

*David Irving*

# CHURCHILL'S WAR

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I — *The Struggle for Power*

Part 3 of 4  
*Chapters 35–44*

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FOCAL POINT

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## 35: *Britain Can Take It*

WHEN THE war ended and D-notice restrictions were lifted, Lord Beaverbrook's newspapers revealed that, while the king and queen had left London by car every evening during the Blitz to join the princesses at Windsor, and while the queen mother had spent the war years at Badminton, Mr Churchill had been 'living throughout his premiership at No. 10 Downing-street, and spending week-ends at Chequers.'<sup>1</sup> This appealing legend was enriched over the years. Readers learned that Second Lieutenant John Watney had been detailed to drive the P.M. round bomb-torn London in his armoured car. 'But,' puzzled this soldier, 'he never got into it. I would call at the front door in Downing-street with the car, and Churchill would go out of the back.' Until every citizen had an armoured car he pledged he wouldn't use one.<sup>2</sup>

His was a robust image. To junior ministers soon after taking office in May 1940 he had declared himself against any evacuation from London, unless life became impossible. 'Mere bombing,' this indomitable man had said, 'will not make us go.'<sup>3</sup> By 'us' he meant the Londoners. In October he decided that even Chequers was not safe. He feared that the knavish Göring might lay a *Knickebein* beam across Chequers and blast it off the map of Buckinghamshire. He began to cast about for an alternative country retreat.

In October over six thousand Britons had been slain. In November 4,500 more would die. Movie theatres were running the film 'Britain Can Take It,' but propaganda alone could not patch the Londoners' fragile morale. One neutral observer reported a growing ferment in the lower classes against 'the very differing plights of car owners who are able to betake themselves to safety, and those who have to spend the night in improvised shelters or Underground stations.' He recognised that many officials still clung to the hope of an early negotiated peace. As the raids worsened, a clamour began among the P.M.'s friends like Josiah Wedgwood who urged him to seek a deeper shelter. 'Eventually I agreed,' Churchill would write. 'One felt a natural compunction at having much more safety

than most other people; but so many pressed me that I let them have their way.'<sup>4</sup>

Another neutral, an American who had dallied six months in London, meeting men like Spears and Duff Cooper, gave the Germans in Lisbon this picture a few weeks later: devastated docks, dwindling food supplies, and a stultified public opinion – people did whatever Whitehall commanded. Commenting on de Gaulle, Spears had said: 'We bet on the wrong horse.' Meanwhile, the American added, Churchill was trying to find ways of restoring contact with Vichy.<sup>5</sup>

De Gaulle's prestige was at low ebb; he was 'a loser.'<sup>6</sup> On October 1, shortly after the Dakar fiasco, Lord Halifax had persuaded the cabinet to face up to the general problem of Britain's relations with Marshal Pétain and his government at Vichy. 'I still think,' Halifax dictated into his private diary, 'that with the German behaviour in France, if we could play our cards, French opinion is likely to turn more and more our way. . . The ultimate alternative is something like hostilities with Vichy.' They gnawed over the Vichy problem in cabinet that day, and the foreign secretary found Churchill not unhelpful – 'much as it goes against his natural instinct for bellicosity.' Halifax reminded him that Britain's purpose was to defeat Germany, and not to make new enemies.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, Churchill was not committed to 'any exact restoration of the territories' of France, and he felt after Dakar that losing Morocco might be a suitable penalty for France's 'abject' attitude. He asked Halifax to let the Spanish know that Britain would be 'no obstacle to their Moroccan ambitions.'<sup>8</sup> \* But when the foreign secretary suggested that they also hint at handing back Gibraltar after the war, the P.M. put his foot down: 'Does anyone think,' he inquired, 'that if we win the war opinion here will consent to hand over Gib. to the Dons? And, if we lose, we shall not be consulted.'<sup>9</sup>

Churchill's hostility toward de Gaulle grew during October. In private remarks he showed an inclination to deal with Pétain, whatever the public vilification of the marshal. 'Vichy is being bad enough,' he had told the journalist Knickerbocker at the end of September, 'but not as bad as it could be; for instance, they could turn over their ships to Germany if they wanted to be nasty.' Writing to Roosevelt a week later, the P.M. mentioned that Vichy was trying to enter into relations with London, 'which,'

\* In 1946 Franco staggered Randolph Churchill by revealing that, in 1940, 'the British ambassador offered me part of French Morocco if I promised to remain neutral.' Sam Hoare (Lord Templewood) denied this as 'entirely untrue and without any foundation.' (*Daily Telegraph*, February 18, 1946.)

he suggested, 'shows how the tides are flowing in France now that they feel the German weight and see we are able to hold our own.'<sup>10</sup>

What he did not tell Roosevelt was his decision to embark on clandestine conversations with Vichy aimed at reaching a *modus vivendi*, a gentleman's agreement. Broadly speaking, once he was sure that Pétain was moving the right way he was prepared to relax the naval blockade he had announced at the end of July.<sup>11</sup> He put out his secret feelers through Madrid, asking Sam Hoare on the twentieth to convey to the French ambassador there two root ideas, as he called them: that Britain could always let bygones be bygones; but failing that 'we shall stop at nothing.'<sup>12</sup>

On the following evening he broadcast to France – first, ignoring professional advice, in French, and then in more intelligible English. The British were waiting for Hitler's invasion, he said: 'So are the fishes.' 'Never,' he added, 'will I believe that the soul of France is dead.'<sup>13</sup>



Out of this developed two extraordinary and controversial meetings with a Vichy emissary, Louis Rougier. Equipped with credentials signed by Marshal Pétain, this French-Canadian professor of philosophy arrived in London via Madrid on the day after Churchill's broadcast.<sup>14</sup> The F.O. forbade him to contact either de Gaulle or the American embassy.

Before he was brought over to No. 10 there was an unexpected interlude: on the twenty-fourth Hitler met both Prime Minister Pierre Laval and Marshal Pétain, and during the night rumours reached London that at Montoire the aged marshal had agreed to hand over Toulon naval base to the enemy.

Churchill had taken fitful refuge from the bombs in his private Downstreet deep shelter, The Barn. A secretary woke him with the news; he hurried back to No. 10 and drafted a disapproving message for the king to send Pétain. It spoke of Britain's resolve to fight on to the end and restated the promise to restore 'the freedom and greatness of France' – though not mentioning her territories.<sup>15</sup> The rumours about Toulon worried him, and he asked his military staff to consider a purely British assault on Dakar – proof of how far de Gaulle had fallen in esteem.

Lord Halifax's diary of October 25, 1940 renders an amusing picture of that day:

Dorothy and I had slept in the [Dorchester Hotel's bomb-proof] dormitory and at 5:30 A.M. I was woken up by the night waiter who said that the foreign office wanted to telephone me on the prime minister's instructions. I could not have been more an-

noyed and came upstairs wondering whether Alec [Cadogan] had been hit by a bomb or the Germans had gone into Spain or Anthony Eden had been assassinated in Egypt. It turned out to be a message from Sam Hoare giving some side-lights on the Vichy conversations with Hitler [at Montoire], in regard to which Sam suggested certain prompt action might be helpful.

When I got to the [foreign] office after breakfast I went over to No. 10 where I found Winston in his dugout, having drafted one or two telegrams which he invited me to improve. He was . . . in what I understand nurses are accustomed to call a 'romper suit' of Air Force colour Jaeger-like stuff, with a zip fastening up the middle, and a little Air Force forage cap. I asked him if he was going on the stage but he said he always wore this in the morning.

Lord Halifax, who had been the Reichsmarschall's guest three years before, concluded, 'It is really almost like Göring.'

It was later this day that the first meeting with Pétain's emissary took place. Churchill and Rougier mapped out a gentleman's agreement.<sup>16</sup>

After Rougier left No. 10 there was a further shock. Fleet-street falsely reported that Pétain had signed a peace treaty with Hitler. Outraged at this apparent treachery, Churchill shouted at Rougier the next day: 'I will send the Royal Air Force to bomb Vichy!'<sup>17</sup> \* With some difficulty, the professor calmed him down and they settled the terms of the agreement. Before Rougier left London on the twenty-eighth, Sir William Strang asked him to draw up a memorandum of the kind of statements he proposed to make to Pétain. Two copies in the professor's flawless native French were brought across to No. 10. Churchill added marginal alterations and returned one copy fifteen minutes later to the F.O. On November 10 it was in Pétain's hands.<sup>18</sup>



What *was* agreed? Five years later, with de Gaulle in power and Marshal Pétain on trial for his life, the very notion of such dealings was abhorrent enough to deny. Thrice in 1945 Mr Churchill would do so. On February 28, 1945, two days after Pierre-Étienne Flandin revealed to astonished Gaullist judges that Pétain had shown him a secret treaty concluded with Churchill 'at the time of Montoire,' he denied it through Reuter's.

\* Churchill echoed this to Attlee and Halifax: Britain must emphasise in communicating with Pétain 'that in the event of any act of hostility on their part we should immediately retaliate by bombing the seat of the Vichy Government, wherever it might be.'<sup>19</sup>

He denied it again on All Fool's Day. On June 8, 1945 the defendant Pétain confirmed Flandin's testimony. 'It is correct,' the marshal wrote to the instructing judge, 'that I caused a treaty to be settled with Mr Winston Churchill that was supposed to remain secret. This treaty – whose negotiation began on the day of Montoire – gives Montoire its true character; it was what guided my policies, even if the British now seem to dissociate themselves from it.' When Rougier shortly published a book with the documents on the case in Canada, Churchill was embarrassed, and again denied it, this time in a White Paper.<sup>20</sup> Even now, parts of the F.O. file are closed until the year 2016 and all the papers relating to Rougier and the Churchill–Pétain deal have been physically removed by the British government from the late Lord Halifax's papers.

Rougier appears to have told the truth. While a guest of Walter Lippmann in Washington later in 1940, the noted commentator introduced him to Justice Felix Frankfurter, and the summary which Rougier drafted for the White House is among the judge's papers. Paul Baudouin would testify that the professor returned to Vichy with 'a document I myself held, corrected in Churchill's own hand.'<sup>21</sup>

Among the terms reliably recalled by Baudouin and Rougier were that Britain agreed: to restore France provided she gave the Axis no quarter; to ease the blockade; and to oblige the B.B.C. to take the heat off Pétain as he had become a symbol to the French. Vichy promised not to recapture the dissident colonies or to cede bases in Provence or Africa to Germany.<sup>22</sup> Admiral Fernet saw Rougier report to Pétain on the secret meetings with Churchill and Halifax. 'These talks,' Rougier had said, 'permit of big hopes.' Later Baudouin asked the Portuguese ambassador to have Dr Salazar forward word of Vichy's unconditional acceptance of these terms to Mr Churchill. In his July 1945 White Paper Churchill would nonetheless maintain: 'His Majesty's Government never received any communication from Marshal Pétain or his Government suggesting that they considered themselves under any commitment as a result of M Rougier's conversations.'

Be that as it may, in 1940 he immediately put the 'gentleman's agreement' into effect. The B.B.C. dropped its attacks on Pétain, and the blockade was eased.<sup>23</sup> All operations against Vichy France's territory and fleet ceased.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequently, Churchill would imply that Rougier was used only as an emissary to General Weygand, governor-general of Algeria.<sup>25</sup> He was certainly anxious for Weygand to raise the standard of rebellion in North Africa, because behind Rougier's back he drafted a rousing message to the general.<sup>26</sup> He had also given Rougier an oral message to deliver to



Weygand when he passed through Algiers. The professor called on Weygand at the Palais d'Hiver on November 5, chancing to arrive at the same moment as the P.M.'s clandestine letter, which proposed a Vichy-British staff meeting at Tangier. Weygand was not pleased by this: German agents, he pointed out, would certainly detect any such move, and Hitler would insist on his recall. He knew of only one set of instructions, this loyal servant of France told the professor: to defend her empire against everybody.

After the emissary's departure, Churchill was pricked by conscience. 'In view of our relations with de Gaulle, and engagements signed,' he suggested to Eden, 'he has a right to feel assured we are not throwing him over.' But actions spoke louder than words. While still awaiting Pétain's response, he ordered Admiral Pound to stay any naval actions against Vichy forces. If Vichy interfered with de Gaulle, who had landed a small force at Duala and obtained the French Cameroons' adherence, Britain must not defend him: so Churchill ruled. On the first day of November 1940 he was heard to mutter that the Free French general had become an embarrassment to him in his dealings with Vichy and the French people.<sup>27</sup>

HIS WAR CABINET now met regularly in the bunker Cabinet War Room, as did the specialised committees on night air defence and tanks. He harried and pressed and badgered, calling for progress reports and deciding priorities: radar-controlled guns and searchlights were coming into use, and the top-secret airborne interception (A.I.) radar was undergoing trials. He was pleased at reports that German aircraft were aborting their missions because of increasingly accurate gunfire even through cloud. 'We are getting our cat's eyes, it seems,' observed a minister.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Lindemann stood watchdog over these inquiries, growling like a Cerberus over each feud or folly perpetrated by more mortal subordinates. Electronic experts were designing transmitters to interfere with *Knickebein*; by mid-November three would be ready and eighteen more under construction. Now Churchill was told that deciphered messages showed the enemy was using an even more accurate radio-beam device, the *X-Gerät*. Shortly he received angry news from the Prof.: an enemy Pathfinder plane carrying this vital apparatus had belly-landed on the beach only to be washed out to sea while officers bickered over whether it was naval, army or airforce property.<sup>29</sup>

It was going to be a long war, but Churchill was confident that British science would outclass the enemy's. Knowing perhaps more than he ought of his opponent's industrial Four-Year Plan – to prepare the Wehrmacht for war ('with the Soviet Union') by 1940 – he elucidated to his private

staff that it took four years to reach maximum war production. Germany, he said, had attained that peak, while Britain was still at Year Two.<sup>30</sup> Reviewing strategy at the end of October he asked the crucial question: 'How are we to win?' Bombing seemed the only answer.

He knew that Hitler's main offensive would be against the convoys supplying Britain. Churchill predicted to the defence committee that, during 1941, Germany might in theory campaign simultaneously in Spain, Turkey and Russia: Hitler would probably turn covetous eyes on the Caspian and the Baku oilfields.<sup>31</sup> Bletchley proved that his airforce was installing a ground organisation in Romania and Bulgaria. Seen from No. 10, it seemed that Hitler was planning to thrust through the Balkans and Turkey to the Suez Canal.

Each day saw the conflict widening, and it affected Churchill's health. He was sleeping badly, and when John Martin woke him at Chequers early on October 28 with news that Mussolini had invaded Greece he just grunted, rolled over, and dropped off to sleep again. 'Never do that again!' he lectured him later that morning. Martin apologised that the P.M. might have wanted to summon the cabinet. 'What could they do?' asked Churchill dismissively. 'Just gape round the table.' He never wanted to be wakened again 'just because Hitler had invaded a new country.' (Usually he knew from his Oracle anyway.) Back in London, he siesta'd in his bunker bedroom next to the C.W.R. but, meeting Greenwood and Dalton later that day in what the latter irreverently called 'his boudoir,' he still looked haggard and had not pondered the minor point that bothered them at all. 'I have just had my sleep,' he apologised.<sup>32</sup> To the home secretary he sighed that this was the 'most unnecessary war in history.'

A few days later he had a gastric complaint. He turned aside the doctor's castor oil, refused dinner and, as the sirens wailed, entombed himself again in The Barn seventy feet below Piccadilly instead.<sup>33</sup>

He hated this troglodyte existence. Clearly it was not unreasonable for Winston to wish to preserve himself in the nation's interest – 'of which,' he shortly told Hugh Dowding,\* 'I am the judge.' But his previous bragadocio was proving brittle. At the end of July he had announced that all ministers were to be at their posts when the bombing began, and urged Halifax to move back from the Dorchester to the F.O. Now his own senior staff ascribed his frequent exchange of capital for country to 'the full moon and the fear of night attacks.' When Dr Dalton suggested they bomb Rome but spare the Pope, Mr Churchill replied with feeling, 'I should like to tell the Old Man to get down into his shelter and stay there for a week.'<sup>34</sup>

\* See page 490 of this chapter.

Others contemplated their own mortality with sang-froid. Sir Alan Brooke resolutely bedded down each night on an upper floor of the Army & Navy Club, reposing his trust in God. Mr Churchill had invoked the Lord's name too liberally in the past, and in the present extremes he trusted more religiously to distance, putting as much as possible between himself and the enemy's target whenever it was known to him from the ENIGMAS. London could take it; he could not.



The secretary for war was still out in Egypt as November began. Churchill drove out to Chequers that Friday evening, buoyant again: he was leaving the nightmare behind and going to see his family. Eden had telegraphed that he had sent a battalion by cruiser to the Greek island of Crete, and a squadron of Blenheim bombers; but he urged against going overboard in aiding Greece as this would jeopardise 'plans for offensive operations' being laid in Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

Winston also briefly had second thoughts. Just as before Dakar, a cautious instinct tugged at his sleeve. Halifax was talking of injecting British planes into Greece. Should he do more? To Churchill, investing in Bomber Command still seemed the more flexible means of helping. He had written to Portal suggesting an attack on 'the morale of the Italian population'; he justified this diversion from precision targets as 'in the nature of an experiment.'<sup>36</sup> When he spoke to Peirse, chief of Bomber Command, he again warned: 'We must be very careful not to bomb the Pope. He has a lot of influential friends!'<sup>37</sup>

On Saturday November 2 he changed his mind. Freed from the shackles of cabinet restraint, he threw caution to the winds; he decided to do everything possible, 'by land, sea and air,' for the Greeks. 'Greek situation,' he replied to Eden, 'must be held to dominate others now. We are well aware of our slender resources.' He expressed concern at the effect on Turkey if Britain wretched on yet another guarantee. Urging Portal to send four bomber squadrons over to Greece, he wrote: 'Please try your best.'<sup>38</sup>

Telegrams flew back and forth, but still he did not consult his colleagues. In the Great War, Lloyd George would never have attempted even to browbeat let alone by-pass the elder statesmen like Balfour, Milner or Bonar Law. But Churchill had a cabinet of shadows. Even the service ministers were sycophants.

Eden was restless to return home, but Churchill urged him to stay on in Cairo. He took the big decision at Chequers that weekend, far from moderating influences: Britain would shift one Gladiator (fighter) and

three Blenheim (bomber) squadrons into Greece. Nor did he consult the Dominions. Scrutinising a telegram notifying their prime ministers of his resolve to accept the risk of rushing aid to Greece, Churchill objected to the draft: 'Who is responsible for drawing it up and sending it out?'<sup>39</sup>

That Sunday morning he sent a sharply-worded telegram to Eden:

Trust you will grasp situation firmly, abandoning negative and passive policies and seizing opportunity which has come into our hands.

Sipping soda and reclining in a silken kimono on a chintz-curtained four-poster bed, he dictated a scowling finish to the telegram. 'Safety First,' he said, 'is the road to ruin in war, even if you had the safety, which you have not. Send me your proposals earliest, or say you have none to make.'<sup>40</sup>

The first British troops were disembarked on Greek soil. Until now Hitler had had no plans to invade Greece; but fearing that British bombers might soon be within range of his Romanian oilfields, he would now order contingency invasion plans prepared. Pale-faced, the C.I.G.S. left Chequers on Sunday with the P.M.'s exhortation in his ears: 'Don't forget, the maximum possible for Greece!'<sup>41</sup> A new Churchill fiasco was beginning, of which he was the unquestioned architect.

Was it just the sentimental Churchill, seeing himself as the saviour of Greek civilisation? Was he turning a greedy eye on Suda Bay, the fine naval anchorage on Crete's northern shore? Perhaps the word *opportunity*, used in Sunday's telegram to Eden, held the key. Was he illicitly reading frantic Italian messages as their brash offensive into Epirus came unstuck? Was he hoping to reap the triumphant harvest with the Greeks? Certainly among the visitors he received after he returned to No. 10 on Monday November 4, was 'C,' head of the Secret Intelligence Service, at 6:15 P.M.

Early in October he had again insisted on getting every ENIGMA message deciphered by Bletchley. He guarded his Oracle jealously and was vexed to learn that digests had even circulated to the American embassy. He very properly ordered that this practise cease – to the enduring ill-feeling of the Grosvenor-square diplomats who considered that the prospect of a \$3,500-million loan entitled them to more.<sup>42</sup> Shortly, the three Bletchley women who allocated daily priorities – deciding which of the dozens of cyphers was to be run through the computer (*bombe*) first – each began producing a weekly digest for him of their expert knowledge, since they had to read every single document deciphered; this identified the cypher from which each item had been culled.<sup>43</sup> This all-embracing knowl-

edge added a fearsome dimension to his burden: it gave him insight into events which he would not always be able to hinder.

Early in November it yielded evidence that Hitler's Sixteenth Army, along the Channel coast, was finally returning its invasion gear to store.<sup>44</sup> The P.M. had expected as much since late July anyway. On November 5 he told the House, adopting his most theatrical stance – rubbing his hands up and down his coat front with every finger extended as he searched for the right phrase, 'conveying almost medicinal poise,' as one member put it – and dressing up the news as a great victory.

The plain fact that an invasion, planned on so vast a scale, has not been attempted in spite of the very great need of the enemy to destroy us in our citadel; and that all these anxious months, when we stood alone and the whole world wondered, have passed safely away – that fact constitutes in itself one of the historic victories of the British Isles and is a monumental milestone on our onward march.<sup>45</sup>

It gave him little joy. He was to lunch at the palace, but he slouched into the smoking room instead and buried himself in an afternoon newspaper with some liquor until a harassed minion found him. 'Luckily,' noted the Member who found him, 'I had just seen him boozing in the smoking room.' Churchill grunted ungraciously and shuffled off to the palace.<sup>46</sup> That evening he again lowered himself in the little two-man elevator into the bowels of The Barn. He was accustomed now to the Tube trains that thundered past his bedroom, only the thickness of a freshly-bricked wall away; but the ticking of the ancient clock, screwed to the wall, unnerved him and he ordered it permanently stopped.

The Blitz was getting on everybody's nerves. Little heroic spirit remained at ministerial level. Churchill had not visited the blitzed areas for weeks. Dalton, privileged like the P.M. with access to ENIGMA, jotted two cryptic lines one evening in November: 'Revelations! I therefore leave early in the afternoon instead of risking anything by staying the night.'<sup>47</sup> It was difficult not to become edgy or mercurial. Churchill could plunge into a Stygian gloom in an instant. Kingsley Wood, now a cabinet minister, came to see him on the eighth, and found him more depressed than ever before. 'Cabinet in the morning,' dictated Dalton, to whom he told this,

very ragged and much depression, principally owing to heavy naval sinkings and decline in various indices of output. . . In the

Midlands, e.g., Coventry, the morale of munitions worker is affected by raids.

