspaper proprietor found them now orderly and odour-free. ‘Not many children,’ he wrote privately, ‘a good many Jews and a few youths.’ Most of the occupants were middle-aged, middle-class women, ‘surprisingly steady and almost contented.’<sup>15</sup>

CHURCHILL EXPLOITED this perverse contentment, intoning ceaselessly against Hitler’s barbarism and visiting the provinces to display his own portly presence to the people there. The newsreels show him stumping through the shattered streets acknowledging cheers and perching on the back of a car, the better that the crowds might see him. Despite the unhappy circumstances, he was enjoying the limelight. When he hoisted his headgear aloft on his walking stick he was in his element.

His hats were his trademark: they were fitted by the best hatter in town. Like a jealous woman, he would rather die than appear in a hat that anybody else was sporting. At the historic siege of Sidney-street everybody had worn top hats or army headgear – Winston wore a bowler. Motoring out in 1926 he and Baldwin had both chosen grey trilbies – Churchill turned his back to front. For his visit to the Monterey peninsula in 1929 he had bought a *ten*-gallon Stetson. He had tried five kinds of trilby, three of topper, two each of bowler and Panama, a naval cocked hat, an Irishman’s ‘Paddy’ hat with claypipe, an Oxford degree cap, an army pillbox, a Hussar’s busby, caps with and without peaks, an artist’s beret, and now a tin hat too.<sup>16</sup>

Now that he was P.M. and Britain was ‘in peril’ he became downright flamboyant. A strange new fashion in outer apparel was added to the hats: when the foppish Eden – no Mrs Grundy himself when it came to *haute couture* – arrived for dinner in the newly-strengthened basement at No. 10, Winston strutted in wearing his new airforce-blue siren suit. With its full-length frontal zipper it was like a baby’s giant rompers. (Once when the zip fly came undone, he reassured an alarmed visitor: ‘Madam, a dead bird never falls out of its nest.’)



Something – perhaps the impending resignation of Chamberlain as party leader – had evidently pleased him, because he was in a rare humour. He harangued the cat he had shanghaied from the admiralty and evoked roars of laughter from Eden and secretary Colville when he rebuked Nelson for jumping at the gunfire. ‘Try to remember what those boys in the R.A.F. are doing,’ guffawed Churchill to the apprehensive feline.<sup>17</sup>

‘This exhilarates me,’ he confided to General Sir Frederick Pile that month while touring the experimental rocket and searchlight sites. ‘The sound of these cannon gives me a tremendous feeling.’<sup>18</sup> London’s ancient acres were being methodically wrecked. The factories were tangled ruins, the workers’ graveyards filling. Winston demanded that his Londoners like this kind of war. ‘Sitting in his siren suit,’ recorded Colville, straight-faced, on October 12, ‘and smoking an immense cigar, he said he thought this was the sort of war which would suit the English people once they got used to it.’ They preferred, he claimed, to be in the front line of battle in London than to look on passively at ‘mass slaughters’ like Passchendaele.<sup>19</sup>

After one nocturnal tour of Pile’s gunsites he returned to Downing-street at five A.M. – frisky from the boom of the cannon and the inadvertently-neat whisky which a colonel had pressed into his hand. He rapped on the door of No. 10 with his walking stick and announced to the butler: ‘Göring and Goebbels coming to report!’ followed by a stentorian aside: ‘I am not Goebbels.’ Like a schoolboy in a dormitory feast, he plied the general with Bovril meat extract and sardines, and then showed him out.<sup>20</sup>

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN had succeeded Baldwin as party leader in 1937. Now that he was resigning, Churchill agonised over whether to claim the leadership or remain above party. He asked Clementine. She loathed the party, and warned that accepting would alienate the working class. But Beaverbrook counselled against letting the leadership fall into the wrong hands, and on October 9 he was formally elected Tory leader. The newspapers reported his speech of acceptance the next day.