Production was falling. That evening Churchill again sought refuge in The Barn, calling in the Prof. and Sir Andrew Duncan, a businessman who had taken over the ministry of supply to sounds of relief from Beaverbrook. But then a shaft of light penetrated this gloomy scene. The secretary for war had just returned from the Middle East by flying boat, arrived dramatically in this disused Underground station, and announced that Wavell was preparing a bold counter-stroke in the Western Desert – it would be the first great offensive of Churchill's War. The P.M. purred, he later admitted, 'like six cats,' as his young Pretender elaborated this plan.

His opinion of Italians was low. On first hearing in September that Italian troops had invaded Egypt, he remarked that he did not fear the outcome – 'unless our men behave like skunks and the Italians like heroes.'<sup>48</sup> Accurately gauging the British humour, he let it be known that in one antiquated Italian flying machine his crash investigators had found a loaf of bread, a bottle of Chianti, and some cheese. He betrayed a residual envy only of Mussolini. In 1935 he had called him 'so great a man, so wise a ruler'; in 1937 he had said, 'If I had been an Italian I would have been on Mussolini's side fifteen years ago when he rescued his country from the horrible fate of sinking into violent communism,' or from 'incipient anarchy into a position of dignity and order,' as he put it even in 1939. Once he had scoffed to Ribbentrop that Germany was welcome to the Italians as allies. 'It's only fair,' he said, 'we had them last time.'<sup>49</sup> Speaking of the Italian navy, he mocked that there was 'a general curiosity in the British fleet . . . whether the Italians are up to the level they were at in the last war or whether they have fallen off at all.' When Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham wanted, early in October, to mention Italian sailors' gallantry in attempting to salvage a crippled destroyer under fire, Churchill condemned the tribute: 'This kind of kid-glove stuff,' he wrote, 'infuriates the people who are going through their present ordeal at home.'<sup>50</sup>

Some of his brooding envy was also reserved for Hitler. On November 8 he sent Bomber Command to Munich to disrupt the Führer's annual speech to party veterans. He himself lingered in town that night – unusual for a Friday, but he had to address the Lord Mayor's luncheon on the ninth. As he had notice of a coming raid, he planned then to escape London – not to Chequers this time, but to Dytchley\* in Oxfordshire, a sprawling estate which Bracken had recommended.

\* Thus the spelling on its notepaper.

His speech was platitude: not for the first time, he guaranteed the allied nations their future freedom.\*

Since we have been left alone in this world struggle [he said], we have reaffirmed or defined more precisely all the causes of all the countries with whom or for whom we drew the sword – Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Holland, Belgium, greatest of all France, latest of all Greece. For all of those we will toil and strive, and our victory will supply the liberation of them all.

That said, he drove out to the country to weekend with greater serenity than the dockers in their squalid firetrap terraces. Later that day Neville Chamberlain died, a brave but unpleasant death, over-shadowed by the knowledge that his image had been falsified beyond repair by his enemies. Upon Lord Halifax's farewell visit two days earlier, Chamberlain had croaked a warning to him not to place much trust in Russian promises. ('I am sure,' Halifax had softly whispered, 'that you will be trying to help us – wherever you are.') 'I think History,' Halifax entered in his diary, 'will be more just to Neville than some of his contemporary critics.' Churchill dictated a eulogy with customary facility – not an insuperable task, as he commented to his host, since he admired many of Neville's qualities. 'But I pray to God in His infinite mercy that I shall not have to deliver a similar oration on Baldwin. That indeed would be difficult to do.'<sup>52</sup>

Dytchley, a manor set in three thousand acres north of Oxford, was the domain of a wealthy benefactor from the Focus, the ruddy-faced Ronald Tree. It had a lake and a spread of lawns shaded by tall trees. There was little sign of war except the tramp of sentries on the flagstones and Bofors guns on the grounds. The building dated back three hundred years but had been rebuilt in 1720. Inside, the decor was in faded greens and blues, but there were splashes of red and yellow too; the furniture and wall coverings glittered with gilt. The walls of the dining room were plaqued with the antlers of ancient deer, one slain by King James in 1608. The quiet, high-ceilinged rooms were hung with old masters, ancient prints, and paintings of King Charles II. The first owner, Sir Henry Lee, had married the monarch's bastard daughter; Winston had nothing against bastard daughters – he had married one himself.

\* On September 5 he told the House: 'We do not propose to recognise any territorial changes which take place during the war, unless they take place with the free consent and good will of the parties concerned.'<sup>51</sup>

He was assigned to a room with an eighteenth-century mahogany bed fashioned after Chippendale. Ronald Tree and his comely Virginian wife were perfect hosts; and since Churchill took a liking to Air Chief Marshal Portal, and since his wife was as beautiful as her husband was homely, they were invited too when London was about to be bombed. Dytchley was a pleasant retreat in both senses of the word.<sup>53</sup>

From Churchill's desk calendar we know that he was back at Downing-street on Monday the eleventh for a mid-day meeting on night air defence. He slumbered after that until the sirens startled him awake and drove him to the garden shelter, where he again went to bed. But here the shriek of the bombs seemed even louder, and he retired to his bunker room.<sup>54</sup> He presided over Tuesday's cabinet down here in the bunker. That night's bombs hit the new Sloane-square station and pancaked it on top of an Underground train with heavy loss of life.

More ominous events were augured. On Monday Bletchley had deciphered signals instructions radioed by the senior signals (*Luftnachrichten*) officer of the First Air Corps at two P.M. on Saturday, about the time the P.M. was speaking at the Mansion House, for a future moonlight attack of 'very considerable dimensions.' Call-signs indicated that both air fleets would participate, led by a fire-raising force of KG.100 – some eighteen hundred planes under direct control of Hermann Göring; the squadron commander of KG.100, the Pathfinder squadron, would fly himself.<sup>55</sup> Four target areas were mentioned: the first was uncertain but was 'possibly Central London.' As for the actual date of attack, at one P.M. on the proposed day KG.100 would check the weather and the beams and, if the weather report from KG.100 was unfavourable, the codeword MOND MOND would be transmitted three times and the *Knickebein* realigned onto the night's alternative target.<sup>56</sup>

Churchill was immediately notified. His secretaries were of course not privy to this secret data. Colville recorded only that the operation was known in advance 'from the contents of those mysterious buff boxes which the P.M. alone opens, sent every day by Brigadier Menzies.'<sup>57</sup>

The P.M. had learned from the codebreakers precise details of Hitler's appointments too – the Soviet foreign minister was about to arrive in Berlin. Bomber Command was ordered to see that the Russians were left in no doubt that Mr Churchill's arm was neither short nor weary.

MEANWHILE CHURCHILL kept his daily routine.

He delivered his obituary oration on Chamberlain on the twelfth to the parliamentary colleagues now assembling in the less vulnerable setting of Church House, Westminster. A velvety spirit of final reconciliation



seemingly inspired his words, yet they slid the last nails into the failed premier's coffin as surely as if he had spewed forth gall. 'Whatever else history may or may not say about these terrible, tremendous years,' he declaimed – profoundly conscious that he intended to write that history himself – 'we can be sure that Neville Chamberlain acted with perfect sincerity according to his lights and strove to the utmost of his capacity and authority, which were powerful, to save the world from the awful, devastating struggle in which we are now engaged.'

He mocked at Hitler's recent Munich protestations that he had only desired peace with Britain. 'What,' he cried, 'do these ravings and outpourings count before the silence of Neville Chamberlain's tomb?' The answer is one that even now history cannot render: fifty years later, the official record of the peace feelers between his less bellicose colleagues and Hitler is still closed to public scrutiny.

ON THE thirteenth, air Intelligence unravelled more evidence on the coming mighty air raids: 'the same source' had indicated that there would be three attacks, on three successive nights. At seven P.M. the source revealed that there was a code word for each attack: the first was *REGENSCHIRM* (Umbrella), the second *MONDSCHNEIN SERENATE* (Moonlight Sonata). The third was not known. The most likely target was still Central London.<sup>58</sup>

The next full moon would be three hours after midnight on the fourteenth. On Churchill's desk calendar a bracket appeared, pencilled in from dusk on the fourteenth to dawn on the eighteenth. He left that three-day space free of appointments in London.

To this codebreaking information from Bletchley – primly euphemised as 'a very good source' – the air ministry added the lurid boasts of a Nazi airman shot down on Saturday to an S.P. (stool pigeon) planted in his cell. The Blitz had led to rioting in London, and 'Hermann' thought the time ripe for this colossal raid. True, this bragging airman had also mentioned Birmingham and Coventry, a city of a quarter-million souls; but the *ENIGMAS* indicated London and, as the operations orders now issued for the counter-attack (*COLD WATER*) showed, that was the air staff's bet too.<sup>59</sup>



On Thursday November 14 the three-day, four-night bracket pencilled on Churchill's desk card began. '?No cabinet' had been entered for the morning: at mid-day he and his unwilling colleagues had to be in their pews for Chamberlain's funeral. Several windows of the Abbey had been

blown out and the November air gusted in from outside, cold and bleak. Bevin looked bored, Duff Cooper disdainful. One man observed the irony of this overcoated, muffled congregation – ‘all the little men who had torpedoed poor Neville’s heroic efforts to preserve the peace and made his life a misery: some seemed to be gloating. Winston, followed by the war cabinet, however, had the decency to cry as he stood by the coffin.’<sup>60</sup> The ceremony could not have been staged to provide Chamberlain with a more undignified exit – the mourners found the full-size coffin already in position in the choir, so there was no solemn procession behind it. As the ceremony ended, the coffin was opened and a little oaken casket was plucked out, as though in a conjuring trick, and this – containing the ashes – was ‘put in a hole in the ground,’ as Lord Halifax recorded with evident indignation.

The clock ticked on. At 12:45 he presided over a defence committee. Entered on Churchill’s card at one-fifteen was ‘C-in-C Fighter Command.’ He was going to replace Dowding after all – a party caucus had again complained that the airforce lacked confidence in him. Churchill offered the air chief marshal a mission to the United States – his standard way of disposing of ill-fitting critics. Dowding demurred. Churchill told him curtly it was ‘in the public interest, of which I am the judge.’<sup>61</sup> To Dowding it must have looked like banishment from the kingdom which his command had so recently saved; and so indeed it was.

Winston lunched with the minister of shipping; he even forgot the man’s name, his mind was on other things.<sup>62</sup> The air ministry had summarised their findings on MOONLIGHT SONATA in a seven-paragraph report and sent it round to him. ‘The whole of the German long-range Bomber Force will be employed. The operation is being co-ordinated, we think, by the commander-in-chief of the G.A.F. [Göring]. It is probably reprisal for our attack on Munich.’ The target would probably be London, ‘but if further information indicates Coventry, Birmingham or elsewhere, we hope to get instructions out in time.’ In reprisal, Bomber Command would simultaneously raid Berlin, Essen or Munich, on a ‘knock-for-knock’ basis, and other counter-measures had been planned.

Churchill read in the report that air Intelligence expected to learn the actual date and target of MOONLIGHT SONATA in good time because at one P.M. on the day KG.100 would reconnoitre the target areas and transmit a weather report. ‘This will be our signal that the party is on.’ In the margin was scrawled: ‘*This unit sent the approved codeword at 13:00 exactly. 14/11.*’

THUS SOONER than expected the drama was upon them. Even as Churchill finished his luncheon, radio monitors across southern England found the

Nazi beam transmitters warming up, heard reconnaissance reports, intercepted messages from the special central control set up for MOONLIGHT SONATA at Versailles, and picked up the chaotic traffic as hundreds of enemy bombers switched on and tested radio gear.

It would be dark at six. Normally he would nap until three or four, then take visitors. But today was different – he would clear out of town as soon as he had cleared his appointments: his card shows them as 2:45 P.M., Lord Halifax; three P.M., Mr Attlee.

He certainly saw the former, because the foreign secretary afterward poured out his heart to a fellow minister about 'a great row which he has just been having with the P.M.'<sup>63</sup> Churchill had recently intercepted some general's letter to Eden containing the sentence, 'So far as I can make out the prime minister's scribble . . .' And now it had happened again: the ambassador in Cairo had sent a private telegram describing any further transfer of R.A.F. squadrons to Greece as 'quite crazy.' Through a typical F.O. blunder, this telegram had gone to everybody from the king downward. 'The P.M.,' recorded Dalton smugly, 'is furious.'

Winston had insisted on a reprimand. Halifax wrote back refusing, pointing out that the message had never been meant for his eyes. The P.M. exploded, and sent for him: he wanted to haul him over the coals for disobedience. But Halifax came over to No. 10 in no mood of contrition toward Winston. 'Always stand up to him,' was his advice. 'He hates doormats. If you begin to give way he will simply wipe his feet upon you.' He again reminded the P.M. that he had merely nosed into a private letter addressed to somebody else. Of course, he concluded, if Winston insisted, the rebuke would be sent. The P.M. pouted. 'I don't wish,' he snorted, 'to hear anything more about the matter.'

'A most extraordinary man!' remarked Halifax, after relating this to Dalton.

After Attlee also left, Churchill summoned the Humber to the garden gate to take him out to Dytchley, and slipped out by the back door. Soon it would be dark and the inferno would begin.

Down at the gate John Martin handed him an urgent message. As the car gathered speed Churchill slit open the buff envelope, gasped, and at Kensington Gardens told the driver to turn back.<sup>64</sup> The target was not Central London at all. In his pocket notebook Martin entered afterward: 'At No. 10. False start for Dytchley (MOONLIGHT SONATA – the raid was on Coventry).'



According to the shocked investigations carried out three days later by the air ministry's Directorate of Home Operations, which surely had little cause to bring forward the timing, by three P.M. 80 Wing's radio counter-measures organisation 'was able to report that the enemy River Group [*X-Gerät*] beams were intersecting over Coventry,' hundreds of miles to the north of London. 'All R.A.F. commands were informed, and Home Security and Home Forces put into the picture.'<sup>65</sup>

This matches the recollections of Group Captain Frederick Winterbotham and officers working at the intercept stations. All agree moreover that the radio monitors briefed to listen for the codeword to abort the primary target – *MOND MOND* – heard it as anticipated between one and two P.M., and that Humphreys of Hut 3 immediately phoned Winterbotham's office at Broadway.<sup>66</sup> The latter goes further, claiming that the message from Humphreys also named Coventry. His secretary typed a note in the treble-spacing which Winston required and sent it over to No. 10.<sup>67</sup>

Professor R. V. Jones, whose early reputation was closely identified with Mr Churchill's premiership, disputes this. He maintains that he alone could work out the beam tangents that identified each target; that first Bletchley had to decipher the relevant signals; and that on the fourteenth the necessary break did not occur until far into the night. He also insists, despite the evidence, that 80 Wing had *not* located the beams by the time he left his Broadway office at five-thirty. Perhaps the Wing simply could not contact him; perhaps Wing-commander E. B. Addison did not even try. Jones will not accept either possibility. What is sure is that by the time the watch was changed at Fighter Command headquarters at four P.M., the W.A.A.F. officer bringing on the new watch was detailed to transfer her most able plotters from No. 11 Group (covering London) to No. 10 Group, covering the route to Coventry.<sup>68</sup>



The Humber had returned to Downing-street. The buff envelope in Churchill's hands had told him that the London raid was off, and that the beams had been found intersecting over Coventry.<sup>69</sup>

Noticing the curiosity at No. 10 about his unexpected return, he explained to his staff with perhaps less than utter candour that 'the beams' indicated a colossal air raid on London that night, and he was 'not going to spend the night peacefully in the country while the Metropolis was under heavy attack.'<sup>71</sup> He sent the female staff home to their lodgings, then packed off Colville and Peck, the two private secretaries still on duty, to The Barn. 'You are too young to die,' he said. He himself mounted to the

air ministry roof, 'waiting for MOONLIGHT SONATA to begin,' as he told Colville afterward.<sup>72</sup>

He felt little anxiety about Coventry. He had ordered its defences strengthened after Ernie Bevin, now in the war cabinet, had reported its vulnerability to him on the seventh. Although the first bombs would not fall for several hours, there could of course be no question of alerting the whole population (and that is not the point at issue in this narrative). But since four P.M. the teletypes had gone out from the air ministry to the commands and ministries concerned, issuing the pre-arranged code-signal: 'EXECUTIVE COLD WATER.'<sup>73</sup> This triggered immediate countermeasures, including bomber attacks on Berlin, the enemy airfields and beam transmitters, and extra fighter cover.

By-passing London, Göring's bomber armada hit Coventry at seven P.M. Fighter Command scrambled 121 fighter planes and twelve thousand rounds of flak ammunition were expended, but neither injured the attacking force. The diary of General Hoffmann von Waldau, chief of Luftwaffe operations staff, betrays his delight:

Coventry attack proved to be biggest Luftwaffe operation ever and biggest success. Giant fires, 458 planes dropped bombs in good visibility. British report thousands of dead and injured. . . Pleasing results of our own flak particularly at Berlin, altogether ten bombers shot down.

Churchill went back to The Barn to sleep. Archie Sinclair admitted baldly the next day that the result was 'thoroughly unsatisfactory.' Sir John Anderson described the surviving Coventry workforce as 'shaken' and 'bitter.'<sup>73</sup> Over 550 had been killed and fifty thousand homes rendered uninhabitable. Twelve aircraft factories – the pilots' allotted targets – had been brought to a standstill. The enemy had lost only one plane, a Dornier. It was not a good beginning for the post-Dowding era.



*The secret underground headquarters of the war cabinet and the chiefs of staff in Marsham-street, Westminster, London. The building, designed to hold over 2,000 people, included radio and power stations. Shown here is Lord Ismay in the map room of the underground headquarters. With him is Mr G. Ranse, to whom all correspondence was addressed during the war, when the war cabinet offices were a top-priority secret.*

## 36: *All Very Innocent*

**F**RIDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 1940: soldiers cordoned off all access roads to Coventry; nobody was allowed through, even with ministry passes. That day the Bletchley Oracle spoke again. London was definitely to be the target. The air ministry flashed this secret message to all commands: 'Beams laid from Cherbourg to West of Surbiton station, Olympia, Paddington area, Westbourne Grove.'<sup>1</sup>

There had been a time when bombing did not worry Churchill. 'I take refuge,' he would say, quoting Raymond Poincaré, 'beneath the impenetrable arch of probability.' He had long since decided that probability needed a tilt – that there was something to be said for spending the night in the country while the metropolis was under attack. So he had gone again to Dytchley, and summoned Sir Alan Brooke to join him there at five P.M. next evening.

The general was not keen. He had spent a poisonous night in his club with only blankets between himself and eternity, listening to bombs falling all round St. James's and fire engines clanging past; he dreaded the bombers far less than the prospect of being kept up until two A.M. listening to the P.M.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Whitehall the P.M. double-checked the safety of the Cabinet War Room. While a secretary held a torch he clambered among the new girders and stanchions being inserted beneath the Annexe.<sup>3</sup> He decided to continue living in The Barn.

WITH SUDA Bay now a British naval base, he had great plans – he contemplated attacking Abyssinia, campaigning in the Balkans, even re-entering France in 1941. In his imagination he seized the Portuguese Azores and Cape Verde islands, and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. It was down in this disused Underground station that he called a staff meeting to urge a project which had now become an obsession – the seizure of Pantelleria, an islet seeming to dominate the narrows between Tunisia and Sicily. He

wanted a victory, however minor. Only one man was enthusiastic, Admiral Keyes, director of combined operations. He offered his five thousand Commandos for this assault. But Sir Andrew Cunningham demanded a postponement. He loathed Keyes and hated the whole idea. How could the navy supply a garrison on Pantelleria as well as its other duties? Churchill accused the admirals of 'negativism' and woeful ignorance of the time factor.<sup>4</sup> Down in The Barn he blistered at the Joint Planning Staff for wet-blanketing the fiery Admiral Keyes. 'I tell you frankly,' he promised, detaining the admiral afterward, 'I am not going to have anything to do with it unless you lead it.'<sup>5</sup>



The P.M. risked staying in the metropolis that night. His Oracle had revealed REGENSCHIRM as the target for destruction: an obvious reference to Mr Chamberlain's umbrella, and hence to Birmingham, the late premier's constituency. He seemed in better health – his cheeks ruddy, firm and lean – as he drove back to No. 10 the next morning, November 20, for an hour with Cecil Beaton, photographing him across the cabinet table.

On the morrow the monarch would re-open Parliament. Today Churchill invited his ministers to the House for the traditional preview of the king's speech. They stood self-consciously around his panelled room clutching sherry glasses while Churchill read the text. 'It is *cuthtomary* to *tht*and up,' he lisped, 'when the *kingth th*peech is read.' They stared curiously – they did not often set eyes on him. His lids did not droop, nor were there bags or black lines. One minister found himself fascinated by the eyes – 'glaucous, vigilant, angry, combative, visionary and tragic.'<sup>6</sup> He was running his war almost single-handed, and barely needed ministers.

Anxious for Wavell's offensive to begin, Churchill harried the taciturn general with inquiries. After he drafted one telegram over Eden's head, the secretary of war telephoned an acrimonious protest.<sup>7</sup> But he told Eden and Dill on the twenty-second that if Wavell could win a victory in Libya it might impress Turkey to enter the war. A few days later he invited Eden into his bedroom to feast with him on oysters. Winston washed them down with glass after glass of champagne, continuously sipped from an outsize wine glass whose stem he held between the first two fingers, until a healthy pink suffused the unnaturally pallid cheeks. Like father and son, together they looked forward to the time after Wavell's offensive: Eden said they must not leave his army idle – perhaps they should reinforce the Greeks? Bitten by the old unhealthy wanderlust, he suggested flying out to Wavell again.<sup>8</sup>



General Dill, the C.I.G.S., was excluded from such conversations. Churchill found it easy to dominate him. Dill was not getting enough exercise; one attaché found him charming but very pale.<sup>9</sup> He was burdened by a slow domestic tragedy – his wife was fading away at his Westminster apartment, paralysed and unable to speak. Moreover, Beaverbrook had begun poisoning Churchill's mind against him in favour of the ack-ack General Pile. Once Churchill taunted Dill that he wished he had General Papagos to run the army. Dill was a thoroughbred, too finely tuned to handle the 'gangster transactions' of politicians, as he called them; he poured out his heart to Brooke about how difficult he found the P.M. to deal with, and Brooke wrote, 'I feel he is having a miserable life.'<sup>10</sup>

Churchill thrived on friction: he wanted his lieutenants to be at each other's throats, not his. Beaverbrook squirmed, but toed the line. 'In cabinet meetings,' learned one observer, referring to the Canadian, 'he crabs the plans laid before them and is the one dissentient in almost everything. His close tie-up with Churchill is a thing of the past.'<sup>11</sup> On December 2 Beaverbrook wrote once again tendering his resignation. 'When the reservoir was empty,' he grumbled, sour that he was no longer getting his way, 'I was a genius. Now that the reservoir has some water in it, I am an inspired brigand. If the water slops over I will be a bloody anarchist.' He suggested Churchill hand over aircraft production to somebody who would 'inspire confidence' at the air ministry. The P.M. replied sharply. 'You are in the galleys,' he wrote, 'and will have to row on to the end.'<sup>12</sup>

Beaverbrook was not an easy horse to ride. Altogether he submitted half a dozen such resignations. Months later he would write cheekily to the prime minister that he had deduced what was wanted of him: to stay in office, but 'to storm, to threaten resignation – and to withdraw again.'<sup>13</sup>

AS THOUGH to assert his potency, Winston thrived on cutting short majestic careers; his own ruthlessness rejuvenated him. His baleful eye had settled again on the navy in the Mediterranean, despite the daring exploits which had recently tilted the balance firmly in its favour. By hit-and-run tactics Admirals Cunningham and Somerville had gnawed at the Italian navy's superior strength. A spectacular Fleet Air Arm attack had crippled three of Mussolini's biggest warships in harbour at Taranto. Despite these triumphs, Churchill was out for Somerville's blood: in fact he had wanted revenge ever since Somerville had dared criticise the massacre at Mers-el-Kébir.

On November 27 the P.M. saw his chance. Escorting a convoy from Gibraltar, the admiral had briefly tangled with the Italian battle fleet off Sardinia but gave up the chase when they outran him. To Churchill this

smacked of a dearth of ‘offensive spirit,’ and he rushed Admiral Lord Cork out to investigate. But upon hearing jubilant Italian propagandists claim that Somerville had ‘run away’ he had second thoughts – a court-martial now would confirm the propaganda – and suggested they merely tell Somerville to haul down his flag. He would put Admiral Sir Henry Harwood in his place, the victor over the *Graf Spee*. He had entertained him recently at Chequers and liked his style.

But Cork was already out at Gibraltar, so it was too late to call off his investigation. Churchill expressed confidence that Somerville could nonetheless be relieved within the week – unless of course found blameless, which seemed to him hardly likely.<sup>14</sup> To the P.M.’s chagrin, Cork not only exonerated the admiral but called the investigation a ‘bloody outrage,’ while privately urging him not to bear hard feelings against the admiralty. There were, he apologised, people inside and out – which the victim took as an aspersion to Tom Phillips and Winston Churchill – ready to ‘raise their voices without any knowledge of the facts.’<sup>15</sup> \*

While this row was blazing, in defence committee on the fourth he asked impatiently about Wavell’s offensive, and was indignant that Eden could not say when it would begin. He criticised the generals, ranted that the army should ‘do something,’ and sulked when Eden suggested leaving Wavell to do as he thought best. The normally white-faced Dill coloured with anger at the P.M.’s attitude.<sup>16</sup> Winston was unrepentant. ‘If with the situation as it is,’ he wrote to the C.I.G.S. a few days later, ‘General Wavell is only playing small and is not hurling in his whole available forces with furious energy, he will have failed to rise to the height of circumstances. I never worry about action, but only about inaction.’<sup>17</sup>

Churchill revived his current obsession – Pantelleria. He put it to chiefs of staff and Keyes on the third. But two days later it was finally shelved in defence committee. Eden poured cold water on the project, though carefully attributing to Wavell the blunt opinion that the islet seemed ‘an insufficient prize.’ The First Sea Lord agreed, alarmed at the side-tracking of warships he urgently needed for convoy duties.

‘Pantelleria,’ he quietly murmured, ‘has so far caused us very little trouble.’ Roger Keyes did not attend, and the plan was shelved – to Churchill’s enduring discontent. ‘It is really a terrible business having R.K. mixed up with the business as D.C.O.,’ Admiral Pound lamented later. He

\* Readers already dubious about the official histories may compare Capt. S. R. Roskill’s bold 1977 narrative in *Churchill & The Admirals* with his anodyne 1954 account in the official *The War at Sea*. The latter narrative, published during Mr Churchill’s second premiership, makes no mention of his part in this episode.

is a perfect nuisance. . . The only thing he cares about is the glorification of R.K.'<sup>18</sup>



That day, December 5, he drove over to the Spanish embassy to lunch with the Duke of Alba. When the civil war broke out in July 1936, the traditionalist in him had swayed him to General Franco's cause against the Republicans. He became a fervent advocate of non-intervention during August and insisted that the majority was on the rebel side. On October 2, 1936, moved by the atrocities committed by the communists and anarchists, he had declared: 'It would be a mistake alike in truth and wisdom for British public opinion to rate both sides at the same level.' He was initially unmoved by news that German and Italian 'volunteers' had begun slaying Russian Bolsheviks and French communists in Spain. 'When I search my heart,' he announced on January 7, 1937, 'even if all these armed tourists to Spain were to transfix each other with the simultaneous efficiency of Ivan the Terrible and Bulbul Amir, till there was no one left except the press representatives to tell the tale, I cannot feel that the interests and safety of Britain would be in any way endangered.' Only in April 1938 had he reversed his public stand and spoken out against Franco.

But in private he liked the Spanish and had urged Roosevelt to ship victuals to them. There were sound political reasons for alleviating their suffering. Germany had to be kept away from Gibraltar.

'In your civil war,' the Spanish ambassador reported Churchill as saying at this luncheon,

I at first took your side, and if I were a Spaniard I would have served Franco without hesitation. Subsequently, when I saw Germany and Italy intervene, I believed as a good British patriot that a Nationalist triumph was not in our interests and for this reason I went so far as to write articles against you. Later still I persuaded myself that it was not certain that you were in the wrong, and I tried to demonstrate this by my speeches to the House. It pained me, to be sure, that my words were not published in the Spanish press.

We have decided – and I have intervened personally now in this matter – to facilitate supplies to Spain as much as possible. Will Spain be able to resist Germany's pressure? We ourselves desire to maintain the best and most cordial relations with you, and if these change you can be certain that we shall not be to blame. I detest communism as much as you do yourselves.<sup>19</sup>

Hitler had sent his chief of Intelligence, Admiral Canaris, to pressure Franco in Madrid. If Churchill was reading the German diplomatic cables he could follow the admiral's progress. Two nights after the London banquet Franco rebuffed Hitler: in both countries' interests, as he put it, he declined to approve of *FELIX* – the proposed entry of German troops into Spain scheduled for January 10; he did not want Spain to become a burden on the Axis.<sup>20</sup>

The self-effacing cryptanalysts at Bletchley were the unsung heroes of Churchill's strategy. The strain on these men and women was seldom less than on their comrades in combat. One professor – who would eventually crack *BROWN*, the cypher used by the Hitler's secret weapons establishments – was slowly cracking up himself. His colleagues saw him storm out slamming doors or wrapping an imaginary gown about himself. How many German deaths were already on their minds, how many British lives? Churchill longed to magnify and sing their praises, but could do so only in the utmost privacy. Visiting these rare people once, he complimented them: 'You all look very, uh,' he began, groping for the right expression of what was passing through his mind, '*innocent*.'<sup>21</sup>



Churchill would have found time for an embassy luncheon even if Hitler was not wooing Franco: eating was his second major pleasure. Told in cabinet that sardine imports would have to cease, he had quietly vowed out of earshot, as he thought, 'I shall never eat another sardine.'<sup>22</sup> The noises of uninhibited digestion added to his eating pleasure – if not to that of his fellow diners. After one Chequers dinner a supreme commander secretly demonstrated to his incredulous staff 'how the P.M. eats his soup – if "eats" is the word':

Being short and blockily built his mouth isn't very much above the soup plate. He crouches over the plate, almost has his nose in the soup, wields the spoon rapidly. The soup disappears to the accompaniment of loud and raucous gurglings.<sup>23</sup>

'On the first sip of clear turtle soup,' wrote the Ivy League host of a Churchill banquet years later,

his head bobbed up and down in vigorous approval. He was firm about having no sherry in the soup, pushing away the heavy silver ladle which the waiter almost reverently proffered; but the soup

in its unboosted state disappeared into the Marlborough throat with a smacking of lips and hissing inspirations which, had they been broadcast to the nation as an example of table etiquette, would have undone in a single stroke the entire theory of polite eating as now applied to American children.

When the terrapin was brought in, he lowered his mouth and forked in the delicacy with the 'businesslike thrust of the grab bucket of a steam shovel.'<sup>24</sup>



In the distance that Sunday evening, December 8, 1940, he could hear London again being bombed. Four hundred bombers were over the capital. But the news from Madrid was good: a visitor noticed that he looked vigorous and bright-of-eye and confident.<sup>25</sup> He had another reason too: General Wavell had begun slowly advancing into the Western Desert. For five weeks Winston had had one nightmare: that 'some sandstorm' would give the generals a chance to call off the offensive.

The next morning he pulled on a fur-collared topcoat, drove to Westminster, and picked over the charred wreckage in Parliament escorted by Eric Seal and a policeman. 'Horrible!' he observed, without plucking the cigar from his mouth. Bombs had demolished the wing where Oliver Cromwell signed King Charles's death warrant.<sup>26</sup> He went back to his bunker to preside over a night air-defence meeting and sent Clemmie out to tour the shelters. She had a realistic understanding of the common people's problems, as her recommendations showed – models of logic and humanity which Winston passed along without amendment to Herbert Morrison.

The news was that British troops were now engaging the Italians south of Sidi Barrani. In cabinet he apologised for having taken the decision to authorise this offensive with only defence committee approval. As Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor's two divisions rolled westward into Libya, they took thousands of prisoners and killed or captured several Italian generals. With visions of corn falling before the sickle, Churchill reported this victory to the House on the tenth. Eden telephoned that O'Connor had taken Sidi Barrani. Unable to sleep for excitement, he even telephoned Eden on the twelfth to complain about not pursuing the Italians hard enough, and rasped about 'missed opportunities.' It was a symptom of his continuing distrust of local commanders.<sup>27</sup>

He basked in reflected glory, not all of it unjustified. To the Dominion premiers he preened himself for having run the risk, 'in the teeth of the

invasion menace,' of reinforcing the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> It was a bald untruth, but he had come to believe it himself, repeating it to his duty secretary who was not aware of Bletchley's achievements. With unconscious irony he predicted how future history would have written of this 'gamble' had it failed – of his criminal folly in exposing Britain to invasion, compounded by sending to Greece the very squadrons that might have brought victory in Egypt. But it had not failed. He had brought this offensive to brilliant fulfilment – 'unlike Narvik,' he sighed, 'which of all [the] fiascos had . . . been the worst – except for Dakar.'<sup>29</sup>

Flushed and jubilant, he carried the tidings to his junior ministers assembled in the bunker for the purpose. His earlier obloquy about the Cairo generals was forgotten. 'In Wavell,' he announced, 'we have got a winner.' The victory would send ripples around the Mediterranean and as far as Moscow. One minister dictated afterward:

The P.M. says that he is quite sure that Hitler cannot lie down under this. Perhaps within three weeks, and certainly within three months, he must make some violent counter-stroke. What will it be? An attempt, at long last, to invade us? Perhaps a gas attack on us on an immense scale, drenching our cities with mustard?

The British, Churchill continued, must be prepared for worse to come. There was nothing to stop Hitler advancing through to Salonica. As for American aid, he expressed perennial optimism. 'They will soon be in the war in fact,' he hinted, 'if not in form.' His message to Washington would be this: So you want to watch us fighting for your liberties? Then you'll have to pay for the performance.<sup>30</sup>

AFTER BEING laid up for decades, the fifty destroyers which he had wrested from the U.S. Congress had proven of such questionable seaworthiness that he was loath to put British sailors aboard them. Two of the destroyers turned turtle and sank. The director of naval Intelligence learned that they were unstable.<sup>31</sup> Dining at Chequers with Churchill and Lord Louis Mountbatten, an army lieutenant gathered that the ships' designer had been sacked. 'They roll 70°,' he wrote a few days later. They would be useless until refitted, in the spring.<sup>32</sup>

Unofficial Washington jeered that having cried out for the ships now Churchill was not manning them. The truth was more unpleasant, but in the current state of play he could hardly complain to Roosevelt. Britain would shortly need massive financial aid, and he spent two weeks drafting an appeal to Roosevelt. No doubt gritting his teeth, he praised the de-

stroyers as 'invaluable.'<sup>33</sup> Anticipating further jeers, he confidentially asked the admiralty for data on the destroyers – when each had arrived and 'defects that had to be remedied.'<sup>34</sup> In cabinet he confessed that he was chilled by the American attitude since the presidential election.<sup>35</sup> Worried, Churchill tried to coax some response. A typical telegram began temptingly, 'You may be interested to receive the following naval notes on the action at Taranto. . .'<sup>36</sup> Viewed from Downing-street, Roosevelt's was the silence of the sphinx.

Britain was now buying hundreds of fighter planes, aircraft and aero-engines from America; billions of bullets, tons of explosives, a million rifles and machine guns. When there were delays, the P.M. would telephone to the British Purchasing Commission in Washington to inquire. Its director, Arthur Purvis had direct access to the White House. Purvis had reported to him in person late in November; Churchill liked his eagerness and invited him down to Chequers to work with him on the latest dramatic appeal to Roosevelt.<sup>37</sup>

The fifteen-page document was cabled to Lord Lothian, the ambassador in Washington, on December 7, 'a statement of the minimum action necessary to achieve our common purpose.' Churchill referred in it to Britain's 'perhaps unexpected' recovery, but predicted that the decision for 1941 would lie upon the high seas, across which the supplies had to be brought.

We can endure [he wrote] the shattering of our dwellings and the slaughter of our civil population by indiscriminate air attacks, and we hope to parry these increasingly as our science develops, and to repay them upon military objectives in Germany as our Air Force more nearly approaches the strength of the enemy.

After discussing other ways in which the United States could help, he turned to the underlying nightmare: how to finance all this. 'The moment approaches,' wrote the P.M.,

when we shall no longer be able to pay cash for shipping and other supplies. While we will do our utmost, and shrink from no proper sacrifice to make payments across the exchange, I believe you will agree that it would be wrong in principle and mutually disadvantageous in effect if, at the height of this struggle, Great Britain were to be divested of all saleable assets so that after the victory was won with our blood, civilisation saved, and the time

gained for the United States to be fully armed against all eventualities, we should stand stripped to the bone.<sup>38</sup>



Uncertain about the future, he had resumed his flirtation with Vichy. He told General de Gaulle only in part about the prospect of winning over General Weygand. The Free French general was careful not to agree to serve under this rival.<sup>39</sup> Shortly impressive secret assurances reached London from Vichy: Professor Rougier sent a written statement.<sup>40</sup> \* The Canadian chargé at Vichy, Pierre Dupuy, confirmed the terms orally with Pétain and his ministers. Churchill asked Halifax to circularise details to the cabinet in utmost secrecy.<sup>41</sup> A few days later Dupuy came down to Chequers and reported over dinner that Pétain, Darlan – now prime minister – and Huntziger, the minister of war, had suggested they co-operate with Britain behind a fake ‘smokescreen’ of apparent hostility. Even Darlan had agreed, while huffing that after Mers-el-Kébir he would never shake hands with a British officer again.<sup>42</sup>

Fate would reward these three Frenchmen poorly. Pétain was sentenced to death by de Gaulle for treason; Darlan was assassinated by an S.O.E. hired gun; Huntziger was liquidated by de Gaulle’s agents.<sup>43</sup>

ALONE AMONG Churchill’s colleagues, Lord Halifax was quite under-awed by the P.M. Rather proud of the fact, the foreign secretary had noted in his diary on the last day of April, after Churchill had been ‘rather cantankerous’ at the cabinet meeting: ‘It is a source of amusement to me to watch John Simon slightly mesmerised by him, and his look of surprise if I venture, as I often do, to butt into Winston’s tirades; the latter doesn’t really mind, but grunts a bit over his cigar and is as friendly as ever afterwards.’ With Winston now prime minister, that friendliness had worn thin, and their relations had smouldered all that autumn on a shortening fuse.

According to some, the devout Catholic insisted on starting cabinet with a prayer. He was a knobbly, gangling aristocrat who wore ancient leather-trimmed tweeds as a conscious mark of superior breeding. He fled most weekends to Yorkshire to escape the P.M.’s verbosity, but was pursued even there by the P.M.’s lisping, snuffling voice, calling him by tele-

\* Rougier had gone on to Washington. Churchill proposed they buy his silence. The F.O. instructed the Washington embassy to ‘discuss Rougier’s financial position with him,’ and added, ‘We are rather apprehensive of his indiscretions. One report states that he is incapable of holding his tongue.’



phone. He found he could stanch this irksome long-distance verbal flood-tide ruthlessly by interrupting: 'What's that, Winston, I can't properly hear you!' (He could not pronounce his r's.)

After one late-November cabinet had dragged on wholly needlessly, Halifax blamed it on Winston's infatuation with his own voice. Worse had followed: a defence committee 'at which Winston turned up in a grey romper suit,' as Halifax disrespectfully termed the siren suit. 'It was all I could do to keep my face straight.' The P.M. talked from nine-thirty until midnight, 'round and round and across.'<sup>44</sup> Sometimes, commented one colleague approvingly, Halifax could 'give the P.M. the unmistakable impression that he regarded him as a very vulgar and ignorant person.'<sup>45</sup> Churchill allowed it to be noised around that Halifax was having the F.O. flat elaborately redecorated, and chortled at the resulting contumely heaped upon the minister. (Halifax never even used the flat.) The elaborate building works on Churchill's own 'Annexe' never became known.

The differences with Halifax shortly came to a head. After seeing him briefly on Thursday the twelfth, Churchill drove to Chequers. He had arranged a private preview of Charlie Chaplin's new movie, 'The Great Dictator.' But unexpected news reached him: Lord Lothian, the ambassador in Washington, had died. He had become increasingly drowsy, fallen ill, and being a Christian Scientist had refused treatment. Thoughts of man's mortality oppressed Churchill; only a few days ago Lothian had lunched with him. Brooding over dinner, he reflected on the future – of both Europe and himself. The one should become a confederation, the other retire to Chartwell to write a book about the war – he knew its ending, and he had its outline in his head.\* The thankless task of reconstructing Europe would be best bequeathed to his successors.

Washington was the plum embassy posting. Churchill contemplated sending the even drowsier Pound; considered Vansittart, who had aroused American disquiet by asinine broadcasts about Germany; looked at Lyttelton; and opted in the end for David Lloyd George, the fiery Welshman. Wrapping a rainbow-coloured kimono around his siren suit, he phoned the ex-premier's son to sound him about his father. Lloyd George declared himself still willing. Winston returned to the Great Hall and planted himself beaming in front of the fire. He invited Halifax down to lunch on Saturday and told him. But this solution was soon shot down.

\* Hitler expressed similar ideas after Franco let him down: 'We sat for a long time,' wrote one listener, 'with the Führer around the fireside. He talked about his pension – that of a middle-grade civil servant! He is going to write books – a third volume of *Mein Kampf*. . . entitled *Collected Broken Promises*, and books on Frederick the Great, Luther and Napoleon.' He would give Churchill 'leave to paint and write his memoirs.'<sup>46</sup>

The Welshman's doctor opposed it, and the embassy in Washington advised that Lloyd George was regarded as an appeaser and 'not unwilling to consider making terms with Germany.'<sup>47</sup>

Then Eden, still secretary for war, came down to Sunday dinner. Together they watched 'Gone with the Wind,' then sat up late talking. Eden had long resigned himself to Churchill clinging on to the premiership until the war was over. But he spread the flattery as thick as butter whenever he could. After the P.M.'s sixty-sixth birthday, he had forced himself to pen a fulsome letter about how heartened he had been to hear Winston remark that he had never felt more equal to his work than now. 'All the same,' he had written ingratiatingly, 'take care of yourself.' Somehow between them, in the warm afterglow of Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh, the ideal solution occurred to them: Halifax should be moved three thousand miles to Washington, while Eden moved into the foreign office – only a few yards from No. 10. Churchill saw Eden again on the sixteenth before lunching with Lloyd George, and by the next day he had made up his mind.

A multitude of reasons underpinned the choice. True, Halifax was as much an appeaser as Lloyd George – and Lothian for that matter. In Britain, Winston quietly told his staff, he had 'no future.' But he could yet restore his name if he could bring America into the war.<sup>48</sup> Appointing the foreign secretary to the embassy might seem like a demotion to him, but it would flatter the Americans. Halifax cursed Eden for stabbing him in the back. Eden told him, 'In wartime everybody must go where they are sent.' Over dinner with Eden on Thursday, Churchill said that Halifax had suggested that Eden take Washington instead. Eden turned that down and on Friday the P.M. wrote to Halifax insisting. 'You are,' he said, 'I am sure, the one person best qualified for this paramount duty.'<sup>49</sup> Lady Halifax was furious at seeing her husband shunted into this Washington cul-de-sac. She rampaged into No. 10 at her husband's side and asked bluntly what the emoluments would be. 'When they had been promised plenty of money,' wrote Beaverbrook maliciously, 'all was well.'<sup>50</sup>

Headaches plagued Churchill when he listened to these tiresome squabbles. Later that Friday Eden came down to Chequers, handed his rakish hat to the butler, and sat up with the P.M. Winston reassured him that he would make a marvellous foreign secretary. 'It is like moving up from fourth form to sixth,' he suggested.<sup>51</sup> In fact he was appointing a nonentity, and deliberately. While every poll demonstrated his immense popularity, Eden was admired by nobody at cabinet level except himself. 'I should hate to have in [Halifax's] place,' wrote one minister, 'that wretched Eden, posing before the looking-glass.'<sup>52</sup> Americans might dub

him 'Miss England,' but he was oblivious to his reputation for vanity. Winston might call him his 'Princess Elizabeth,' and did; Eden took it as a compliment.<sup>53</sup> One of his staff at the Dominions office recalled that Eden had asked outright for 'as much publicity as possible.'<sup>54</sup> Nor did the new foreign secretary impress foreign notables. He had rather liked Hitler, but the Führer had dismissed him as a 'brilliant dandy.'<sup>\*</sup> The American military attaché meeting him at a dinner party with the C.I.G.S. would make a note of his 'extreme collegiate manner – rather limp and inclined to flop about.' 'He was the only one,' commented this general, 'who sat at table feeding himself like an untrained child.'<sup>55</sup>

A few days later an intimate emissary sent by Roosevelt met the new foreign secretary: 'The words,' he reported to the president, '. . . carried no conviction, for I am sure the man has no deeply rooted moral stamina. A goodly number of soft Britishers must like him and his hat and I fancy Churchill gives him high office because he neither thinks, acts – much less say[s] – anything of importance.'<sup>†</sup> For an hour Eden dilated on the Balkan war and the desert. 'I gained the impression,' his visitor secretly wrote to Roosevelt that day, 'that Mr Anthony Eden had little more to do with the prosecution of the war than the Supreme Court. . . Mr Eden took [me] to my car where the photographers were conveniently and no doubt spontaneously waiting.'<sup>57</sup>

Churchill's future ambassador to Washington was a different breed altogether. Just as those who worked with horses or dogs might come to resemble them, observed one envious colleague at this time, so Halifax was 'touched with a distant semblance of stags and the like.' The same American visitor commended him to Roosevelt. 'A tall, stoop shouldered aristocrat with one hand in a grey glove greeted me,' he described, and summarised: 'I liked him.'<sup>58</sup>

Lord Halifax had tried even harder than Chamberlain to halt this ruinous war. But he had the grace to concede defeat. Before giving him a triumphant send-off to Chesapeake Bay aboard the new battleship *King George V*, Winston proposed his health at the farewell Pilgrims' luncheon. Here, he said, went a man of deep religious conviction, and an ardent supporter of the chase. 'And thus,' he followed, with a gentle twinkle in his eye, 'he has always succeeded in getting the best of both worlds.'