My life, such as it has been, has been lived for forty-five years in the public eye, and very varying opinions are entertained about it and about particular phases in it. I shall attempt no justification. I have always faithfully served two public causes which I think stand supreme – the maintenance of the enduring greatness of Britain and her Empire (*applause*) and the historical continuity of our island life.<sup>21</sup>

Like Hitler, he devoured newspapers. They were brought down to Chequers by despatch rider, even flown out to him at Cairo by plane. A Berlin newspaper report on a man who swindled soldier's widows would result in a swift decision by Hitler upgrading the mild penalty to death; a Fleet-street item about firemen convicted of looting would produce the opposite reaction in Churchill, perhaps because liquor was involved. 'Five years' penal servitude for stealing whisky . . . seems out of proportion,' he rebuked the new home secretary. His biographer tells us without comment that a few months later Mr Churchill protested at a five-year prison sentence imposed on a woman for observing that 'Hitler was a good ruler, a better man than Mr Churchill.' This seemed to him 'unduly harsh' punishment for expressing an opinion, 'however pernicious.'<sup>22</sup>

Nor was the press spared the P.M.'s displeasure. To him all journalists were 'filthy communists' and as dangerous as the fascists he had locked up. True, they had raucously applauded those arrests, but soon he would have offending columnists transferred to the colours and close down recalcitrant publications. Fleet-street was contemptuous about Dakar, and on October 6 the *Sunday Pictorial* powerfully attacked the recent reshuffle. At Monday's cabinet Churchill, still casting about for scapegoats, boiled over onto the 'scurrilous' tabloid press. Brandishing the *Pictorial* and a column by Cassandra, the immortal, incorruptible William Connor, from the *Daily Mirror*, he blared that these attacks on him were a dangerous and sinister attempt to prepare the country for a surrender peace. He wanted to prosecute the editors, but the attorney general poured cold water on his urge, warning that the government had no case.

Churchill winced. He considered he was of almost papal holiness if not infallibility. It was not right, he grumbled, that someone bearing his responsibilities should have to put up with attacks like these. Willing to wound but afraid to strike, he prodded Attlee – whom he himself would later dub 'that sheep in sheep's clothing' – into giving Fleet-street's editors a verbal dressing down.<sup>23</sup> Attlee summoned the proprietors and, with the utmost sheepishness, hinted at a possible censorship of news and views. A few months later Churchill, still writhing, would return to the attack.



At that Monday morning cabinet Churchill fulminated against the navy too. The First Lord had remarked, according to Dalton's notes, that he was superseding Dudley North.<sup>24</sup> 'Since 1923,' Desmond Morton related to Dalton a few days later, echoing Churchill, 'every sailor who made even the slightest mistake was axed. The result is that now all the senior

officers are men who have never made a mistake and are therefore quite incapable of action!'<sup>25</sup>

Sir Charles Forbes, commander-in-chief of the Home Fleet, would be the next to go. He was one of the soundest admirals but, as Admiral Cunningham would write later, 'Winston and Brendan Bracken disliked him.'<sup>26</sup> Some said that he was too old, others that he was a bad tactician.<sup>27</sup> He seldom put to sea escorted by fewer than eight destroyers, while the luckless *Glorious* had been provided with only two.<sup>28</sup> Pound believed that Forbes had lost the confidence of the fleet.<sup>29</sup>

Forbes's final downfall was disagreement that summer over the big ships. It was obvious that there would be no invasion, but Churchill wanted them stationed to the east and south because of the invasion scare. Forbes refused to denude the Atlantic convoys and made a 'final appeal' to this effect on September 28. In mid-October he was replaced by Jack Tovey, and the fifty-five-year-old new commander-in-chief, Home Fleet, was invited down to Chequers for the weekend. After this extraordinary encounter with the P.M., Tovey wrote two letters describing it. The first was to the First Lord, violating all the rules, on October 9, attempting to explain what he had said 'when undergoing the test in agility of intellect and resoluteness of spirit' at Chequers. 'One or two of the prime minister's remarks,' Tovey wrote to A. V. Alexander, 'particularly when he said during the after-dinner discussion on developing our offensive in the Near East that like everyone else I was all for one of the other services doing the job, showed very clearly a complete misunderstanding of our ideas in the Mediterranean.' A few days later he wrote to Admiral Cunningham, still expressing astonishment at the P.M.'s remarks. 'He made some such astounding statements about naval warfare [that] I still don't know if he was wanting to find out if I was prepared to applaud everything he said or whether he really believes half what he says.' At one point the P.M. referred to Admiral Cunningham's 'pussy-footing' around with the French admiral at Alexandria in July. Tovey found that raw but made no comment. Churchill said he liked outspokenness, but when Tovey pluckily rejected his accusation that the heads of the armed forces were to blame for their sorry state in 1939, he rose and swept out with a tongue-clucking First Lord in his wake. Winston was so taken aback that for a few days he reconsidered his decision and even ordered Tovey back to the Mediterranean. But he relented, and Tovey assumed command a few weeks later.<sup>30</sup> The Battle of the Atlantic was entering a painful phase. The Germans had sunk two million tons of shipping since Britain declared war on them. In October they sank fourteen ships in one convoy and sixteen in another, and losses like these preyed on Winston's mind.<sup>31</sup>