\* In February 1934 Eden told Jan Masaryk that the Führer made an excellent impression on him. 'He considers Hitler an honest fanatic who does not want war,' noted the Czech diplomat. 'My own impression is that Eden's promotion to Lord Privy Seal and tour of Europe right afterwards have gone to his head.'<sup>56</sup>

† From the hand-written original in the Harry Hopkins papers in New York. Robert Sherwood, *The White House Papers of Harry Hopkins*, page 238, imperceptibly omitted these lines. One more example why it pays to eschew printed sources.

Halifax rose dryly to the occasion. As viceroy of India, he said, he had once thanked the stationmaster at Delhi for the excellent arrangements for his journey. The turbaned Indian gentleman had bowed low and replied, 'It has always been a very great pleasure to see you off.' He ventured a mirthless smile. 'No doubt many of you here to-day are animated by feelings no less kindly.'<sup>59</sup>



Still visited by doubts about his own longevity, Churchill passed an afternoon on a twice-postponed call at his old school – his first in thirty years. Once during the wilderness years, hoping to wallow in nostalgia, he had driven out to Harrow with Lord Birkenhead, only to be espied and booed by a multitude of pupils. He vowed never to darken Harrow's door again. But the school had had its share of bombs and casualties, and he softened. Together with his Harrovian colleagues he joined in the lusty songs remembered from half a century before, and tears rolled down his cheeks to the concealed merriment of the boys.

After the memorial service for Lothian, Dalton came over to No. 10 and spoke with Churchill, who had not attended the abbey, sending Bracken in his place. Being partly responsible for psychological warfare, Dalton's people had drafted a script for Churchill to broadcast urging the Italians to get rid of Mussolini. Given his recent setbacks the time was ripe. Dalton said his agents would make hay when the Fascist leader visited Milan. Churchill remarked, 'They will all be killed.'

'No doubt,' said Dalton without feeling. 'But that is war. If they can add to the confusion and loss of morale, they will help us to a victory.' In his secret diary he observed that they must offer 'a fair price' to Italians willing to get rid of 'M[ussolini] and his gang.' He added, however, 'There is no place today for stupid doctrinaire prejudices against Fascism as such. If some Fascist toughs will murder M. and a few more, and then join with others representing the royal family, the army, industry, the Italian workers and peasants, we must not reject them for the sake of some thin theory.'<sup>60</sup>

The P.M. broadcast the desired text on the twenty-third from his bunker. One American journalist remarked, 'It is the best thing that Winston has ever done.'<sup>61</sup>

One thing puzzled him on reflection: retaliation against Germany – what the air ministry had alluringly called 'knock-for-knock' – was not working. The enemy raids were getting worse. After Coventry, Bomber Command was ordered (on December 4) to deliver an area attack with the town centre explicitly stated as aiming point for the first time. The cabinet

approved this order retroactively on the thirteenth, and the first such attack was executed three nights later on Mannheim, an inland port and a chemical centre. Experienced crews went in first as fire-raisers. For the first time photographic reconnaissance was available, and the photographs taken five days later showed that despite bright moonlight the 134 bombers had caused no damage to the town. The P.R. unit then photographed oil plants allegedly attacked by hundreds of bombers; they had not been damaged either. Seemingly Mr Churchill's night bombers, lacking navigation aids, had so far released most of their munitions onto the countryside or open sea.

It was a sobering revelation, and certainly untimely. On his resolve, the war economy was being geared to an immense bomber programme (it was not a cabinet decision). The discovery that humans cannot see in the dark was not new. But there was no way back now.

Two or three times over the next three weeks the Canadian defence minister, Colonel James L. Ralston, called on Churchill to express concern about how he proposed to employ the Canadian contingent training in Britain. 'I mentioned,' Ralston reported to Ottawa after seeing the P.M. in the cabinet room on December 17, 'that in Canada already there had been newspaper reports intimating that it was proposed to send Canadians to the Middle East.' Ralston reminded Mr Churchill that such a proposal had never even been put forward. 'We assume,' he said, 'that employment of our troops outside of the United Kingdom will be left for our suggestion.'

'Of course,' replied Churchill, and mentioned in his next breath that there was 'always a very real threat' of Nazi invasion.

He was confident [reported the Canadian minister] that notwithstanding [Hitler's] apparently great military superiority we can survive and eventually defeat him. Victory might, however, take years.

In his private diary Ralston described a Churchill conference on gun production that day with the minister of supply. 'Churchill,' he wrote, 'completely dominated the situation. They were all assembled and Churchill was writing something. They all sat around and spoke in whispers. No one took liberties and the atmosphere was only lightened when he made some Churchillian remark.'

Ruling that Germany was not to be bombed over Christmas – an act of charity that under these circumstances seems of only academic interest – Mr Churchill drove down to Chequers. (He had probably been warned

by Bletchley that Hitler had already issued identical orders.\*) ‘Wonder whether the Germans will fall into the trap!’ wrote an F.O. official. They did not. Afterward, he heaved a sigh of relief. ‘Thank Goodness we decided not to bomb,’ he wrote. ‘We should have looked fools talking what Joe K[ennedy] would call all that “God stuff,” if we had bombed and the Germans had not.’<sup>62</sup>

As papa Winston joined his family that Christmas, Mary observed that everybody was in good spirits. ‘No reports,’ she entered carefully in her teenager’s diary, ‘of any air, land or sea activity.’

True, her papa made a point of working on, and exhorted his staff to do the same. But after the Christmas turkey the necktie was loosened, and Sarah sang while husband Vic Oliver manned the piano. Everybody joined in until far into the night – the P.M. singing lustily and occasionally in tune. And when their Viennese family pianist hammered out some waltzes, Winston trod what one secretary called ‘a remarkably frisky measure of his own’ on the centre of the floor. ‘This,’ wrote Mary that day, ‘was one of the happiest Christmases I can remember. . . I’ve never before seen the family look so happy – so united.’ They were all there, son, daughters, spouses and now even a grandson. ‘No one but the family,’ Winston told Halifax in a proud letter, old enmities forgotten. ‘And oddly enough the whole of it.’ Christmas one year later would find them both three thousand miles away.

He had invited the clever and perceptive Canadian, Colonel Ralston, to weekend at Chequers together with Canada’s ambassador to Vichy, Dupuy. Ralston’s diary gives a vivid picture of that weekend:

*Saturday, December 21, 1940:* The prime minister did not come down so we chatted until dinner time, 8:40 P.M., with Mrs Churchill, very kindly and agreeable, and Miss Mary, most attractive and unspoiled.

At dinner the prime minister was vigorous and intensely interesting and told us the story of . . . Dunkirk and . . . his conferences with Gamelin and others. He described graphically the rear-guard battles to enable the withdrawal to be made at Dunkirk. . . I was in no position to check the facts but it did seem to me that the story upheld almost too wonderfully, and that it might be that there were rough edges which had been smoothed off in the telling.

\* After visiting German airforce headquarters, Göring’s deputy Erhard Milch recorded in his pocket notebook (in the author’s possession): ‘From 24th till 26th, a.m., no attacks on England on Führer’s orders.’

It was however an outstanding demonstration of vitality, clearheadedness . . . the story of a man who would not simply sit by and allow the staff to work things out, but had night and day taken a direct hand in the policies being carried out.

More than once during the evening he gave evidence of his fighting quality and his confidence in the indomitable spirit of the people of England. He described their fighting with pitchforks and hoes and shovels. He was asked what England would do if Hitler attempted to invade. He said that they would drown as many of them as they could on the way over and knock the rest of them on the head when they got there. He said the Hun had to be fought with everything we have.

'I shall stop at nothing,' Churchill said. The Canadian defence minister continued his diary the next day:

*Sunday, December 22, 1940:* While Churchill was working (in bed), Howe, MacQueen and I went up to say goodbye. . . He had a big mahogany board with legs on it on the counterpane. On the right hand side was the despatch box with the lid up and all the papers and whatnots; left on the table were clips, extra supplies of paper, general stationery sundries.

Churchill was busy pasting red stickers, which he was wetting with a moistener held in his left hand, onto documents from the box. Ralston saw that they were printed with big black letters, ACTION THIS DAY.

He smoked the regulation long cigar, which by the way only seems to get smoked now and again. His practise (I saw him at dinner) is to chew the fuller end of the cigar, the cigar having gone out, then finally to cut down both ends and get a fresh grip. He then lights the fuller end and most gradually consumes the cigar, more by chewing than by burning. . . He is to see Dupuy again. . . I must say that I came away with a deep impression of his robust courage, force and resourcefulness.<sup>63</sup>

Churchill drove down again to Chequers the following weekend.

Invisible, five thousand feet above London's empty streets that Sunday night, December 29, the *Knickebein* radio beams intersected in the pitch darkness above the University tower. At seven P.M. the enemy arrived at that crossroads in the ether and began dropping explosives and incendiary

canisters. It was only on a moderate scale, with 136 bombers – two more than Churchill had sent to Mannheim. But the City buildings were locked, deserted and inaccessible; and the river was at low ebb. When the All Clear sounded two hours later, fifteen hundred fires were burning; these soon multiplied to four thousand. A fifty-knot wind fanned eastward across the City until the blaze was out of control. Wren churches, the Guildhall, County Hall, bastions of the Tower itself – masterpieces of London's architectural history – were enveloped in the unfeeling flames.

The newspapers needed to penetrate no cordons to visit the wasted streets. They were on their very doorstep. 'Near the office,' wrote Cecil King, footsore after picking his way for hours through the wreckage,

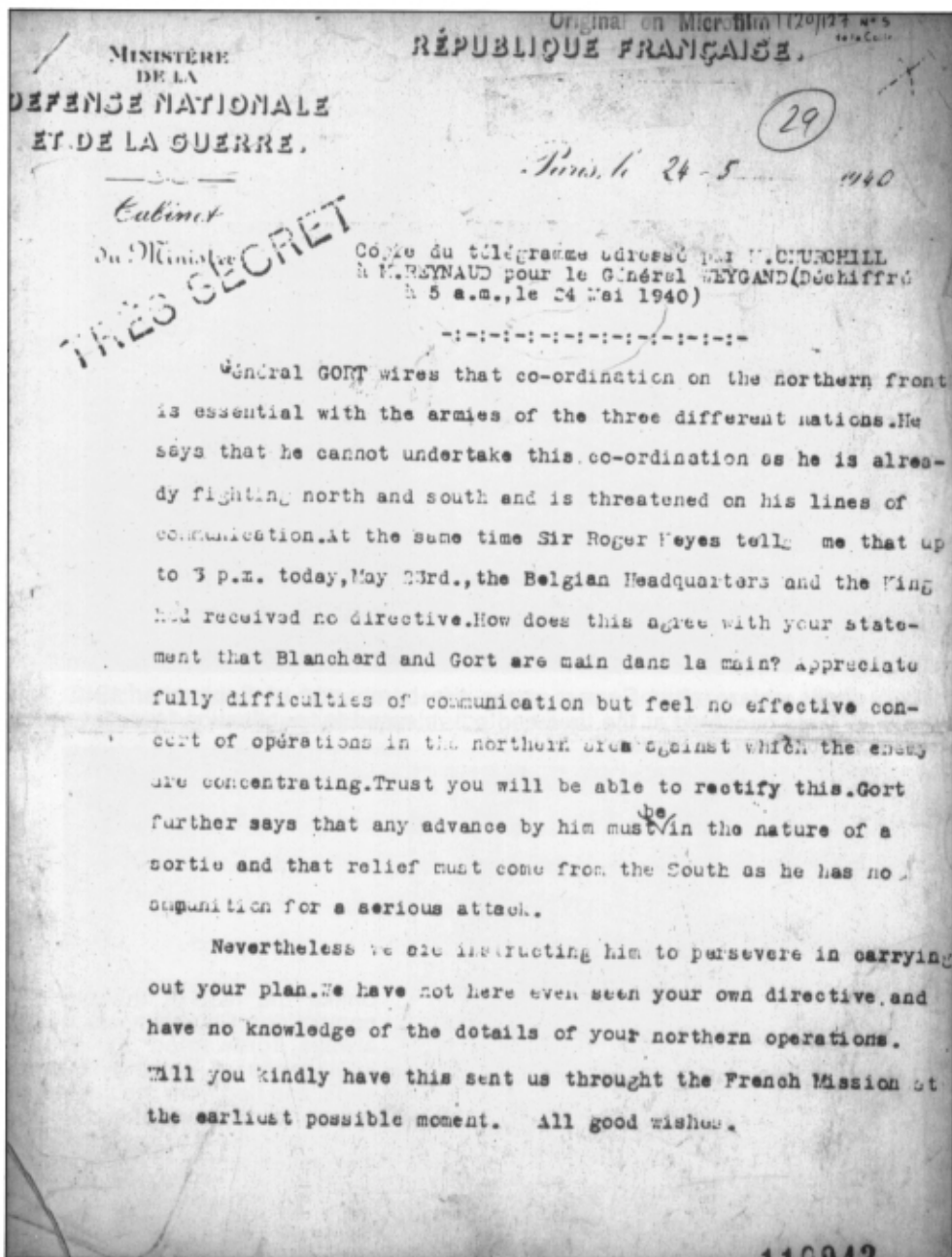
there was one big fire. It stretches from Usher Walker's premises, just off Fetter Lane, through Gough-square (Dr Johnson's house is apparently not touched after all) to Eyre & Spottiswoods (completely gutted) and Shoe Lane. St. Bride's was destroyed . . . almost every building round St. Paul's, including the old Chapter House, the whole of Newgate Street, both sides from the Old Bailey to St. Martin's-le-Grand, including one of the three huge blocks comprising the G.P.O. . . . One side of Moorgate is badly burnt as far as Finisbury-square. Then I turned west again through Bunhill Fields – two sides of the three built up are gutted, and all around the City Road, Old St. and Goswell Road. . . There is another bad area near the Tower and another in Cannon Street and Queen Victoria Street and I heard London Bridge Station is burnt down. In all it is obviously the greatest disaster to London since the Great Fire.

'It gives us a grand chance of building up a fair city,' he concluded – over-optimistically, it would turn out – 'but . . . the City of London as I have known it for twenty years has gone.'<sup>64</sup>

Churchill had tuned in to hear Roosevelt's fireside chat as bomb flashes lit the distant London skyline like the flicker of sheet-lightning. 'There is no demand for sending an American expeditionary force outside our own borders,' the president was saying, in that tone of ringing sincerity that had become so familiar now. 'There is no intention by any member of your government to send such a force. You can therefore nail – *nail* – any talk about sending armies to Europe as deliberate untruth.'

But after that disappointment came a phrase which uplifted Mr Churchill's stout heart: President Roosevelt talked of America becoming 'the Arsenal of Democracy.'





After the defeat of France in 1940 the Nazis seized documents including Churchill's damning messages at the time of Dunkirk. These are often still withheld from the British archives.



*While London's wealthy and influential slept soundly in the bombproof cellars of the Dorchester Hotel, and while Churchill left by the back gate of No. 10 Downing-street for his hideout in Oxfordshire, the working class took refuge in squalid conditions in the city's subway stations.*

## 37: *The Unsordid Act*

ON THE DAY that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died, Churchill telegraphed to a mutual friend that he understood the depth of his grief. 'We have lost one of our greatest friends and one of the most valiant champions of the causes for which we fight,' he said. 'I had a true affection for Franklin.'<sup>1</sup> From first to last, he had not understood Roosevelt's imperatives; he had been unable to penetrate the wall of implacable American self-interest.

Seen from the banks of the Potomac River, Roosevelt was the most illustrious American of the century. He gave his ragged nation a sense of empire. Ten million were unemployed and his New Deal was in disarray, but by plugging into Churchill's War at the most judicious moment he would bring wealth and prosperity to his great nation. With eleven millions under arms, and by ruthless power politics and financial huckstering, he made it a great power. He blackjacked his allies into parting with their gold. Loaded with new riches, he contemplated taking over Britain's colonies, and offered cash on the nose for defeated France's two latest battleships, *Jean Bart* and *Richelieu*.

Twice by late 1940 contemporaries had benevolently applied the label 'gangster' to Mr Churchill. But in a century of gangster statesmen, he and Roosevelt were not on the same side; they were not playing the same game; they were not even in the same league. 'I never let my right hand know what my left hand does,' the president told his treasury secretary as he settled into his third term. 'I may have one policy for Europe and one diametrically opposite for North and South America. . . And furthermore,' he bragged, unwittingly echoing Hitler's words, 'I am perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war.'<sup>2</sup>\*

He ran rings around the British and boasted that he was better at it than President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>3</sup> He regarded Churchill as a pushover —

\* On June 2, 1941 Hitler told his staff, 'As a private person I would never break my word. As a politician for the sake of Germany, if need be, one thousand times!' — *Hitler's War*, millennium edition, page 199.

unreliable and 'tight most of the time.'<sup>4</sup> He turned a deaf ear on all of Churchill's pleas. When the P.M. suggested he send American warships to Britain's imperial outpost at Singapore to keep the Japanese in line – since he was about to reopen the Burma Road to let supplies into China – he got no joy from the White House.<sup>5</sup>

This is not surprising. The survival of the British empire did not figure high on Roosevelt's priorities. 'I would rather,' said Roosevelt in 1942, 'lose New Zealand, Australia or anything else than have the Russians collapse.'<sup>6</sup> A few weeks later he repeated this. England was, he said, 'an old, tired power' and must take second place to the younger United States, Russia and China.<sup>7</sup> Later this sly statesman conceded, 'When there are four people sitting in at a poker game and three of them are against the fourth, it is a little hard on the fourth.' Vice President Henry Wallace took this as an admission that Roosevelt, Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek were ganging up against Mr Churchill.<sup>8</sup>

France's humiliating defeat and Britain's threatening bankruptcy gave Roosevelt the opportunity to clean up these old empires. At Teheran in 1943 he would confide to Joseph Stalin, 'I want to do away with the word *Reich*.' He added, 'In any language.' Stalin liked that. 'Not just the *word*,' he said.<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt's policy was to pay out just enough to give the empire support – the kind of support a rope gives a hanging man. When his treasury secretary confirmed after visiting London in 1944 that Britain was penniless, the cynical man in the Oval Office would prick up his ears and snicker. 'I had no idea,' he said. 'I will go over there and make a couple of talks and take over the British empire.'<sup>10</sup>

This inspired American statesman would pursue his subversion of the empire throughout the war. He might lead the crusade for democracy, but he expected the front-line nations to foot the bill. During the Munich crisis, he had predicted to his cabinet that the United States would be enriched by any resulting war. Sure enough, gold from the beleaguered nations had begun to flow in payment for American war materials. The 1939 revision-of-neutrality legislation, which legalised this sale of war goods to belligerents, and the Johnson Debt-Default Act required that such purchases be for cash. So the great blood-letting began. Britain donated £2,078 million of aid to her own minor allies during the war years, but the United States extorted from her every moveable asset in return for acting as the Arsenal of Democracy. During the war Britain would sell off £1,118 million of foreign investments; in addition, her foreign debt would increase by £2,595 million from 1938 to 1945.<sup>11</sup> Formerly the world's major creditor, Britain became an international pauper, and even forty years later she had not permanently recovered.

A FAVOURITE poem of Churchill's ended with the rousing line: 'But westward, look, the land is bright!' The transatlantic incandescence in 1940 was the glow of Europe's gold being carted to America by cruiser and battleship. Britain too had snapped up what gold she could – Britain had impounded the Romanian, seized the Czech, and, to use one F.O. official's word, 'snaffled' the Dutch and Belgian.<sup>12</sup> As France collapsed, a benign Roosevelt offered safekeeping to her gold too; Reynaud had shipped five hundred tons across the Atlantic.<sup>13</sup> Later Roosevelt tried to obtain the Soviet reserves as well, and called their ambassador Constantine Oumansky 'a dirty little liar' when he demurred.<sup>14</sup>

Mocking the president's Wagnerian lust for this precious metal, Churchill chided an American special emissary after one dinner, when liquor had loosened his tongue: it would serve Franklin right if the world struck back and decided that gold was only of value for filling teeth. 'Well,' replied his visitor, unabashed, 'We shall be able to make use of our unemployed in guarding it!'<sup>15</sup>

What was no joke was the deeper purpose underlying Roosevelt's foreign economic policy. Under Morgenthau, but particularly after June 1941 when Cordell Hull called the shots, American aid was conditional on Britain dismantling the system of imperial preference anchored in the Ottawa agreement of 1932. To Hull, aid was 'a knife to open that oyster shell, the Empire.'<sup>16</sup>

Roosevelt went further than either Hull or Morgenthau. He wanted to dismantle the empire altogether. 'Winston,' he would lecture the P.M., 'this is something which you are just not able to understand. You have four hundred years of acquisitive instinct in your blood. . . A new period has opened in the world's history, and you will have to adjust yourself to it.' Briefing his staff for a mission to London in 1944, he authorised them to broach the colonial problem, and recalled to them with warmth how he had once sent American troops to seize a British island in the Pacific.\* 'The British,' he told them, 'will take land anywhere in the world – even if it is only a rock or a sand bar.' Ultimately, a trusteeship agreement had been hammered out for that island, and he regarded that as a model for all former colonies.<sup>17</sup>

\* The Americans had sequestered the unoccupied Canton Island in the Phoenix group (although Britain had only just reiterated her sovereignty over it), transferring troops there from Howland Island. The secretary of the interior observed at the time, on August 14, 1937, that Roosevelt favoured making 'wide claims' of unoccupied British islands in the Gilbert and Ellice groups in the Pacific. British archives on the Canton incident were closed until the late 1990s.

Britain and France had invested millions in expanding and modernising American industry as war approached. ‘Generally,’ the director of the U.S. Bureau of the Budget would testify, ‘they have paid twenty-five per cent cash when orders were placed, in addition to [subsidising] capital investments required.’<sup>18</sup> According to Morgenthau’s files, Britain invested \$550 million in this way. Roosevelt nonetheless made Britain sell off assets, while the United States used her capital and inventions to build up aircraft and arms industries which would guarantee their own postwar domination of civil aviation and related fields.

Britain had entered the war a wealthy nation, but her assets were not limitless. At the end of 1940 they were about to run out. ‘We have been milking the British financial cow,’ confided this outstanding president to his cabinet, ‘which had plenty of milk at one time but which has now about become dry.’<sup>19</sup> The war was costing Britain \$1,500 million each month.<sup>20</sup> By the end of 1940 Arthur Purvis’s purchasing commission had placed orders worth \$2,700 million in the United States, and had advanced about \$1,300 million on them. There was no way that Britain could pay the balance, or stand this drain much longer, despite having raised \$2,000 million from gold production in South Africa and from her dwindling exports.

Financially, Britain could keep going only a few months longer by selling off her foreign assets. At the end of 1940 Morgenthau assessed her holdings in the United States at \$616 million of marketable securities and \$900 million of direct investments. Britain had also invested \$2,000 million in Canadian enterprises – which had however been earmarked to pay for her purchases from Canada – and over \$3,500 million in Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

But that was all. To his cabinet on November 8, Roosevelt put the saleable British assets at about \$2,500 million. Morgenthau’s experts believed they could squeeze Britain into spitting out even more – \$3,000 million – but after that any squeeze would just be breaking ribs. They would have to make some other arrangement. Roosevelt suggested to his cabinet a kind of ‘leasing arrangement’ for the supplies to Britain.<sup>22</sup>



The threatening bankruptcy hung like a pall over Churchill’s war strategy. As the Blitz intensified in November he had begun drafting that fifteen-page letter to Roosevelt and had invited his Washington ambassador Lord Lothian, visiting England, to come out for lunch on the tenth to help. The message would lay Britain’s cards on the table. It took four more weeks to write, and Lothian had dropped a hint about its content

when he returned to New York on the twenty-third: 'Well, boys,' he said, as flashbulbs popped, 'Britain's broke; it's your money we want.'

Britain's orders placed with American factories for deliveries due up to August 1941 already totalled \$9,000 million. Her gold and dollar balances combined had sunk to \$574 million. Morgenthau wanted her to start using the Allied, Dominion and French gold. Suspicious that she was not trying hard enough to sell off her assets – and might even be concealing information about them – on December 9 he had complained to Britain's senior treasury representative in Washington, Sir Frederick Phillips. Phillips had recommended to Lord Lothian that they must help Roosevelt make up his mind on how to address Congress: Britain must start selling; otherwise, he said, the Roosevelt administration 'will wash its hands of us.'<sup>23</sup> Churchill drafted a hurt reply to Roosevelt directly:

If you were to 'wash your hands of us,' i.e., give us nothing we cannot pay for with suitable advances, we should certainly not give in, and I believe we could save ourselves and our own National interests for the time being. But we should certainly not be able to beat the Nazi tyranny and gain you the time you require for your re-armament.<sup>24</sup>

Roosevelt had yet to reply to Churchill's fifteen-page message of the eighth. But he dropped a broad hint at his press conference on the seventeenth. He talked about lending a neighbour a garden hose if his house was on fire, and not being too particular about when and how the neighbour paid him if the hose got damaged.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting perhaps that half a loaf was better than no bread, Churchill filed away his draft telegram, unsent.

But sensitivity was not Roosevelt's forte. In a few days' time Britain's gold would run out. He proposed that an American battleship visit South Africa to collect £50 million of British gold there. 'There is nothing for it,' Phillips felt, 'but to acquiesce.'<sup>26</sup> To the wincing P.M., reading this message on Christmas Day, the battleship proposal sounded like a loan shark collecting on a debt. He minuted the chancellor that day, amidst the family festivities: 'I do not like it.' Lord Beaverbrook wanted it resisted to the utmost. 'Our financial relations with the Americans,' he wrote to the P.M., 'have been so loosely handled that it is necessary, now and forthwith, to take up a firm policy . . . even to the extent of a rupture.'

They have conceded nothing. They have exacted payment to the uttermost for all they have done for us. They have taken our bases without valuable consideration. They have taken our gold. They

have been given our secrets and offered us a thoroughly inadequate service in return.

Arthur Purvis, declared Beaverbrook, had nothing to show except 'a kindly disposition on the part of Mr Morgenthau,' easily purchased at such a price. The time had come for showdown. Britain must retain a tight grip on the empire's gold.

These are the last resources of the British people and should be held intact to provide us with essential means in the case of a compelling necessity to obtain foodstuffs for our people.<sup>27</sup>

Sir Kingsley Wood shared his concern, but warned Winston that if Roosevelt prevaricated in obtaining congressional approval for his Lend-Lease scheme, Britain was liable to be 'stripped bare.' He suggested they offer to load £10 million of gold aboard the American warship.<sup>28</sup> Hearing of this half-hearted measure, Phillips was terrified of its effect on the president. He cabled to Churchill: 'You did ask him urgently for help and as a favour to us, he is doing most unusual thing in sending a Cruiser.' After all, Britain was expecting interest-free aid to the tune of £800 million a year.<sup>29</sup>

The P.M. smouldered for several days. On the twenty-eighth he began drafting a biting reply to the battleship proposal, rasping that it would look to all the world like 'a sheriff collecting the last assets of a helpless debtor.'

It is not fitting [he dictated in this draft] that any nation should put itself wholly in the hands of another, least of all a nation which is fighting under increasingly severe conditions for what is proclaimed to be a cause of general concern. If I have some word from you showing us where we stand, and that the United States is going to supply us with the thousands of millions of dollars worth of munitions which we shall need in 1941 and 1942 if Nazism is to be beat, I will gladly give directions for any gold in Capetown to be put on board any warships you may send or do anything else that may be just and fair. I feel however that I should not be discharging my responsibilities to the people of the British Empire if, without the slightest indication of how our fate was to be settled in Washington, I were to part with this last reserve from which alone we might buy a few months' food.<sup>30</sup>



He chewed over this text all day, neutralising the acid and letting off steam; he liked its masculine tone and would eventually publish it in his memoirs.<sup>31</sup> In fact he never sent it, on the lame excuse that he wanted to hear first what Roosevelt said in his 'fireside chat' the next day.<sup>32</sup> During this, Roosevelt comfortingly announced, 'We must be the great Arsenal of Democracy.' But how much longer would Churchill have to wait for Roosevelt's terms? His staff could see his growing concern lest their American cousins' nose for business led them to strip Britain of every asset before acting the Good Samaritan.

On the last day of that ruinous, triumphant year, Churchill sent for Eden, perched Kingsley Wood on an armchair and, occasionally consulting Beaverbrook, drafted a more mellow reply to Roosevelt. Sending 'the warship' (no longer 'battleship') to Capetown might, he argued, 'produce embarrassing effects.' It would certainly upset empire opinion and probably encourage the enemy. If Roosevelt felt this was the only way, however, direction would be given for the loading of the 'available' Capetown gold.<sup>33</sup> Afterward, he took his party up onto the roof. There was little gunfire to be seen, however, and his adrenaline remained unreplenished.



The upshot was Lend-Lease. President Roosevelt mentioned it almost in passing in his traditional opening address to the Congress on January 6, 1941. To Churchill it was a milestone. Later, he would write of Lend-Lease as 'the most unsordid act in the history of any nation.' His colleagues aided in the deceit. They could hardly blazon forth how much their war would cost unborn generations of their countrymen. On October 1, 1941, Kingsley Wood would hotly deny in the House that Britain was being 'bled to death.' Mr Churchill also kept silent: there was a time when he had quailed at the prospect of asking his people to surrender their wedding rings to the nation's gold reserves. In August 1944, when Henry Morgenthau lunched at No. 10 in the role of Roosevelt's avuncular bailiff, Churchill had to admit to him that he had no intention of telling the House about Britain's insolvency until after the war. He had learned to pocket his pride. One month later, he would ask Roosevelt for an extension of Lend-Lease, while a smiling Morgenthau and his mysterious assistant Harry Dexter White looked on. 'What do you want me to do,' Winston exclaimed, nervous at some minor delay, 'get on my hind legs and beg like Fala?' – a reference to the president's odious dog.<sup>35</sup>

The rakish progress – of selling the empire down the Potomac River – had begun with the bartered bases. By December 1940 Churchill knew the

U.S. destroyers were worthless heaps (though Phillips begged him not to be so indelicate as to mention this). Few political benefits had accrued. Roosevelt remained as remote as ever, playing his cards at leisure; a general sent to London to observe the Battle of Britain reassured him that there was scant real danger to the country. The enemy had no secret weapons, so there was no need to rush in to save 'British culture and civilisation.'<sup>36</sup>

The view from the White House was very different from the view from No. 10: angry contrasts were drawn between Britain's 'stinginess' and her rumoured wealth. Morgenthau assured Roosevelt that his agents, burrowing everywhere, had now located all of Britain's world-wide gold and assets; he had spied upon her account in the Federal Reserve Bank, and his agents there were supplying regular Intelligence on Arthur Purvis's billion-dollar purchases. When Britain reluctantly began to liquidate her investments, Sir Edward Peacock, the Whitehall official sent over to supervise this painful auction, would also be shadowed on Morgenthau's instructions.<sup>37</sup> His crackdown aroused vestigial sympathy for Britain. 'These same people seem to agree,' wrote one uncomfortable colleague after a White House cabinet, 'that our own safety depends upon Britain's ability to withstand Hitler, and yet . . . they wanted to be perfectly sure that England was fighting naked, with bare hands, before they would be willing to go to her aid under the pending Lend-Lease Bill.'<sup>38</sup>

Mr Churchill's begging telegram reached Roosevelt on the second day of 1941 at his Hudson riverbank estate. The president turned to Cordell Hull for advice. The face value of Britain's world-wide assets might be \$9,000 million (Hull had suggested \$18,000 million); and perhaps \$1,500 million of this was in the United States; but Britain could probably raise only \$1,000 million of this at short notice. Clearly worried about security for any loan, F.D.R. mused, 'There is always the possibility of their putting up [as collateral] their sovereignty to and over certain colonies, such as Bermuda, the British West Indies, British Honduras and British Guinea.' But he dismissed this possibility. 'If we can get our naval bases,' he reasoned, 'why for example, should we buy with them two million headaches.' Their Blacks would be a drag on the economy and their new American citizenship would 'stir up' questions of race. Taking over Britain's Pacific possessions on the other hand, the islands south of Hawaii, would be worthwhile, 'as stepping stones in the control of the Central Pacific area.'<sup>39</sup>

The Lend-Lease bill would authorise Roosevelt to advance to the democracies war materials initially worth \$7,000 million. In the spirit of making Britain 'get on her hind legs and beg,' his legislators ironically

numbered the bill 1776. Generations of his fellow countrymen still breathed the independent aroma of that year. Most Americans perceived that Mr Churchill was inveigling them into war. Anti-British feeling was running high. The grudges against Britain were ancient but all-embracing – upper-class arrogance, colonial government, penal settlements, the Hessians, the Boston Tea Party; her peccadilloes included 1812, the Civil War, the China Wars, the Indian mutiny, the Boer War, Ireland, and now ‘this king business’ – coupled with a demand that Britain restore the duke and his American duchess to the throne. The Hearst newspapers raised a hue and cry about hordes of British propagandists on the loose; British speakers were drummed off the lecture circuits. When novelist Somerset Maugham asked the pained question in the *Saturday Evening Post*, ‘Why D’you Dislike Us?’ his mailbag burst with answers – less than one in ten favourable to Britain’s plight. Only Mr Churchill’s steadfastness during the Blitz had earned Americans’ admiration.

All Americans, whether their ancestors had arrived on the Mayflower or they themselves had barely dusted the mud of Eastern Europe off their boots, grasped at this opportunity to liquidate Britain’s wealth and empire. When Roosevelt’s cabinet examined on January 16 Mr Churchill’s credit-worthiness, former vice-president John Nance Garner – ‘flushed of face and loud of voice, and at least half full of whiskey’ – reminded them of Britain’s immense American assets. ‘Why, Mr President,’ he boomed,

you told us that the British had three or four billions of dollars in this country that could be spent here. The British, per capita, are the richest in the world, and if they care anything about their freedom, they ought to be willing to spend all that they have.

The secretary of agriculture chimed in that the Midwest farmers had told him the British had unlimited wealth. But Roosevelt shook his head and Morgenthau said flatly that the British were broke – they had spent everything they had. ‘When the British pay off what they have now contracted for,’ he said, ‘they won’t have a dollar left.’<sup>40</sup>

## 38: *There Goes the Empire*

THE OLD bravado was wearing thin. People plodded to work that winter through streets strewn with broken glass, but they began to notice missing faces. Drab became dreary. The meat ration had been cut. London's smile had faded except where the high-heeled strumpets strutted Mayfair in their short fur coats and silk stockings.<sup>1</sup> Army engineers ushered in 1941 with the mournful thud of demolition charges levelling ancient buildings that had survived one Great Fire only to be engulfed by the next. Rush hour in the darkness became a stampede each time the sirens sounded. The proletarian East End was a wasteland; but now the praetorian West End was also looking gawky.

Dinner guests leaving hotels stepped around the burning incendiary bombs and used the sand bags provided at lamp posts to douse them. One January night the enemy torched the Law Courts and Fleet-street with equal contempt; tin-helmeted newspapermen told each other it was the worst raid so far.<sup>2</sup> For those who stayed in London, each night brought excitement and danger; socialites and journalists crowded rooftops, and there was a strange beauty in the air. 'While I was on the roof,' scribbled an editor around midnight on the eleventh, 'another two bombs whistled over and then two more that sent us diving for cover.' Walking up Ludgate-hill he glimpsed the dome of St. Paul's rearing through billowing clouds of red-hued smoke. Cheapside and St. Martin's-le-Grand had been gutted and a gas flame was geysering from a crater.<sup>3</sup> A canyon marked Bank subway station – it had taken a direct hit.

The damage was more than material, as London filled with foreigners and the Englishmen went forth. 'Women give themselves freely,' one grimacing American notable observed, 'and men take just as freely. Even the "war widows" are willing to grant their favours.'<sup>4</sup>

BEHIND THE shutters and sandbags protecting his frayed home in Downing-street, Churchill nursed a stubborn cold. He was putting on weight too. As he went over to inspect damage to the House – now corseted in scaffolding – and exchange a few whispered remarks with the Speaker,

one witness remarked that his double-chin had swollen as if a goitre.<sup>5</sup> Newspaper executive Cecil King looked him up and down and decided he looked more lined than in June – but tougher.<sup>6</sup> ‘Churchill,’ he wrote,

*is* wartime England – England with all its age, its waning virility, its dogged courage, its natural assumption that Instinct is more valuable than Intellect. In Churchill the country feels it is personified and for this reason there can be no question of Churchill’s departure until after complete defeat. From his point of view he has done, is doing and will continue to do all anyone could, to win the war. He feels this, and so attacks on his Government mystify and bewilder him.

His speeches were popular only because ‘they are the articulate expression of what is in most Englishmen’s hearts.’

He has no contribution to make to our future, but he personifies our present and our past.<sup>7</sup>

Impatient for American Lend–Lease to pass into law, he became cantankerous and unjust. Bevin explained that he was incapable of delegating authority and grossly overworked.<sup>8</sup> The defence committee on the thirteenth demonstrated this. ‘P.M. in the Chair gives the impression of being mentally completely exhausted,’ wrote one minister afterward. ‘Almost alone, he argues against the proposals of the Chiefs of Staff and the Hankey Committee. He goes round and round the same point and is, for him, terribly slow in the uptake and most pig-headed.’<sup>9</sup>

He even questioned whether bombing could win the war. A year ago everybody had produced cut and dried calculations proving it could. After Hitler attacked Holland and Belgium they had bombed the Ruhr. The result? Barely any interruption of production.<sup>10</sup>

Once again his instinct was sound, but he lacked the energy or will-power to act upon it. He was tired, and no wonder. Only liquor and contact with the humbler orders replenished his vital juices, and he drank often from both cups. Lingering at Dover with an American emissary for a baleful glint at the Nazi-held coastline, he heard one artisan remark as he passed by, ‘There goes the bloody British empire.’ Winston took it as a compliment, and his face wreathed in smiles. ‘*Very nice,*’ he lisped to the secretary sitting next to him.<sup>11</sup>

LIKE A badly-digested repast, the Dakar fiasco kept throwing up bubbles of foul-smelling gas by a kind of peristalsis in his gut. In the first days of 1941 his Falstaff, Desmond Morton, brought mortifying evidence that none other than Vice Admiral E. H. Muselier, commanding the Free French navy, had betrayed Dakar to the enemy. Seething with anger, Churchill ordered the Frenchman's arrest. Muselier was discovered pleasuring a woman of easy virtue, stripped of his epaulettes, and tossed into Brixton Jail. M.I.5 searched his apartment and claimed to have found documents and tens of thousands of pounds. The Gallic admiral screamed that it was a preposterous frame-up: 'If I had that kind of money,' he argued, 'would I have been in bed with a common woman?' Never short in sense of history, Churchill had him removed to Greenwich – where Admiral Byng had been put to the firing squad '*pour encourager les autres*' – and invited a judge, Mr Justice Singleton, to review the evidence.

The case collapsed as inevitably as it had against Somerville. Singleton found that the admiral had indeed been framed. The humiliating story, better than Gilbert & Sullivan, ran round Whitehall. Who had prematurely ordered the arrest? 'That baby dictator Winston!' chortled Sir Alexander Cadogan. The episode illuminated the chronic frailty of Churchill's colleagues too. The First Lord had wanted to ease the imprisoned admiral's lot – until he realised whose hand was behind it, and then he went all 'wankly,' as Cadogan put it. Muselier was brought back to Carlton House Terrace, the Free French headquarters, in his powder-grey Rolls Royce, and his treasured epaulettes were handed back. *Daily Mail* journalist G. Ward Price concluded that the admiral may not have been pro-Vichy before, but he certainly must be now.<sup>12</sup> Churchill snarled – 'When I'm in the wrong,' he explained to Eden, 'I'm always very angry' – and issued a D-notice prohibiting press mention of the ludicrous affair.<sup>13</sup>

Churchill's strange dealings with Vichy surfaced again in his farewell conversation with the Canadian defence minister, as Colonel Ralston's diary shows:

*January 7, 1941:* Had a half hour with Churchill in the cabinet room. . . I spoke of the Dupuy incident. . . He said Dupuy had done a very useful service and that he was anxious to have him go back and see Weygand and Pétain if possible. He said, 'You know, I suppose, that we have offered Pétain six divisions?' I told him I knew we offered help but I did not know to what extent. He said they had done that as the reply [from Pétain] had indicated that the door was not closed. I said to him that probably there might be some criticism of Canada appearing to flirt with the German-

controlled government at Vichy, and that I felt we should be able to say that it was at the suggestion of the U.K. He said, 'You certainly can do so and you can use my name if you want to.'

He put out a further D-notice forbidding editors to ventilate his furtive talks with Vichy.<sup>14</sup> It was true that he had written to Pétain through American diplomatic channels offering an expeditionary force of six divisions if his government crossed to North Africa and resumed the fight against Germany. There was no reply.



Roosevelt had not yet replied to his fifteen-page letter either.

Anglo-American relations were in disorder. Since Lothian's death and Kennedy's return, neither country had an ambassador in the other's capital. But on January 9 an unkempt and unlikely emissary arrived at Poole from Lisbon aboard the BOAC flying boat: Harry L. Hopkins, the president's intimate and confidant. Bracken, who had met him some years earlier, announced that this was a most important American and hurried down to fetch him, taking the finest Pullman train that Southern Railways could assemble at such short notice, staffed with white-gloved attendants. This brought the shy American wearing a battered hat and untidy necktie back to London just as the sirens howled at 7:25 P.M.

Hopkins's mission was something of a mystery. Roosevelt had evidently instructed this quiet, unassuming native of Iowa to report on Britain's needs and morale. He and Hopkins had become intimates through the intrigues of a mutual lady friend.<sup>15</sup> Of these, Hopkins had enjoyed many – one had jumped to her death after he jilted her in 1940.<sup>16</sup> Hopkins's installation at the White House badly upset Bernard Baruch and other jealous satraps of the president.<sup>17</sup> He sold White House influence: Baruch had stumped up a large annuity for him, and when he stopped paying, industrialist Averell Harriman and car-rental magnate John Hertz replaced him as benefactors.<sup>18</sup> He was a rare friend, and the president liked him enough to hire him as personal librarian at Hyde Park. Upon moving into the White House he became as popular with Eleanor as Bracken and Beaverbrook were with Clemmie Churchill.

Roosevelt congratulated himself on having sent Hopkins to London – he was just the person to impress somebody of Mr Churchill's pedigree and breeding. 'According to the president,' noted one colleague as Hopkins left England on his return, 'the deeply laid plot had worked out even better than he had anticipated.'<sup>19</sup> He would become intimate adviser of both statesmen – a 'spider sitting in the centre of the net.'<sup>20</sup> A year later

Hopkins would remarry, and would brag about the wedding gift that Lord Beaverbrook gave his bride – one million dollars in emeralds.<sup>21</sup> It looked like barefaced bribery, but since Hopkins became Lend–Lease administrator, the million dollars may have been money well-spent for England.



Workmen were still swarming over No. 10 repairing bomb damage when Bracken brought Hopkins round for lunch with Churchill on the tenth. It was a Friday, and Churchill would soon be leaving for the country. He went downstairs in his Pickwickian striped pants and black jacket, and extended what Hopkins called a ‘fat but none the less convincing hand.’ The American was a sallow, shrivelled, frail, whimsical-looking man, his face gaunt from his recent illness, but with all his wits about him.<sup>22</sup> Studying him over soup and cold beef in the tiny basement dining room, Winston’s private secretary liked the visitor’s quiet dignity.

Hopkins found the P.M. a ‘rotund, smiling, red-faced gentleman,’ mushy of voice but clear of eye. He mentioned straight away that Roosevelt was hoping to meet Winston in April. A remark about Churchill’s rumoured anti-American sentiments provoked a tirade about Joe Kennedy; he flourished the congratulations he had sent Roosevelt on re-election. He proudly displayed photographs of his grandson and no less proudly reviewed his other accomplishments, beginning with Dunkirk. Hitler could not invade, he declared, even if he used poison gas: ‘We too have the deadliest gases in the world.’