General Sir Alan Brooke had also been invited to 'dine and sleep' at Chequers that remarkable weekend. After sitting up with Winston until two A.M. he wrote: 'P.M. in great form,' and marvelled at his vitality and the way he bore his heavy burden. 'It would be impossible to find a man to fill his place at present.'<sup>32</sup>

Something of Churchill's greatness came out in the case of Major-General P. C. S. Hobart. Hobart was slated for retirement, charged with being hot-tempered and narrow-minded, despite his wide expert knowledge and drive. 'Such prejudices,' Churchill wrote, perhaps thinking of his own past fortunes, 'attach frequently to persons of strong personality and original view.' Hobart's controversial views on tank design had now been confirmed, he pointed out. 'We cannot afford to confine Army appointments to persons who had excited no hostile comments in their career.'<sup>33</sup> 'Remember,' he would rebuke General Dill when the Hobart case came up again, 'it isn't only the good boys who help to win wars. It is the sneaks and stinkers as well.'<sup>34</sup> Hobart was reappointed, raised two armoured divisions, and commanded them with great distinction. To a family friend visiting Chequers on his return from Dakar, Churchill would give this advice – even if he did not always follow it himself: 'Carry a little slate with you and wipe it regularly clean of all grudges.'<sup>35</sup>

That Saturday evening, October 12, Chequers teemed with Churchills. Clemmie was showing off their first grandson, born to Randolph the day before. Winston was visibly nervous about air raids. 'Probably they don't think I am so foolish as to come here,' Colville quoted him, writing in his vivid diary. 'But I stand to lose a lot. Three generations at a swoop.' Hearing of more heavy bombing of London and of damage done to the war office, he commented that frequenting Chequers was tempting providence. He decided to spend future weekends, when air raids seemed likely, at some other country estate.



With less than his usual honesty, Winston had announced to the House in October that Bomber Command was attacking only military targets. In secret he pressed Portal for more widespread attacks. 'Remember this!' he lectured his staff, 'Never maltreat the enemy by halves. Once the battle is joined let 'em have it.'<sup>36</sup> Six months later his colleagues would endorse his deceit, ruling that the government need never reveal that their bombing was killing German civilians. 'It was better,' the cabinet minutes

recorded, 'that actions should speak louder than words in this matter.'<sup>37</sup> After Sunday lunch on the thirteenth, puffing his cigar and sprawling in his new rompers, the P.M. pontificated to Sir Charles Portal and 'Stuffy' Dowding: 'A Hun alive,' he defined, 'is a war in prospect.'<sup>38</sup>

The corollary was to kill as many as possible. With his own role in the bombing of London clearly uppermost in mind, he advised Lord Halifax to discourage the International Red Cross from monitoring the British and Nazi air offensives. 'It would simply result,' he claimed, 'in a committee under German influence or fear, reporting at the very best that it was six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. It is even very likely they would report that we had committed the major breaches.' And he added, 'Even if Germany offered to stop the bombing now, we should not consent to it. Bombing of military objectives, increasingly widely interpreted, seems at present our main road home.'<sup>39</sup>

He returned reluctantly to Downing-street on the fourteenth. Dining that night in the fortified rooms, behind windows protected with steel shutters, he heard a bomb detonate in the Horse Guards Parade. On an instinct, he left the table and directed the cook and downstairs servants to the shelter. His secretary John Martin galloped down and jumped in on top of them just as a second bomb hit the treasury next door. The kitchen's plate-glass window, which had not been provided with shutters, was blasted inward in a shower of glass, timber, masonry, and the sooty grime of centuries. The blast left the doors dangling drunkenly on broken hinges and curtains and chairs hurled about the rooms. The bomb had killed one man in the treasury. Donning a tin hat, Bracken went over in a dressing gown to ascertain his name and, in a typical act of generosity, anonymously sent the widow money.<sup>40</sup>

Standing on the roof that night, Churchill watched the fading dazzle of incendiaries replaced by the flicker of flames rising from Pall Mall and Piccadilly. Clubland was in flames – not that he was a clubbable man. His secretary telephoned the Reform. 'The club is *burning*, sir,' the hall porter evenly replied. Afterward, Winston visited the charred wreckage of the Carlton. The severed marble head of William Pitt the Younger, his predecessor at the time of Waterloo, lay tumbled on the threshold. The dining room tables were littered with unfinished meals and wine. It was like Pompeii, or perhaps less civilised.