The American talked little and listened much – which left the loquacious with an agreeable impression of his sagacity – and afterward jotted down his impressions of what Churchill had said.

He thinks Greece is lost – although he is now reinforcing the Greeks – weakening his African Army – he believes Hither will permit Mussolini to go only so far downhill – and is now preparing for the [German] attack which must bring its inevitable result. He knows this will be a blow to British prestige and is obviously considering ways and means of preparing the British public for it. . . . The débâcle in Greece will be overcome in part by what he considers to be the sure defeat of the Italians in Africa.

‘Make no mistake about it,’ was the message from Roosevelt which Hopkins conveyed to the British, ‘He will carry you through, no matter what happens to him.’



Hopkins lingered for three hours. At four o'clock – an hour late – he drove to a press conference in Grosvenor-square. 'I have never had such an enjoyable time as I had with Mr Churchill,' he declared to the newspapermen, lighting a cigarette. 'But God, what a force that man has!'<sup>23</sup>

CHURCHILL HAD touched upon his surreptitious offer of six divisions to Vichy in Africa. He was, he had told Hopkins, 'in close touch with Pétain on this point.'<sup>24</sup> He had sent Pétain a message via Admiral William D. Leahy, U.S. ambassador to Vichy. Vichy offered no reply. Puzzled by this, Churchill wondered whether the elderly marshal had failed to grasp what was being offered. On Saturday the eleventh he wrote a rather plaintive telegram to Roosevelt.

It seems from [Admiral Leahy's] report . . . that the Marshal may not have realised that the message was one from myself and that it involved considerably more than a suggestion of assistance in the event of the French Government deciding to cross to North Africa.

He wondered whether the presence of the collaborationist Flandin had inhibited Pétain, and suggested that Leahy try conveying the message to Pétain again.

I do not want to press Marshal Pétain to cross to North Africa; I would not press him for any further answer; I only want to be sure that there has been no misunderstanding and that the Marshal would be fully aware of the nature and origin of the message.<sup>25</sup>

On the thirteenth Churchill sent another oral message for Leahy to deliver, stepping up the offer to Pétain: if the Pétain government crossed to Africa, Britain would allow the French fleet to sail from Alexandria.<sup>26</sup> Nothing came of this, except for an indirect reply that eventually filtered back: Pétain was 'anxious for a British victory.'<sup>27</sup>

As usual, that Friday afternoon Churchill had driven down to Dytchley for the weekend.

While German bombers again blitzed London, and the empty buildings blazed fiercely, in Washington bill No. 1776 was published. Bit by bit Britain was being burnt and bankrupted. Sir Kingsley Wood warned that the bill would 'strip us of everything we possess.' Such was Roosevelt's intent, for Hopkins confided to staff at the embassy that the president was stubbornly insisting that Britain cough up first – for example, they must

vacate all their commercial shipping routes and confine British shipping to the North Atlantic route. Deaf to the roaring dangers, Churchill welcomed Lend–Lease, and proclaimed it the next best thing to an actual declaration of war. Hopkins had come down to Dytchley with him.

In the afterglow of these weekends Churchill's guests often found they could not reconstruct his monologues in their memory. 'I feel quite peeved,' John Martin regretted after one dinner conversation, 'that I haven't the sort of memory that could treasure up the P.M.'s *obiter dicta* to chuckle over afterwards.'<sup>28</sup>

It was the language that mattered, and that was as difficult to capture as the splash of a sunset on a mountain range. Churchill treated Hopkins that Saturday to his customary recital of events. The American flattered him that the president brought a radio into cabinet to listen to the historic speeches, but to Winston 1940 was a blur. The only speech he recollected was one to junior ministers after Dunkirk: he had realised even as he spoke



*For a whole year – as Churchill was aware from intercepted Nazi signals – Hitler forbade his airforce to bomb London. In August 1940 Churchill bombed Berlin. In September the Germans hit back.*

that they *wanted* to hear him say that Britain would fight on.<sup>29</sup> Once the phone rang: the night's target was Portsmouth and refugees were fleeing the city. Wearing siren suit and bulldog mien, and puffing at a larger-than-usual cigar, he paced the floor or stood at the hearth declaiming until four A.M. Mers-el-Kébir, he claimed, was the 'turning point' – after that the world accepted Britain was in earnest.

Around two A.M. the phone brought further ill-tidings: down in the Mediterranean, German dive bombers had sunk a cruiser and damaged the new carrier *Illustrious*. The news could hardly have been better timed. Churchill betrayed neither shock at this German debut in the Mediterranean nor dismay at the loss of life. He and Roosevelt, he said, reverting to a familiar theme, could field 120 million Whites against Germany's sixty million, and that was what this war boiled down to. Hopkins wrote to Roosevelt afterward, 'The people here are amazing from Churchill down, and if courage alone can win – the result will be inevitable.' 'Churchill,' he emphasised, 'is the gov't in every sense of the word – he controls the grand strategy and often the details.' Organised labour and the armed forces all backed him. 'He is the one and only person over here with whom you need to have a full meeting of minds.'

The P.M. did make one tactical mistake. He begged his guest to stay out of the Blitz. The frail American defiantly drove back to Claridges Hotel. 'This is no time to be out of London,' he told Roosevelt, 'so I am staying here.' 'I have been offered a so-called bombproof apartment by Churchill,' he added. 'A tin hat and gas mask have been delivered.'<sup>30</sup>

Hopkins had won the confidence and intimacy of the prime minister. 'I am most grateful to you,' Winston cabled to the president, 'for sending so remarkable an envoy.'<sup>31</sup> And Roosevelt told his staff, delighted:

Apparently the first thing that Churchill asks for when he gets awake in the morning is Harry Hopkins, and Harry is the last one whom he sees at night.

The rest of Washington took a more jejune view. 'The attachment of Churchill to Harry Hopkins may be entirely genuine,' observed one cynic. 'I suspect that if as his personal representative the president should send to London a man with the bubonic plague, Churchill would nevertheless see a good deal of him.'<sup>32</sup>

One source of friction was the famine spreading across Europe as a result of the British naval blockade. Churchill imperturbably argued that this was Hitler's weakness – 'to be in control of territory inhabited by a dejected and despairing people.'<sup>33</sup> Promoting insurrection had been a British

objective ever since November, when the chiefs of staff directed the Special Operations Executive to prepare 'co-ordinated and organised revolts' in occupied Europe as a preliminary to action against Germany.<sup>34</sup>

Roosevelt had discussed the famine with the late Lord Lothian, but Churchill refused to lift the blockade even to permit the American Red Cross to transport limited quantities of dried milk for French children. The president urged him to relent 'for humanitarian and also political reasons.'<sup>35</sup> Churchill however had been brought up in the belief that it was cruel to be kind: and he was a very kindly man. Perhaps war is never so harsh as when an unforgiving enemy or woolly-minded friend can credibly portray its machinery as being levelled against non-combatants. Given the larger issue at stake – Lend–Lease – he grudgingly yielded but pleaded with Roosevelt to present the British case, in any announcement to be made, in 'as favourable a light as possible.'<sup>36</sup> In fact, famine was as necessary as Lend–Lease to his war plan, and he urged Hopkins orally to persuade his boss not to go 'too far in feeding any of the dominated countries.'<sup>37</sup>

As yet, he showed little interest in Special Operations and obstinately left it to Dr Dalton. At the defence committee on January 13, their attack on Hitler's Romanian oilfields was up for discussion. Churchill was too tired to listen. 'You needn't go into any detail,' he told Dalton. 'Provided the F.O. and the Treasury and the Service Departments agree you can do what you like.' Dalton failed to see how they were ever going to win the war like this. Alone, his staff began mapping out an assault on the Lofoten Islands where Norwegian fish processing plants supplied Germany's most vital vitamins.<sup>38</sup>

CHURCHILL'S MIND was with his beloved navy. On Tuesday the fourteenth he was going to take Hopkins up to the great Home Fleet anchorage at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys to see off Lord Halifax. He was sending him to Washington in style aboard the newest battleship; he correctly guessed that Roosevelt would be curious enough to want to meet the ship at Annapolis. Such attention to detail was typical of the P.M. In fact he pored over the passenger list, called the First Lord over to No. 10, and insisted that two would-be passengers in particular be dumped ashore with bag and baggage. Thus on Tuesday he was not in cabinet. Attlee announced why, and everybody sighed with relief.<sup>39</sup>

As the endless snake of warm Pullman cars hauled northward out of the frosted capital, Churchill bathed, exchanged his spurious nautical garb for a dinner jacket, and tottered into the dining car. Clemmie was educating the new ambassador on how the White House got its name – it had

been ignited by the British and painted white to conceal the blackened scars. Halifax looked shocked, and one pained American diplomat gathered that he was unaware that the war of 1812 had ever happened.

A moaning wind was driving snow horizontally across the darkened moors when Churchill awoke. The train stood still for three hours while a derailed wagon was cleared from the line ahead. His throat was sore and the seas off Thurso were reported to be rough, but a large brandy revived his spirits. 'I'll go and get my Morthersills,' he croaked at breakfast and began talking about a new anti-aircraft missile which they were to see fired – in fact he expected to fire it himself.

'It costs about £100 a minute to fire it,' the captain of the fleet said rather dryly. The smile faded from the P.M.'s lips and the corners of his mouth turned down like a baby's.

'What, not fire it?'

'Yes, darling,' Mrs Churchill added quickly, 'You may fire it just once.'

'Yes, that's right, I'll fire it just once. Only once. That couldn't be bad.'

Halifax's former private secretary, recording this in his diary, observed that nobody had the heart to say that it would be bad, and Winston was soon beaming again.<sup>40</sup> Oblivious of his doctor's warnings – Clemmie had insisted that Charles Wilson accompany them – he marched aboard the minesweeper as the sun lifted above the horizon, and declared that he for one was going on up to the Flow.

From the little minesweeper, rolling and pitching in seas whipped up by a bitter north-easter, they transferred to the destroyer *Napier*. 'It was a beautiful scene,' wrote his own secretary, 'the mainland and low islands covered with snow, the sea extraordinarily blue and bright sunshine turn about with lashing blizzards.'<sup>41</sup> The American military attaché looked at the freezing hills and was not surprised that the sheep there had to grow Harris tweed. Hopkins was too miserable to enjoy the bleak scenery – he had all but fallen overboard during the transfer, while Churchill had prattled on heedlessly about Wavell's triumphs in Libya.

Clearing the anti-submarine booms guarding the Flow, the destroyer made fast alongside *King George V*. Touring the battleships, this pudgy politician wedged in the hole as he squeezed into her fourteen-inch turret. Despite having one withered and useless hand, Halifax slithered up into the turret with agility. Churchill said farewell to him and to the officers who were to open secret staff talks in Washington, then crossed over to the *Nelson* to watch it test the anti-aircraft rocket. The missile fouled the rigging and blew up, catapulting an object the size of a jam-jar at the

bridge, where it detonated five feet from Hopkins. Churchill did not share the American's roars of laughter.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout his stay so far, Hopkins had offered no inkling of his thoughts. It unsettled Churchill, but the canny American planned to make no speeches. They inspected Rosyth dockyards, and still Hopkins kept his thoughts to himself. Over lunch in his train on the seventeenth, Churchill quietly asked Tom Johnston, editor of *Forward* and a former Scots miner, who had joined them as regional commissioner for Scotland, to arrange a small dinner party in Glasgow that night: they would try to draw him out.

The dinner was at the Station Hotel. At Churchill's whispered bidding Johnston proposed their guest's health. Hopkins had no option but to rise to his feet. 'I suppose you wish to know what I am going to say to President Roosevelt on my return,' he teased. 'Well, I'm going to quote you one verse from that Book of Books in the truth of which Mr Johnston's mother and my own Scottish mother were brought up: "Whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."'

He added softly, 'Even to the end.'<sup>43</sup>

Tears frolicked down Churchill's cheeks. At eleven-thirty P.M. they were back aboard the train, returning to Chequers.

HE ALWAYS remembered those warm words; Hopkins never forgot that ice-cold weekend. His victory gift to Britain, he vowed, would be central heating for Chequers.<sup>44</sup> With an overcoated Hopkins huddled near to him, Churchill telephoned the White House late on the nineteenth. ('Mr President, it's me – Winston speaking!') No record has been released of any Roosevelt–Churchill telephone conversations. On this occasion he probably touched on the possibility of a meeting. 'Before Hopkins could deliver the message,' Roosevelt later minuted, 'Churchill expressed exactly the same thought to Hopkins.'<sup>45</sup>

A new week began. Winston's cold had not improved, and back in London Eden found him tired and resigned. The inevitable Greek tragedy was crowding closer, as the Oracle at Bletchley showed: Hitler was bound to invade Greece soon. The German airforce was preparing to move into Bulgaria: their mission in Romania had that very day transmitted a cypher message about fuel logistics in Bulgaria.<sup>46</sup> On Saturday, Bletchley had deciphered a signal about German airforce huts being moved down to Bulgaria. When the defence committee met that Monday night in the bunker, Eden predicted that Hitler was going to invade Turkey. Churchill was more immediately concerned about Greece: Hitler was obviously about to move into Bulgaria, probably with the king's connivance. 'The Germans

would gain a dominating position from which to threaten Salonica.<sup>47</sup> But Athens was confident that Hitler was only acting defensively and General Metaxas declined Britain's offer of reinforcements.

Churchill felt sick. He snarled and snapped at imaginary enemies. He growled at Eden that the Tories hated him, and he talked of willingly yielding to anybody prepared to face problems like Australia's obstinacy and the constant, almost unendurable 'nagging' in the House.<sup>48</sup> Sensing communists and fifth columnists everywhere, he suddenly shut down *The Week* and the communist *Daily Worker* on January 21. (The *Daily Mirror* had got wind of this four days before and printed a malign cartoon and comment.<sup>49</sup>) Fleet-street did not even whimper. When the home secretary briefed the editors, only the great Frank Owen, editor of the *Evening Standard*, protested. The rest squealed approval, the Liberals louder than the rest. The *Manchester Guardian* bayed that the communist daily believed in neither the war nor democracy: 'We can well spare it.' 'It was given a lot of rope,' echoed the *News Chronicle*, 'and it has now hanged itself.'<sup>50</sup>

Their complaisance was fortunate, because Churchill could not bear criticism. Shown the *Mirror's* cartoon, all his ugly suspicions about its 'hidden backers' bubbled forth, and on Thursday he fired a broadside at it. He complained particularly of the columnist 'Cassandra' who had recently reported an alleged rebuff by him to Eden: 'Your report contains every cliché except "God is Love" and "Adjust your Dress Before Leaving."' Two days later Churchill wrote again, accusing the *Mirror* and its sister *Sunday Pictorial* of paving the way for 'naked defeatism and a demand for a negotiated peace.'

Fearful of being closed down, editor Cecil King saw Churchill at No. 10 on the last day of January. He arrived at three P.M. as an air raid was beginning.

I waited ten or fifteen minutes by a big coke fire just outside the cabinet room where I waited the last time I saw Churchill. I was then ushered in by a secretary – tall, blue-eyed, fair and of the pansy brand. . . Winston went into the cabinet room by another door and was standing up by the fire when I came in.\*

He motioned King to a table on his right. King saw on it a green telephone labelled 'Admiralty.' The wallmaps had changed since June – Europe, the Mediterranean and the world. Once or twice enemy bombers

\* The author relies upon the late Cecil King's voluminous pocket diaries at Boston University, Massachusetts, rather than the published text which was edited for tact and brevity.

droned overhead, and through the mist he heard Bofors guns firing in the park. 'When a plane came very near,' King noticed, 'he stopped his talk and listened, and twice seemed on the point of retreating to his shelter but did not do so.'

He started off with a great tirade. . . Our policy constituted a very clever form of Fifth Column'ism: praising the P.M., pressing for an intensification of our war effort, but at the same time magnifying grievances, vilifying ministers and generally creating a distrust by the nation for its leaders. . . I protested that . . . we supported many of his ministers, but others we thought unworthy of high office and said so.

Churchill flared up. Did the *Mirror* arrogate to itself the right to appoint ministers? 'No,' replied King evenly, 'but surely loyalty to him as P.M. did not carry with it loyalty to Attlee as Lord Privy Seal?' The P.M., who found his deputy small-minded and a bore,<sup>51</sup> conceded this point. He revealed that there had been discussion about the *Mirror* group and that 'research had been undertaken into the ownership of our shares.'

I said there was nothing – there were five executive directors, of whom I was one. . . The politics were largely left to me.

'Well,' he said, 'you look innocent enough!'

Churchill stressed that it was the malignancy of the attacks that annoyed him. He had contemplated prosecution and even denouncing the *Mirror* in a broadcast, but decided that would be 'out of proportion.' King asked why the P.M. had not telephoned the newspapers to 'pipe down'? Churchill huffed that he 'would not ask for favours.' King replied that it would have been an order, not a favour. He recalled Churchill only making one such request since becoming P.M., in fact – that newspapers refrain from attacking Chamberlain; the *Mirror* had obliged, temporarily.

Churchill then turned to the criticism of some of his ministers:

He said that he had never taken back what he had said about the appeasers, but that the M.P.s who had supported Chamberlain still formed a majority of 150 in the House and that he was not going to fight them as they were too numerous. He had, however, moved away the old bunch bit by bit, keeping Chamberlain on for a time to minimise the shock of the change.



Throughout their rambling seventy-minute conversation Churchill had been 'very difficult to talk to,' wrote King.

He reminded me strongly of Rothermere – getting up and striding about, shooting remarks at me that often had nothing whatever to do with his last remark or anything I was saying, sitting down again, leaning on the fire-guard or lighting his cigar.



With General Wavell's triumphs in Libya, something of the old exuberance returned. Answering one M.P.'s criticism in the House, Churchill slipped in a Latin phrase. When Labour members shouted, 'Translate!' he agreed smilingly that he would do so – 'for the benefit,' he added with the barest pause, 'of any Old Etonians present.'<sup>52</sup>

Two days later, on Friday January 24, he was back at Chequers wrestling with top-secret papers on Libya and Greece. As was his custom, he turned over one of the foolscap-sized cabinet papers to Harry Hopkins as bedtime reading. It reproduced on seventeen green pages – with no reference to intercept Intelligence – the dramatic telegrams that had passed between himself and Wavell. 'This morning,' wrote Hopkins on Saturday, dazed by those amazing messages,

I have awakened on a cold, dreary morning – and the formal garden of this lovely old place seems very unhappy under the onslaughts of wind – and snow and cold – I have just finished my breakfast in bed – of kidney and bacon and prunes –

He picked up the document again, and marvelled at those directives written at the height of the September Blitz. Ignorant of the Oracle which allowed Mr Churchill his strategic insights, he jotted down his feelings on the daring and determination they displayed:

Italy invades Greece – precious planes must be taken away to bolster the Greeks – and guns too – but the P.M. ever urging Wavell to press on – planes desperately needed in England rushed to Wavell's support by the P.M.'s insistant orders – the P.M. impatient – prodding Wavell – but ever giving him his confident support – but Greece must be supported for political reasons and Wavell grudgingly agrees for these are explicit orders from the minister of defence.<sup>53</sup>

Since early January the Greek tragedy and Libyan triumph had become entwined. With his Russian campaign only weeks away, Hitler had tried desperately to avoid involvement in Mussolini's Balkan quagmire; but, concerned by the menace to Romanian oil resources, he had reinforced his airforce mission there and reluctantly prepared to move through Bulgaria to Greece to rescue the Italians. Germany's moves – faintly reflected by Bletchley's uncertain mirror – were closely followed by Mr Churchill, and on January 6 he recommended that Libya take 'second place' to Greece.<sup>54</sup> On the ninth there was an ENIGMA message about German airforce telephone lines being laid through Bulgaria to the Greek frontier.<sup>55</sup> The indications were that Hitler was going to slam two Panzer divisions through Bulgaria into Greece on or about the twentieth; two hundred dive bombers would support the attack. Churchill had been outwitted over Norway, and he did not want it to happen again.<sup>56</sup> This time he hoped to push airforce and mechanised units into Greece at once, and asked Wavell to consult with Athens. In his eyes, however, Greece was already doomed, and he told Hopkins so, while ordering a reluctant General Wavell to comply with 'our decision, for which we bear full responsibility.'<sup>57</sup>

Ignorant of the intercepts and anxious to avoid provoking the Germans, the Greek authorities refused the offer of army aid. Until then, Churchill had planned to divert Wavell's main effort to Salonica (northern Greece) as soon as he captured Tobruk. Now he shrugged. 'Prince Paul's attitude,' he had written to the cabinet before entraining for Scapa Flow with Hopkins, 'looks like that of an unfortunate man in the cage with a tiger, hoping not to provoke him while steadily dinnertime approaches.'<sup>58</sup>

In Libya, Wavell's victorious army had swept the Italians before it. Bardia had fallen with 462 guns and 45,000 prisoners, including two corps commanders, four divisional commanders, three nuns and a bishop. 'The general has now telegraphed that all resistance has ceased,' Winston had reported to Roosevelt – without specifying whether this included the ecclesiastical captives.<sup>59</sup> On January 22 the Australian and British troops over-ran Tobruk. Given Greece's unco-operative attitude, however, the defence committee had authorised Wavell two days earlier to continue from Tobruk to Benghazi.

There seemed little to be done for Greece. On the twenty-sixth, Churchill reiterated that the enemy was now in Bulgaria and preparing to attack Greece. 'We must expect,' he warned Wavell fatalistically, 'a series of very heavy, disastrous blows in the Balkans and possibly a general submission there to German aims.'<sup>60</sup>

As the last hope he turned to Turkey. Hitler would no doubt tell Istanbul to keep out or be bombed. In a letter to President Ismet İnönü, the

P.M. proposed a pact allowing Britain to put planes and ground personnel into Turkey immediately, to menace Hitler's oilfields in Romania and, if need be, Stalin's at Baku – a nostalgic echo of the Anglo–French planning heyday twelve months previously. Over-generously he offered Turkey ten squadrons of bombers and fighters.<sup>61</sup> It dawned on him that he had offered most of these to Greece as well, and he inquired of Sir Charles Portal: 'Have we not in fact promised to sell the same pig to two customers?'<sup>62</sup> Fortunately, Turkey rejected this naïve proposal out of hand. İnönü had a written guarantee from Hitler too, and that evidently counted for more in his eyes.

CHURCHILL, SURE of the impression he had made on Hopkins, became sunny, almost benign. The hangdog air had gone. Roosevelt's rival Wendell Willkie had also come over and arrived at Chequers on the twenty-seventh bringing a few lines by the poet Longfellow copied out in Roosevelt's hand:

Sail on, O Ship of State!  
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!  
Humanity with all its fears,  
With all the hopes of future years,  
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

Winston overwhelmed him easily, as he had won over Hopkins. On Willkie's return home he too pressed the urgency of getting aid to Britain. At first he called Churchill a much greater man than F.D.R., but on reflection, after further British humiliations, he changed his tune and declared that self-assured men made poor planners. The trouble was, he told the vice-president, that Churchill 'came from the most aristocratic blood-lines from Britain, that he had been subject to flattery from early youth, that the women had always adored him.' Even so he admitted that Churchill was gifted with the ability to 'speak like a Demosthenes and write like an angel,' that in conversation he was scintillating, and that 'he was an excellent raconteur of stories, couched in the most correct English language.' Roosevelt's first question to Willkie on his return was, 'Is Churchill a drunk?'

'Mr President,' replied Willkie, 'I had as many drinks as Churchill all the time I was with him, and no one has ever called me a drunk.'<sup>63</sup>

When Churchill visited the southern naval base of Portsmouth, touring the blitzed streets, he took Hopkins with him. On February 2 they dined at Chequers, and the P.M. even danced a bit, mellowed by the meal

and the music of records that Hopkins had brought with him. 'He feels a great bond of sympathy for America, and in particular for Roosevelt,' wrote one secretary on February 2. 'He had an American mother. . .'<sup>64</sup> They dined and journeyed together that first week of February like friends who had known each other for a lifetime.

Down at Chequers again, late on Saturday the eighth, Churchill learned that the House of Representatives had passed bill No. 1776. It still had to clear the upper house. As Winston was pacing up and down, dictating a broadcast for Sunday evening, a securely overcoated Hopkins arrived to bid farewell.<sup>65</sup> The dampness of the English winter had chilled him to the marrow and he was feeling poorly. Churchill handed him a bottle of tablets, saying he took them three times a week.\* Hopkins pocketed them, scribbled a note on Chequers notepaper wishing 'confusion to your enemies,' and left at ten-thirty p.m. by Pullman train for Bournemouth.

The broadcast went out world-wide that Sunday night – the P.M.'s first in many months. Waiting in a Bournemouth hotel for flying-boat weather, Harry Hopkins listened to it with Bracken. Churchill spoke of the tragic indifference of the little Balkan nations in face of the stealthy German encroachment:

Of course if all the Balkan people stood together and acted together, aided by Britain and Turkey, it would be many months before a German army and airforce of sufficient strength to overcome them could be assembled in the south-east of Europe.

As things were, he expected them to be dismembered one by one and share the fate of Denmark, Holland and Belgium. Later in his broadcast he turned to Britain's immensely strengthened position. 'In order to win the war,' he declared, repeating a familiar argument, 'Hitler must destroy Great Britain.'

He may carry havoc into the Balkan States; he may tear great provinces out of Russia; he may march to the Caspian; he may march to the gates of India. All this will avail him nothing. It may spread his curse more widely throughout Europe and Asia, but it will not avert his doom.

\* Months later Hopkins had them analysed. The medicine was harmless: 'It is a conglomeration of everything,' Hopkins noted for his records in December, 'that couldn't do anybody much harm. They tell me it couldn't possibly do them very much good either.'<sup>66</sup>

With every month that passes the many proud and once happy countries he is now holding down by brute force and vile intrigue are learning to hate the Prussian yoke and the Nazi name as nothing has ever been hated so fiercely and so widely among men before.

And all the time, masters of the sea and air, the British Empire – nay, in a certain sense the whole English-speaking world – will be on his track, bearing with them the swords of Justice.

Conscious that Hopkins – and, perforce, the president as well – were listening, he answered that verse of Longfellow, addressing himself across the ether to ‘this great man,’ the ‘thrice-chosen head’ of a nation of 130 million souls:

Put your confidence in us. Give us your faith and your blessing and, under providence, all will be well. We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle, nor the longdrawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.

## 39: *Against His Better Judgement*

ON HIS return to New York, Wendell Willkie privately uttered this warning about Mr Churchill as conversationalist: ‘He can thrust,’ he said. ‘He can take, appreciate, and acknowledge your thrusts. He is subject to no doubts about his own greatness and importance – his supreme importance as the greatest man in the British empire. But he cannot endure bores.’ Therein he saw the danger – that at some critical moment ‘slick presentation’ might prevail over ‘the man of substance who bores him.’ Others had long criticised his judgement. ‘He is the sort of man,’ one Tory had written, ‘whom, if I wanted a mountain to be moved, I should send for at once.’ But: ‘I should not consult him, after he had moved the mountain, if I wanted to know where to put it.’<sup>2</sup> Neville Chamberlain had also remarked on his ‘furious advocacy of half-baked ideas.’

In his time Churchill had been with equal vehemence both pro- and anti- on a number of subjects – North America, Germany, France, Finland, Franco, home rule for Ireland, the gold standard, and the House of Lords. He had changed colours with a facility that the chameleon could envy. Once (in 1901) he had announced, ‘I am not such a vain and foolish creature as to be seduced from my allegiance to the Conservative Party by the fulsome and gushing flattery of the radical press.’ Three years later he had crossed to the Liberals.

It was not irresponsible buffoonery. He enjoyed a lifelong love affair with the sound of his own voice. In 1903 he had declared, ‘The cruel and clanking struggle of armaments is drawing to a close, and with the New Century has come a clearer and a calmer sky.’ Through this New Century had flowed golden rivulets of such Churchillian nonsense prose, prose of a ripeness obscured by its undeniable eloquence. The instances were endless. As recently as October 1939 the B.B.C. had carried his prediction into the ether: ‘An Eastern Front has been created which Nazi Germany does not dare assail.’

Such idle prophecies would matter less if he was not so often seduced by his own emotional prose into taking decisions against his better judge-

ment. Years before, Chamberlain had noticed how Winston might pass casual comment on a topic and then, as though waylaid by a sudden image springing across his mind, become seized with animation, his face suffused with impetuous pink, his language accelerating until shortly he would not tolerate opposition to this idea which had only just occurred to him.<sup>3</sup>

These were serious faults, and deeply pertinent to the history of 1941. They explain why he pressed Britain's suit upon a reluctant Greece, against his better judgement. Britain's prestige could not take the abandonment of Greece, but it was not just that: half forgotten lessons at Harrow stirred within him; an illogical affection for the cradle of civilisation blinded him to reality, just as he had emotionally declared in May the year before his 'invincible confidence' in the French army and its leaders.

The auguries about Greece were as clear as the writing on Belthazar's wall. From airforce cyphers Churchill knew that the enemy was moving into the Balkans. Göring had earmarked twenty-two of the fifty-four airfields in Romania and a similar number in Bulgaria.<sup>4</sup> But neither Turkey nor Greece would see things his way. 'Last year's history in north-west Europe,' wrote one cabinet minister, 'is likely, the P.M. thinks, to repeat itself this year in south-east Europe.' Germany was devouring the little nations one by one.<sup>5</sup>

Who took the fateful decision during February to divide Wavell's army of the Nile to help Greece? It aroused heated controversy. When Colonel Truman Smith of U.S. military Intelligence shortly described it as the most disastrous political interference in a military strategy 'since General Halleck in the Civil War,' he was roasted for 'this dangerous statement.' The very safety of the United States, declared Henry Stimson, depended on Mr Churchill's preservation in office: he alone had promised to keep the British fleet from Hitler.<sup>6</sup>

But the truth was that in the first instance it *was* Mr Churchill who decided to help Greece. He was unworried about North Africa. Broadcasting on February 9 he boasted that the triumph in Libya had 'broken irretrievably the Italian military power on the African continent.' Nobody raised his voice against the decision, least of all the generals who knew the fate of dissidents. As minister of defence, Churchill dictated his whims to Pound, Dill and Portal directly. In cabinet he acted as though their ministers were not even present.

The service ministers were now all awe-struck figureheads. In the December reshuffle he had made Captain David Margesson secretary for war – the fourth incumbent within a year. Margesson was a clean-cut, florid party official who had once sold cutlery on New York's Lexington-avenue; he had served eight efficient years as Chief Whip to Chamberlain and

Churchill. But his appointment raised eyebrows: anti-Semites whispered that Lord Bearsted paid his expenses; giving the war office to a party hack smacked of Caligula. One editor scoffed, 'The papers are so pleased about the victory in Libya they would applaud if Winston made his horse minister of transport.'<sup>7</sup> But he had already given *that* post to a retired army colonel, John Moore-Brabazon.

Eden ran diplomatic errands for Churchill just as Ribbentrop ran them for Hitler. He had no real power. Unlike Cadogan, his permanent under-secretary, Eden was not trusted with ULTRA, the codebreaking output of Bletchley Park. He penned peevish minutes or stalked languidly around exclaiming, 'I can't imagine what Edward [Halifax] did with himself all day!' By telephone he clung to Winston for diplomatic decisions.<sup>8</sup> On February 10 he drafted a long, muddled minute addressing the claims of Tripoli *versus* Greece. Churchill probably ignored it: the only way to get a clear line from foreign office memoranda, he had once said, was to skip alternate paragraphs; they usually started 'On the other hand . . .' The defence committee also tackled the question that night. Under Churchill's guiding harness – he pleaded that the Greeks were 'putting up a magnificent fight' – they decided to halt Wavell in Libya and help Greece instead. He cabled this decision to Wavell on February 11.<sup>9</sup> While that brave general now fished around for reasons establishing the correctness of Churchill's decision, the P.M. ordered Eden and the C.I.G.S. to fly out to him bearing sealed instructions.<sup>10</sup> Since these confirmed the decision to aid Greece, while leaving minimal forces in Africa at Agheila, Colonel Truman Smith's information was substantially correct. The decisive interference was political: Mr Churchill's.

His two emissaries Eden and Dill set out from London at mid-day on the twelfth. At that very moment, unbeknown to any Englishman, another newcomer was arriving not in Greece but in North Africa. At Tripoli airfield a slight, short-sighted German general clambered out of a Heinkel aircraft – General Erwin Rommel.

Hitler was about to outwit Churchill all over again.



Britain had scored some success in small-scale covert warfare. Five Norwegian freighters laden with ball-bearings and machinery had been extricated from Gothenburg in an operation devised by the First Lord and Hugh Dalton. Churchill, worried by larger issues, contented himself with giving Special Operations a blank cheque. Dalton used this freely in bribing the necessary Swedes, and the ships reached Britain safely on January 24.<sup>11</sup> He was also planning murkier missions. SAVANNA was one, a plan to



parachute agents into Brittany to liquidate the pilots of the KG. 100 radio-beam squadron outside their Vannes airbase. Portal refused to supply a plane, priggishly calling the agents 'assassins.' Dalton gasped, agreed to use uniforms, and went ahead. He rather liked the inevitable comparisons between himself and Himmler, noting that one intercepted Spanish message showed 'the Duke of A[lba] thinks he has made a discovery,' namely two certain agents had been appointed by 'a certain minister engaged on some sort of S.S. work.'<sup>12</sup>

Rarely did Churchill intervene in Special Operations. At one cabinet in February, Dalton asked for the navy to stop a Japanese ship carrying machinery and Oerlikon guns from Europe to Japan. But, his colleagues argued, the Japanese might be hoping to provoke an incident. Churchill, seemingly less concerned, dropped a 'broad hint' to Dalton to get on with it.<sup>13</sup>

THE PACIFIC war scare that gripped Whitehall that February has still not been explained. Mr Churchill put it about that 'drifting straws' suggested that Japan was spoiling for a fight with Britain, but there is no sign of this in Japanese telegrams or records. Again according to Mr Churchill, indiscreet chatter indicated that Tokyo had signalled embassy staff in London to be ready to pack immediately. 'Wait for *the* cable next week,' one message had said. And: 'Cut off all social contacts and hold yourselves aloof.'<sup>14</sup> Again the Japanese files do not help us. But London advised Washington of the danger with remarkable speed.<sup>15</sup> Churchill undoubtedly saw a possible way of involving Roosevelt: the British navy was weak in the Far East, so the United States must lean on Japan. He passed on to Washington a digest of 'the machinations of these beastly little monkeys.'<sup>16</sup> On the seventh Eden summoned the baffled Ambassador Mamoru Shigemitsu and railed at him – a 'last warning' that Britain would defend her empire.<sup>17</sup>

Churchill shortly learned from his Oracle that the scare was unfounded. Under an agreement signed at highest level several weeks earlier, his Intelligence had just received two American-built MAGIC machines, capable of breaking the Japanese diplomatic cypher known as PURPLE<sup>18</sup>; they reached Britain aboard the returning *King George V*. Churchill would also receive all American MAGIC intercepts. He guarded this new material as religiously as the ENIGMA intercepts.\*

But he relentlessly pursued his main priority – to ensnare the United States in war. On February 15 he expressed well-feigned concern about

\* Although the key 1941 Japan files in the Public Records Office remain closed, PURPLE messages transmitted between Tokyo, London and Washington have now become available in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Japan to Roosevelt: while he did not think the Japanese ready to attack Singapore, they might be coveting the Dutch East Indies. 'Everything that you can do,' he suggested, 'to inspire the Japanese with the fear of a double war may avert the danger.'<sup>20</sup>

The Japanese were perplexed by this British bellicosity. Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka ordered an investigation. Meanwhile he reassured London that Japan regarded the Axis pact signed with Germany and Italy purely as a means of limiting the spreading war. He voiced misgivings about the warlike posturing by Britain and America in the South Pacific, and pointed to the risk of escalation. He even appealed to Churchill to help put Washington's mind at rest. Recalling prewar meetings with Eden at Geneva, Matsuoka continued 'in this connection' that Japan's motto was 'no conquest, no exploitation,' suggested that a prolonged war would leave Europe in 'chaos and confusion,' and offered Japan's services as a mediator 'not only in Greater East Asia but anywhere the world over.'<sup>21</sup>

Whatever Mr Churchill's feeling about receiving yet another unsolicited offer to end the war, he probably shortly read a MAGIC intercept of Matsuoka's inquest on the war scare. It turns out British diplomats in Tokyo had mistranslated official statements. 'Thus,' the foreign minister cabled to his ambassador in London, 'England seems to have been greatly shocked.' That in turn explained Mr Eden's inexplicable 'last warning' to Shigemitsu on the seventh.<sup>22</sup>

Evidently the straws had drifted away. Rather disingenuously Churchill claimed to his staff that 'further chatter' had shown the Japanese 'climbing down.'<sup>23</sup> When a 'friendly and deprecatory' Mr Shigemitsu came to Downing-street on the twenty-fourth, he reiterated that Japan was not about to attack Britain or the United States.<sup>24</sup>

For some unfathomable reason the P.M. preferred to conduct such interviews alone. When his secretaries asked him afterward to dictate a note for the record, he found he could remember his own remarks but never his visitor's.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately the ambassador transmitted his own record by PURPLE that day, and this shows that Winston did the talking anyway:

He traced the history of Japanese-British relations, with which he has personally been in touch since the time of the conclusion of the Tokyo-London Alliance [of 1902], up through the Russo-Japanese War and the World War. He went into great detail and told me how, as prime minister, he is greatly interested in his country's relations with Japan.

As his second point, he went on to state: 'Relations between our two countries have gradually been growing worse and worse. I am very sorry to see this happening. If our two nations clash, it will be a tragedy indeed. That is just what it will be! Now, our bulwarks principally about Singapore are purely defensive. Great Britain has not adopted the policy of attacking Japan.'

Thirdly, he impressed upon Shigemitsu Britain's determination. 'I know that this is not going to be an easy war for us,' he said. 'I do not think it will be over this year; nevertheless, I do feel that ultimately we will win. Therefore,' he continued, 'I do not think the question of the mediation of another country will be brought up.'<sup>26</sup>

That said, Churchill handed over a leisurely and hectoring reply to Matsuoka's message. Britain was going to extirpate the 'system of lawlessness and violence abroad and cold, cruel tyranny at home, which constitutes the German Nazi regime.' She sought only the satisfaction of ridding the earth of 'a hateful terror and of restoring freedom to the many insulted and enslaved nations.' Accordingly she had no need for Matsuoka's implied offer to mediate.<sup>27</sup>

This coarse rebuff annoyed Tokyo, and Matsuoka now denied having made the offer.<sup>28</sup> The scare had outlived its purpose, and Churchill poured oil on the waters. On March 3, after a weekend at Chequers, the Australian prime minister Robert Menzies would speak to the Foreign Press Association and urge friendlier relations with Japan. Meeting Shigemitsu again the next day, Mr Churchill blandly remarked upon this speech and used the French term *détente*. 'Well,' wired the ambassador, relieved, to Tokyo, 'I think that we can take this speech of Menzies's as a gesture of friendship from Great Britain.'<sup>29</sup> MAGIC unravelled his telegram a few days later.



On February 14, 1941 Hitler's first troopships bound for North Africa sailed past the sunken hospital ship at the entrance to Tripoli harbour. A grinning General Rommel was there to greet them. Unaware that German units were now joining the Italians in Libya, Churchill was still resolved to divert troops from there to Greece – whether Athens wanted them or not. He felt honour-bound. If Hitler did overrun Greece, Britain would just have to salvage what she could from the wreckage; and that might well happen, he sombrely told Cadogan, standing in at the F.O. while Eden was away.<sup>30</sup> But shortly – perhaps it was because he had read the first in-

tercepts about Luftwaffe units in Africa – Churchill’s instinct began bleating warnings. He cabled Eden on February 20:

Do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will only be another Norwegian fiasco. . . .  
But of course you know how valuable success would be.

Bletchley had now begun sending its intercepts straight to Cairo. But Eden had evidently not seen the news. He sent a message listing the armour, anti-tank and flak troops that Wavell proposed to ship over to Greece. It would be a gamble but, he reminded Churchill, ‘when we discussed this matter in London we were prepared to run the risk of failure, thinking it better to suffer with the Greeks than to make no attempt to help them.’<sup>31</sup> ‘A[nthony],’ observed Cadogan with profound misgivings, ‘has rather jumped us into this.’

Among the guests at Chequers on the twenty-third was Mr Robert Menzies, the genial, back-slapping Melbourne barrister who was nursing a one-vote majority as Australia’s prime minister. His pencil diary recorded their ‘momentous discussion’ about diverting troops from Libya to defend Greece, ‘largely with Australian & New Zealand troops.’ ‘This kind of discussion,’ reflected Menzies, ‘which may mean thousands of lives, is not easy.’

The cabinet discussed the diversion late on the twenty-fourth. ‘You have read your file, gentlemen,’ said Churchill, ‘and the report of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The arguments are clear on each side. I favour the project.’

Menzies, an almost silent observer, wondered if the speed with which the decision was approved indicated ‘great clarity and directness of mind’ in all these ministers – or had Winston merely taken charge of them? ‘I was the only one to put questions,’ Menzies wrote in his illuminating diary, ‘and felt like a new boy who in the first week of school commits the solecism of speaking to the Captain of the School.’

Privately, the ministers were not without misgivings about helping Greece. ‘It’s a nasty decision,’ wrote Cadogan, ‘but I *think*, on balance, I agree with it.’ Squashing the instinct buzzing around his own head, Churchill also commended it, but only weakly. He asked his colleagues for a show of hands: nobody dissented. Democracy had its uses.

‘Full steam ahead,’ he wired to Eden that night.

YUGOSLAVIA’S STANCE, strategically wedged between Nazi Germany and Greece, thus became crucial, and S.O.E. played a major role. Instructed

by Churchill in July 1940 to 'set Europe ablaze,' Dalton had spread subversive tentacles throughout the Balkans. Where Britain had few friends, he procured them by old-fashioned means. His agent in Crete disbursed £400,000 monthly.<sup>32</sup> While Brigadier Menzies ('C') scoffed at S.O.(2)'s 'sheer waste of money' in Yugoslavia, Dalton had assiduously bribed the new Serb Peasant Party since July to oppose Belgrade's pro-German tendency.<sup>33</sup> The British legation housed a powerful S.O.(2) mission consisting of George Taylor, Tom Masterson and Julian Amery; they had established financial relations with the leader of the Peasant Party, Milos Tupanjanin, and the older parties in opposition to the prince regent, Paul. S.O.(2) also channelled funds to the national associations, the Chetniks, and veterans' bodies: by 1941 the British were able 'to ask and obtain virtually anything we wanted' from them.

This now had its uses. Hitler wanted facilities to pass troops through this rugged country to Greece. On the day his troopships arrived in Tripoli, he invited prime minister Dragisa Tsvetkovitch to Berchtesgaden and suggested that Yugoslavia join the Axis pact. A tug-of-war began between Hitler and S.O.(2), with Yugoslavia as the prize.



On February 27 Mr Churchill was to address the House.

Anguish still oppressed him before every speech. It hung above him 'like a vulture,' he once said.<sup>34</sup> An American statesman would also write eleven years later of how much Churchill's recent speeches had preyed on his mind. 'He referred several times to them as vultures which were hovering over him and depriving him of all power to relax and enjoy himself.'<sup>35</sup> This speech was no different. Dictated line by line to a secretary, he laboured until three A.M. The notes were typed downstairs, revised, then retyped in 'Chinese' – the abbreviated and echeloned script he read from.

Oratory without a script was a gamble he had long abandoned. 'It is too easy to come a cropper,' he once explained, and illustrated the point. 'All went well,' he recalled, 'until a certain day when I arrived at the phrase, "The decision rests with the men who . . ." As I came to the word *who* my memory went over a precipice. There was nothing beyond, absolutely nothing, a desert. I took another run at it, "The decision rests with the men who . . ." Once more everything went blank. I sat down, to receive one of the greatest ovations of my long career in the House.'<sup>36</sup>

Tomorrow's speech was to justify M.P.s retaining their seats even when taking up government duties abroad – Cripps was in Moscow, Hoare in Madrid, Macdonald in Ottawa, and his own son Randolph had

now flown to Cairo with No. 8 Commando, equipped by his doting father with letters of recommendation to Smuts and Wavell.