Eden would have hated the scene had he been in England. Still secretary of war, he had left for Egypt, bitten by the travel bug, and it would be November before he returned. He toured the empire reinforcements and

conferred with General Wavell at Cairo. Worried at the weakness of the desert airforce, he cabled asking for reinforcements and added in the message, which reached Churchill on the sixteenth, 'Politically [the] whole situation here would be immeasurably improved if you were able to gain some military success.'

Churchill had nothing planned just yet. He was happy to have Eden out of the way. 'We are considering how to meet your needs,' he replied. 'Meanwhile continue to master the local situation. Do not hurry your return.' Eden dutifully took his time, dawdling in the Western Desert, attending to his suntan and bathing in the clear blue sea; he wondered how long they could bluff the Italians opposing them in the Middle East. Meanwhile other ministers were learning of the reason for Churchill's confidence. 'The rumour grows,' wrote one minister with access to Intelligence, 'through various telegrams and other agencies, that the Germans may attack the Russians in the spring.'<sup>41</sup> The F.O. considered it now 'very doubtful' that England would be invaded.<sup>42</sup>

Since July Churchill had sat on his private Intelligence that the invasion was bluff. He needed it to entrench his position. There was enough fluff floating over the Channel to feed the woolly-minded, and it remains enigmatic that the Germans should have used high-level cyphers to carry deception material. Less perplexing is Churchill's misleading of his own public and the Americans. As the director of naval Intelligence would observe, 'There is nothing new in a dictator seizing an exclusive source of Intelligence, using it as his own, and producing it in a spectacular way at his selected moment – or even withholding it.'<sup>43</sup>

Military Intelligence continued to fatten its file on 'German Preparations for Invasion' with intercepts reporting the encyphered queries, movement orders, embarkation exercises, and timetable instructions that showed that preparations for invasion were being pursued.<sup>44</sup> The director of naval Intelligence discounted them. The Germans had always backed up deception plans with something that could be observed, like bombers shifted to Bremen or dive bombers to Belgium, and the barges along the Channel coast were no exception. The invasion was off, he would later write, and 'we knew it in October.' This certainty is reflected in F.O. documents. Lord Halifax notified a British embassy on the twenty-fourth, 'Though Hitler has enough shipping in the Channel to put half a million men onto salt water – or into it, as Winston said the other day – it really does seem as if the invasion of England has been postponed for the present.'<sup>45</sup>

Churchill periodically brandished the Nazi invasion threat at Roosevelt, and he used it to turn aside Dominion anger at lack of consultation

too. In one angry riposte to Robert Menzies, he wrote, 'We have had to face the threat of invasion here.'<sup>46</sup> He cajoled the president that the danger was still not past. 'The gent has taken off his clothes,' he said, 'and put on his bathing suit, but the weather is getting colder and there is an autumn nip in the air.'<sup>47</sup> Three weeks later he routinely upheld the illusion, telling Washington: 'I do not think the invasion danger is yet at an end.'<sup>48</sup> On January 28 he would still be saying it to Roosevelt: 'All my information shows that the Germans are persevering in their preparations to invade this country, and we are getting ready.'

A painful affair momentarily diverted Churchill's attention. His former private secretary Robert Boothby, who had represented East Aberdeen for the Tories since 1924 and was now a junior minister, had recently come under scrutiny for accepting in 1939 what looked like a dishonest payment from a Czech financier of 'dubious character.'<sup>49</sup> He was a close friend and backer of this man, Richard Weininger, until the latter's arrest – in Boothby's apartment – and internment as an alien under Regulation 18B. Boothby protested to Churchill, but Weininger's files disclosed cash inducements that he had offered to the M.P. Boothby had subsequently delivered a powerful speech on the Czechoslovakia (Financial Claims and Refugees) Bill in January 1940, arguing against repatriating Czech assets held in London to Prague.

The background was this. By 1938 the flamboyant politician was in the clutches of moneylenders but had obtained a five-thousand-pound loan from Sir Alfred Butt. That summer he had visited Dr Beneš and urged him to fight; on the morning after Munich, Weininger and a Dr Jansa of the Czech legation had consulted him about raising a loan for their country. In the following January, Weininger had sought more personal help in getting payment of his claims against Prague from Czech assets frozen in London. He promised Boothby a percentage and handed over one thousand pounds on account of expenses. That was all that Boothby would ever receive from the Czechs, although in one letter found in Weininger's files Boothby had grandiloquently reassured Butt: 'I am, at the moment, the possessor of assets amounting to approximately £20,000 in the form of cash and bonds in Prague.'

Subsequently he had become ensnared in a committee representing similar Czech claimants in London.<sup>50</sup> One of the largest claimants, Dr Walter Petschek, complained that this committee's lawyer had written implying that they were acting for the treasury and threatened penalties if he declined their help. Petschek showed the letter to the authorities, and it was Boothby who got the blame.

It was a disturbing case. To make it worse, Boothby had recently written Churchill indelicately telling him how to run the war. The P.M. summoned him to No. 10 and savaged the document so aggressively that Boothby interrupted. 'You are a bully,' he said, 'and you've always been a bully. But there's one person you'll never bully and that's me.' He left slamming the cabinet room door.<sup>51</sup> Lloyd George buttonholed him afterward. 'Winston's trying to destroy you,' he said. 'You're not the first, and you won't be the last.'

On October 17 Churchill moved that a select committee investigate his old friend's conduct. Since his own prewar Focus had been partly financed by the Czechs, he might well reflect that there but for the grace of God went he, were he not now drawing substantial emoluments from His Majesty instead.\* Defending himself before the House a few weeks later, the M.P. argued that he had dealt no differently than many other members. Churchill dropped a powerful hint that he leave the public gaze. 'There are paths of service open in war time,' he declared, in his speech, 'which are not open in times of peace; and some of these paths may be paths to honour.'<sup>52</sup> Boothby declined to relinquish his seat, but joined the R.A.F. as adjutant of a bomber squadron.



In the second week of October, enemy bombing had killed fifteen hundred Londoners. There was no sure defence for those without country retreats. In a typical incident, an apartment block in Stoke Newington collapsed, burying several hundred people; water flooded the basement and drowned the survivors.

On the sixteenth a bomb wrecked more of the treasury, killing four men and concussing No. 10. The hallowed cabinet room was untouched and the reinforced basement still seemed strong enough, but Bracken prophesied that No. 10 was doomed. Several minor colleagues wrote begging Winston to take care.<sup>53</sup> He was undaunted. Members that day espied him in his second home, the smoking room at the House, sipping port in a leather armchair and burbling greetings to all who passed. Harold Nicolson asked himself whether it was just a pose, but concluded it was not. Another Member, Robert Cary, approached him about the public outcry for reprisals against German cities. Churchill took another swig of port and glared at Cary. 'My dear sir,' he said, 'this is a military and not a civilian war. You and others may desire to kill women and children. We desire – and have succeeded in our desire – to destroy German military

\* His pay as P.M. was £10,000 per annum, or £3,873 post-tax.



objectives.' As an afterthought, he added, taking another swig, 'My motto is business before pleasure.' In pleasant ignorance of the cabinet's less august decisions, the Lobby-fodder marvelled. 'That was a man!' reflected Nicolson as he sauntered out.<sup>54</sup>

Dining at Chequers that weekend was Sir Richard Peirse, Portal's successor at Bomber Command. They planned their new offensive against Germany's cities. Churchill could write to Chamberlain that Sunday, accurately enough, that in switching the attack to London Hitler had made a 'tremendous mistake.' In endeavouring to intimidate the population, the enemy had 'only infuriated' them.<sup>55</sup> But he missed the obvious corollary: what was a mistake for Hitler must be a mistake for Churchill too. That same day he ordered Portal – without reference to Sinclair as secretary of air – to attack enemy towns and morale. He demanded raids on Germany regardless of accuracy, utilising trainees and other substandard crews. 'The Ruhr, of course, is obviously indicated,' he suggested. 'The object would be to find easy targets, short runs and safe conditions.'<sup>56</sup>

Portal balked at this proposal. But he did command the air staff to devise new bomber tactics, attacking civilian morale more directly for the next few months. At the end of the month they issued to Bomber Command a new directive: in future fire-raising planes would lead the attack, followed by regular bomber squadrons who would prevent the fire services from extinguishing the conflagrations, giving them 'every opportunity to spread.'<sup>57</sup> Still Churchill was not satisfied. On the first day of November he sent to Portal three stinging notes expressing 'extreme regret' that the bomber force was not being expanded fast enough, and that even more bombs were not being 'delivered overseas and particularly on Germany.' 'It is the rising scale of delivery of bombs,' he wrote, 'which must be taken as the measure of the success of our policy.'<sup>58</sup>

Understandably he pondered his own safety. Talking with the secretary of the cabinet, Sir Edward Bridges, he predicted on October 22 that the enemy would wreck Whitehall and demolish the capital's other older buildings. Dollis-hill had displeased him, and he decided to carry on from the Cabinet War Room bunker. Its ceiling would now be reinforced by an extra concrete slab, as would Brooke's Home Forces headquarters in the modern Board of Trade building. For living quarters Churchill would move permanently into the Annexe above the C.W.R., and this Annexe would also have to be bombproofed.<sup>59</sup> Carpenters and builders moved into No. 10, repairing the damage and inserting extra timbers. Unwilling to linger there until this was complete, he moved office to 'The Barn,' a deep shelter at the former Down-street Tube station a few yards from Picca-

dilly. Nelson the cat was whisked off to Chequers, whither Mary and other junior members of the Churchill family had been evacuated.

It was a crushing work load, but on the twenty-second it was marginally lightened. Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy finally left England, his scepticism undimmed and still threatening to torpedo Roosevelt's re-election campaign. After a meeting at the White House, however, Kennedy would mysteriously drop all opposition, and he endorsed F.D.R. in a nationwide broadcast. When no high office was forthcoming, he reverted to his uncompromising views. Visiting California he spoke 'off the record' at the film studios for three hours, urging that America never get involved in this war. 'He apparently,' one famous filmstar wrote secretly to the president, 'threw the fear of God into many of our producers and executives by telling them that the Jews were on the spot and that they should stop making anti-Nazi pictures.' Kennedy added 'that anti-Semitism was growing in Britain and that the Jews were being blamed for the war.' The film industry, he said, was a malign influence on public opinion. 'The Jews, in particular, would be in jeopardy if they continued to abuse that power.'<sup>60</sup> Speaking on the last day of May to graduating students at Notre Dame in Indiana, the former ambassador would unfashionably describe the Führer as 'the greatest genius of the century,' and his diplomatic and military ability as superior to anything the British could muster. 'Britain,' Kennedy concluded, 'is hopelessly licked and there will be a negotiated peace within sixty days.'<sup>61</sup>

In October 1940 the prospects of American intervention seemed remote. Mr Wendell Willkie, Roosevelt's opponent, mocked: 'If his promise to keep your boys out of foreign wars is no better than his promise to balance the budget, they're already almost on the transports!' At Boston on the thirtieth the president proclaimed with a grinning Ambassador Kennedy at his elbow, 'I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again. Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars!'<sup>\*</sup> When November 2 came, a reassured America reelected him.

Churchill disliked those words but was relieved at F.D.R.'s victory. He telegraphed congratulations. 'I prayed for your success,' he revealed. Roosevelt vouchsafed no reply, a silence which the Former Naval Person found frankly disquieting and queried with his embassy in Washington.<sup>62</sup> Roosevelt wanted to squeeze the British lemon still harder, as time would show. The unequal partnership was about to begin: Roosevelt's star was ascendant, Churchill's would soon be past its zenith. Gallup pollsters

\* The sentence was omitted from the official text shortly published by Samuel I. Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*; but it was in the recording, and in the *New York Times* two days later.

found confidence in him topping eighty-nine per cent in October. He knew well why: 'I represent to them,' he said, 'something that they wholeheartedly support: the determination to win.' Realistically he added, 'For a year or two they will cheer me.'<sup>63</sup>

If his life had ended now he would have been hailed as Britain's saviour – the man who had rallied an almost defeated nation and led her out of that despondent slough. The burden of the later toil, across the seas and deserts and beaches, would have fallen upon other shoulders; and others would have earned the obloquy for ultimately bankrupting the empire. But fortune plays a straight hand, and to Winston Churchill would now fall the duty of ploughing the same furrow he had set, one which would drag his country into ruin and disqualify her as a world power.