As he worked on the script that night the admiralty telephoned No. 10: a supply convoy had been massacred in the North Western Approaches. John Colville kept these ill tidings from his chief until three-thirty A.M., but then Winston asked him outright what news from the admiralty. 'It is very distressing,' Colville sympathised. 'Distressing!' exclaimed the P.M. 'It's terrifying. If it goes on it'll be the end of us.'<sup>37</sup>

The debate could not be put off. Seal feared it was a grotesque ordeal, but for Winston the skirmish set his adrenaline pumping and he felt quite invigorated.<sup>38</sup> But then toward the end he faltered, and Nye Bevan torpedoed his peroration with a sly interruption. All exhilaration gone, the P.M. stumped off to the smoking room with tears of exhaustion in his eyes. A veteran M.P. bearded him there but only offended him. How difficult it was to say anything that did not upset him when he was in this mood, the M.P. noticed.<sup>39</sup>

Grim-faced at the shocking shipping casualties, the P.M. drove to Chequers. Convoys were the lifeline which the New World was holding out to the Old. When the jovial Australian prime minister Robert Menzies arrived, evidently to discuss the Pacific war scare, the P.M. steeped him in gloom about the convoy losses. But he went on, to the amazement of Menzies, to 'fight his way out,' pacing the floor of the ancestral hall with growing light of battle in his eyes.<sup>40</sup> Engrossed in his own oratory, he always stood with his head thrust forward and his thumbs tucked into the armholes of his waistcoat, or strode up and down as if 'trying to keep pace with his own eloquence,' one man had remarked.<sup>41</sup>

That Sunday Dalton came down to talk about S.O.E., but Churchill could not put convoys and rations out of his mind. Charts were spread out and sinkings marked in. The troops were eating too much, he growled to the minister. 'They could do with less rations,' he added, 'They are using too much cotton and wool.'

During lunch he tried to get a rise out of the now-silent Australian premier. 'Hitler says,' he remarked, methodically forking food from plate to mouth, 'that sixteen million Jews ought to go and live in Australia. What d'you say to that?' The socialist minister Dalton – whose private views were plain from uncompromising titbits about Jews in his diaries\* – pricked up his ears.

\* Bigoted and anti-Semitic, Dalton privately referred to one M.P. as 'that most displeasing rich black Jew,' and noted with interest Desmond Morton's information that Georges Mandel was 'a Jew, whose real name is said to be Rehoboam Rothschild.'<sup>44</sup>

Menzies affected not to hear the remark. He was reflecting how much Churchill grew upon one: 'He has amazing grasp of detail,' he wrote after retiring to his room, 'and by daily contact with the Services' headquarters knows of dispositions and establishments quite accurately.'<sup>42</sup> Hitler had the same grasp. A few days later Churchill translated his distilled wisdom into a written directive, announcing 'The Battle of the Atlantic.'<sup>43</sup>

HE FELT none too good. He had stomach pains, and on February 24 his appointment card showed: '?3:15 Treatment.' The mortal danger to Britain's lifelines 'gnawed my bowels,' he later wrote.<sup>45</sup> His malaise probably had a less picturesque origin in his sybaritic lifestyle. X-rays found nothing wrong. 'But what about the stomach pains?' he asked. The doctor asked what he had eaten or drunk recently, and the ritzy recital that followed was enough for him to fold away his stethoscope – so Major Morton related with a guffaw a few days later.<sup>46</sup> Afflicted with a bad cold, he was scolded by the ear-nose-and-throat specialist that it was because of the snuff he was taking *against* colds.<sup>47</sup> He disliked doctors, and had the habit of summoning several until one yielded the diagnosis he had in mind. His medicines were equally bizarre: he kept a cupboardful, and used them regardless of the malady against which they had been prescribed.<sup>48</sup>

After lunch that Sunday, Dalton talked to him for an hour about Special Operations and its officers: only Brigadier Colin Gubbins seemed to register slightly. He pressed for more aircraft. 'We are now ready,' he urged, 'for more tools.' But the needs of Bomber Command were already paramount.

'I am not dissatisfied,' Churchill consoled him. 'I know that you are a very able man.' Urged to meet more S.O. chiefs, Churchill said: 'No, I see no-one.'<sup>\*</sup> But he had pushed through Dalton's plan for a Commando raid on the Lofotens. 'The admiralty,' he sniffed, 'didn't want to do it.' As for the rest, he approved of SAVANNA and JOSEPHINE – a project to sabotage a power station near Bordeaux. Turning to Roosevelt's tedious insistence on allowing dried milk through the blockade to France, Churchill quietly told the minister that they must prevaricate, delay, and diminish all such maudlin aid.

About three-thirty, Dalton observed, Winston wandered off for his afternoon nap.<sup>50</sup>

\* Dr James Conant, president of Harvard, told Churchill over lunch on March 6, 1941 how valuable the Tizard mission had been. 'I was glad to hear this,' Sir Henry Tizard jealously wrote in his diary, 'as the P.M., who sent me there, had not found time to see me since my return, and had not even acknowledged a preliminary report that I sent him.'<sup>49</sup>



‘Give us the tools. . .’ Words like these bedazzled many, but Robert Menzies for one was unimpressed by eloquence. True, supreme office had ‘improved and steadied’ Churchill. ‘His real tyrant,’ feared the Australian, writing up his diary, ‘is the glittering phrase – so attractive to his mind that awkward facts have to give way.’<sup>51</sup>

Neither Roosevelt nor Morgenthau was going to ‘give’ Britain the tools. The price of Churchill’s War would be paid by Britain – in the Caribbean base leases, in the end of imperial preference, and in higher taxes. The taxes on income and cigarettes had doubled since the war began; even the tax on whisky, the P.M.’s staple drink, had gone up by fifty per cent.<sup>52</sup> Canada began remorselessly selling off Britain’s \$1,924 million investments to pay for raw materials bought in the United States. Washington journalists howled that if Canada found nothing ‘irregular, mean or grasping’ in forcing Britain to sell, the United States should not adopt ‘a more altruistic’ policy.<sup>53</sup> India too was billing Britain heavily for her contribution.<sup>54</sup>

The United States had by now accumulated \$22,000 million in gold. Economist John Maynard Keynes pointed out that gold was of value only so long as nations accepted the convention: ‘The convention,’ he warned, in language reminiscent of Churchill’s ‘gold teeth’ remark to Hopkins, ‘depends on not all the gold being in one hand.’

When in the game of ‘beggar my neighbour’ [Keynes wrote] all the cards belong to one player, that is the signal for the game to come to an end. The pack becomes worthless pasteboard: the fun is over.<sup>55</sup>

Bankrupt and unable under American law to place further orders until the Lend–Lease bill passed into law, Britain’s financial plight was blessedly secret, but none the less terrible for that. Roosevelt procrastinated. Blasé about Britain’s difficulties, he laughed at one press conference, ‘They are not going to be solvent next Monday and insolvent the week after.’<sup>56</sup> Morgenthau unfeelingly remarked on January 9 that the British were getting ‘hysterical.’<sup>57</sup> On the next day the American cruiser *Louisville* picked up £42 million of British gold at Simonstown naval base in South Africa.

Roosevelt’s austere eyes turned to the Allied, Dominion and French gold. France had £284 million of the metal in trust in Canada (including £70 million deposited there by the Bank of England); legally it belonged to Vichy. While this did not impress Churchill, he was unable – despite the



nagging by Morgenthau – to switch it to Washington for fear of French-Canadian disturbances; besides, Nazi propaganda would exploit the theft in France. Instead, Mackenzie King generously agreed to purchase increasingly worthless sterling for hard dollars.<sup>58</sup> The Dutch and Norwegians refused outright to sell Churchill their gold for sterling. On February 4 he tackled the Belgian prime minister, who reluctantly agreed to lend \$300 million in gold if Britain guaranteed to replenish it postwar.<sup>59</sup>\*

It was an unholy financial mess. There were those who failed to understand why Britain should pay anything for the defence of American freedoms. On February 19 Lord Beaverbrook soberly totted up for Churchill twenty years of grievances with the United States. Ever since World War One their American cousins had kept upping the ante – demanding recognition of their twelve-mile limit, prohibition of empire liquor exports to the United States, peace with Ireland, a settlement of the war debt, and breaking the alliance with Japan. 'And look where it has taken us!' exclaimed the minister. 'The Japanese are our relentless enemies. And the Americans are our unrelenting creditors.'<sup>60</sup>

The End-of-Empire Sale had begun. The first stage had been relatively painless – the gift of British technological secrets to America. In Washington, experts told Henry Stimson that American science had been lagging years behind the British until the Tizard mission came: it had brought 'infinitely more' than the Americans could offer in return.<sup>61</sup> The next stage was more painful: the liquidation of Britain's real estate and property.

Worried about Roosevelt's agreement to appropriate \$7,000 million for Lend-Lease, Morgenthau harried him over lunch on March 10. What do he expect in return? 'I asked him if he was thinking in terms of taking over the English fleet or the British Isles in the West Indies.'

Roosevelt feigned lack of interest. 'I don't want the British fleet,' he said, 'because by the time we got it, it would be too antiquated.' As for taking over the British West Indies, he said, they seemed to be in revolutionary turmoil. That left Britain's assets in North America. Morgenthau promised to keep piling on the pressure until Roosevelt told him to stop. 'I may be mistaken,' dictated Morgenthau after their luncheon, 'but I don't think that the President has in mind to do anything very dramatic to help England at this time.'<sup>62</sup>

It was a buyer's market. First to go under the hammer was the wealthy British-owned Viscose Company, worth \$125 million. Jesse Jones later admitted that he would have lent up to \$75 million against it. Instead, it was liquidated. To handle it, the House of Morgan called in Dil-

\* At the time \$100 = approximately £20.

lon & Reed, a firm of which James Forrestal – Roosevelt’s close friend and later navy secretary – was president. Viscose had no debts except current accounts; it held government bonds worth \$40 million. ‘It was sold to the Morgan people,’ recorded Harold F. Ickes with distaste, ‘at an initial price of \$37 million.’ After re-sale the British eventually received a total of \$87 million.<sup>63</sup>

Belying his simulated lack of interest in the British Caribbean, Roosevelt had sent an economic mission there and had raised steep demands on Bermuda, St. Lucia and Trinidad, involving huge garrisons for the proposed American bases. Bermuda and the West Indies – the oldest Crown possessions – protested. ‘Early in December,’ the president wrote to King George in his first letter after re-election, ‘I hope to get a bit of a holiday by going over to the Bahamas and several other prospective bases. That destroyer arrangement seems to have worked out perfectly.’ Only now did His Majesty learn details of the ‘arrangement,’ which Churchill had evidently struck in part by transatlantic telephone, perhaps to avoid creating records on paper.\* Alarmed by Roosevelt’s proprietorial tone, the king registered profound concern. ‘The Americans have got to understand,’ he wrote to his private secretary, ‘that in leasing the bases the question of sovereignty does not come in. These islands are part of the British Colonial Empire and I am not going to see my West Indian subjects handed over to the U.S. authorities.’<sup>64</sup> On February 25, Roosevelt showed impatience: ‘I have been very much concerned at the delay in reaching an agreement in respect to the naval and air bases,’ he notified Churchill, and he hinted that Lend–Lease could be affected.<sup>65</sup>

There was resentment at every level in London. The demands on the islands amounted, observed Colville, ‘to capitulation.’<sup>66</sup> The secretary of the cabinet warned that if the demands became public knowledge they might bring down the government. But Churchill could not go back. In a note to Lord Moyne, his new colonial secretary, he explained that a ‘first class row’ would only aid the opponents of Lend–Lease in the U.S. Senate.<sup>67</sup>

Moyne was no match for Winston. Over sixty, the former Walter Guinness appeared to some long past his prime, but critics whispered knowingly. One afternoon at Cherkley, his country estate near Leatherhead, Beaverbrook jealously told a close friend that the appointment was further proof that Churchill put personal friendships before Britain’s in-

\* When Henry Stimson telephoned Roosevelt on August 3, 1940 at Hyde Park about the destroyers-for-bases deal, the president outlined to him ‘several other talks he had had with other people on the same subject – notably Winston Churchill and Lothian’ (Stimson diary).

terests. He remarked upon Moyne's 'gifts of cigars and alcohol' to Winston, and more specifically upon the fact 'that Moyne kept him regularly supplied with champagne.'<sup>68</sup>

Churchill dined with Moyne and 'Gil' Winant, the new American ambassador, on March 4. John Gilbert Winant was fifty-two, Republican, and a shy homespun liberal. Thrice governor of New Hampshire, he was not a trained diplomat and had few useful British contacts. But he had money, having literally struck oil in his youth, and he was a New Dealer. As a speaker, his delivery was hurried in public and inaudible in private. People said he had Red Indian blood – he was the ghost of Abraham Lincoln in both looks and outlook.<sup>69</sup>

Churchill met this silent but agreeable man again more formally with Moyne and Lord Cranborne, the Dominions secretary, on Wednesday March 5 at No. 10. Moyne told Cranborne that he feared Churchill would – 'in the heat of the conflict' – cede too much to Roosevelt in the West Indies. Cranborne saw it all as the first ugly move by Washington toward hemispheric defence. But Churchill reassured them both. 'America,' he reminded them, 'is providing us with credits that will enable us to win the war, which we could not otherwise do.' With unbecoming cynicism he warned, 'We cannot afford to risk the major issue in order to maintain our pride and to preserve the dignity of a few small islands.'<sup>70</sup>



Bulgaria had signed the Axis pact that Saturday March 1, and Hitler's troops swarmed down to the Greek frontier and began feverishly laying airfields and reinforcing bridges.<sup>71</sup>

The foreign secretary was still in Cairo. Churchill telegraphed Eden to turn his 'main appeal' now to Yugoslavia, on the flank of Hitler's approach to Greece. He hoped too that Turkey might now declare support of Greece – a rather tenuous hope given the centuries of enmity between them. (He received both ambassadors on February 24, though safely separated by lunch.) A timorous Prince Paul – whom he dubbed 'Prince Palsy' in conversation with Dalton – refused even to see the itinerant Eden and travelled in secret to Hitler's lair at Berchtesgaden three days later.

As prince regent and dictator conferred, the first Australian and New Zealand troops arrived on the Aliakmon Line in Greece. But now there was a snag: Athens was becoming alarmed, Eden reported on the fourth, awkward, and even 'defeatist.' At the war office Captain Margesson was growing queasy about Greece and told Churchill's secretary so. 'Many others,' the latter noted, 'feel the same.' Nobody had the courage to argue

with Winston. Looming ahead, Colville saw another Norway, Dunkirk and Dakar 'rolled into one.'

Churchill also resigned himself to the inevitability of tragedy in Greece. On the fifth, after seeing Winant and sleeping off a rich lunch at the Savoy with Oliver Lyttelton, whom he had appointed to the Board of Trade in October, he pulled off the bedclothes and stifled a yawn. 'The poor chiefs of staff,' Colville heard him mutter, 'will get very much out of breath in their desire to run away.'<sup>72</sup>

Eden's forlorn advice was that they see it through. But luncheon and siesta had fortified Churchill's judgement and he began to argue at that afternoon's cabinet that to desert a *half-hearted* Greece could surely not damage British prestige? A few hours later, with barely-suppressed relief, the defence committee agreed. Churchill immediately cabled Eden: losing the Balkans might not be a catastrophe after all, but Britain's 'ignominious ejection from Greece' would. He hinted that Eden should liberate Athens from the obligation to reject a German ultimatum.<sup>73</sup>

A remarkable change of mind, but it was too late. During the night London received the agreement which General Dill had signed in Athens on the fourth. Britain was committed to the hilt. In cabinet that evening, March 6, Churchill put a good face on it: surely Dill would not have signed if the operation was hopeless? Dill now reported that the two ground commanders in Greece, Generals Blamey (Australia) and Freyberg (New Zealand) were willing to take the risk.

The cabinet met at noon on the seventh, but Eden was now reporting that everybody at Cairo was unanimous that they could see it through. The material damage to Greece, if the battle into which Britain had urged her proved hopeless, briefly occupied the ministers. Robert Menzies, attending this cabinet, expressed quiet concern about the political damage in the Dominions if New Zealand and Australian troops paid heavily for a 'commitment entered into by a British cabinet minister in Athens.' He was uneasy at how readily the cabinet was swayed by Churchill's eloquence. Clutching at straws – for example, the hope that Yugoslavia might enter on the British side – Churchill ruled, 'We should go forward with a good heart.'

'Cabinet accepts for itself the fullest responsibility,' he telegraphed to Eden, before driving over to the Savoy for luncheon, taking this time Captain Margesson.

WHO COULD say? Greece might yet prove a British triumph. After lunch, more bountiful in mind, he left for Chequers early; no doubt the Oracle had told him what the Luftwaffe had in store for London that night. The

raid was the first in two months. The crowded Cafe de Paris received a direct hit which slew many revellers who had believed the structure to be impregnable.

Out at Chequers, the P.M. appeared witty and entertaining.<sup>74</sup> His cold was becoming bronchitis, but the awful burden of decision no longer preyed upon his mind. He had retired to bed unusually early when a call came through from Washington – it was Harry Hopkins reporting that bill No. 1776 had just cleared its final hurdle, the Senate. Churchill cabled him the next morning. ‘The strain has been serious,’ he said, ‘so thank God for your news.’<sup>75</sup> That Sunday evening General Alan Brooke came down from London, and was convulsed – like so many others before him – by the spectacle of Winston appearing for dinner in his light-blue siren suit, ‘like a child’s romper suit.’

He was in great form, and after dinner sent for his service rifle to give me a demonstration of the ‘long port’ which he wanted to substitute for the ‘slope’! Then he followed this up with some bayonet exercises!<sup>76</sup>

For a while the hall at Chequers – a covered former courtyard – echoed with Winston’s clattering footsteps. With the passage of Lend–Lease, a load was off his heart. Roosevelt formally signed it into law on Tuesday. ‘An ocean-borne trumpet call that we are no longer alone,’ as Winston triumphed in a speech on the eighteenth. It was another of those phrases that sounded so fine at the time. Three days later, with Britain’s empire entering liquidation and her armies embarking on a disastrous adventure in the Balkans, the agreement on the West Indies bases was signed.

## 40: *The Midas Touch*

ONCE OR twice a small, steely-eyed visitor was let into No. 10 so secretly that the private secretaries were unaware of his presence. He was William S. Stephenson, a quiet Canadian who had made millions from electronics. Churchill had sent him in June 1940 to New York, officially as passport control officer, with orders to establish a secret service there. Behind his outward mission of preventing sabotage to Britain's war supplies was an ulterior one of the highest priority: to lure the United States into Britain's war.

Operating from the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth floors of the Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue, Stephenson acted for both S.I.S. and S.O.E.<sup>1</sup> At the behest of J. Edgar Hoover of the F.B.I., his office was designated 'British Security Co-ordination.' This title aroused suspicions: the state department complained that it was 'not particularly revealing.' They questioned his officials<sup>2</sup> and sent an agent to investigate, but he reported that local anti-sabotage officials had never heard of B.S.C. 'Mr Stephenson,' railed the agent, 'has so far refused to reveal the exact whereabouts of his office.'<sup>3</sup> By late March 1941 they learned that B.S.C. was fashioning 'a full size secret police and intelligence service.' It all sounded highly irregular to Adolph A. Berle Jr, the state department official concerned. Unaware that B.S.C. had the very highest sanction, Berle even wanted the president warned. Suppose, he asked, Stephenson attempted to subvert American decisions or to 'make trouble' for individuals to whom the British took exception?

At that time there was no American foreign Intelligence service. It was a gap which Churchill effectively filled through Bill Donovan, the Wall-street lawyer who had twice since July 1940 come under his spell.<sup>4</sup> Stephenson provided Donovan with the secret data he needed to impress Roosevelt with his ability. Donovan had just spent two months visiting Spain, Britain and the Mediterranean, and he returned to Washington convinced of the rightness of Churchill's strategy. In May the P.M. sent over to the White House his director of naval Intelligence to impress

Donovan's suitability upon Roosevelt, and on June 18 the latter appointed Donovan 'Co-ordinator of Information.'

Thus during those crucial months of 1941 it was the delicate hand of Mr Churchill that controlled the embryonic United States Intelligence service. There can be no questioning this 'most secret fact,' as Major Desmond Morton termed it. He boasted later that summer that the P.M. was fully aware that the U.S. Intelligence services were 'being run for them at the President's request by the British.' In fact Stephenson's deputy, the S.I.S. career officer Colonel Charles H. Ellis, was sitting with Hoover and Donovan, and reporting regularly to the president.

It is of course essential [noted Morton] that this fact should not be known in view of the furious uproar it would cause if known to the isolationists.

Berle did learn of it. 'In other words,' he expostulated in a choked letter to his superior, Sumner Welles, 'Stephenson's assistant in British Intelligence is running Donovan's Intelligence service.'<sup>5</sup>

THROUGHOUT 1941 B.S.C. refined and developed methods of doing what Berle had called 'making trouble' in the United States. Stephenson's three hundred agents (he admitted to only 137 employees, but Berle minuted that obviously Stephenson had shuffled far more of his men onto Donovan's payroll) intercepted mail, tapped wires, cracked safes, kidnapped, and rumour-mongered. They whispered that the antiwar campaigner Charles Lindbergh's abducted and murdered son was alive and training in Nazi Germany. Other tricks were evidently dirtier. After the untimely death of isolationist lobbyist William Rhodes Davis at age fifty-two, B.S.C. requested the F.B.I. not to investigate.<sup>6</sup>

Churchill assigned highest B.S.C. priority to panicking Washington into believing that Hitler had designs in America's backyard, Latin America. Here Hoover had retained control of counter-espionage, so B.S.C. faked documents to plant on the F.B.I.: to 'prove' that Hitler was masterminding a coup in La Paz, B.S.C. forged a letter from the Bolivian military attaché in Berlin.\* Roosevelt, who may have been unaware of the deception, called it 'this astonishing document' in his next broadcast.<sup>7</sup>

\* Dated June 9, 1941 the letter read: 'Friends in the Wilhelmstrasse tell me that from information received from you the moment is approaching to strike in order to liberate my poor country. . . I go much further and believe that *el golpe* should take place in the middle of July.' Written in Spanish, the letter was 'signed' by the military attaché Major Elias Belmonte.

B.S.C. furnished similar documents about Franco's Spain. This time the forgery was detected, and Berle huffed to his superiors that the British had even approached 'our people' to collaborate in 'certain other forgeries.' Stephenson, he warned, was using manufactured incidents to influence public opinion via the *New York Tribune*.<sup>8</sup> But even the watchful Berle was suckered by another B.S.C. product: 'The F.B.I.,' he wrote in April 1942, 'has intercepted and given me today a copy of the German plan for the invasion of Colombia.' And he added admiringly, 'These Germans are thorough.'<sup>9</sup>

Just how thorough became evident a few weeks later. From the U.S. ambassador at Bogotá he learned that Stephenson's station chief Fred Stagg had blandly requested co-operation in assassinating Dr Luis Lopez de Mesa, the Colombian foreign minister.<sup>10</sup>\* This unfortunate gentleman was commendably pro-British but due to retire in May and hence expendable. No doubt the Nazis would be blamed. The U.S. ambassador, noted Berle, declined to co-operate.

Almost certainly, B.S.C. had another function: to provide an informal 'secret channel' between the White House and No. 10, circumventing noisome embassy and cabinet officials. Using a special cypher, Stephenson sent thousands of code messages from the F.B.I. transmitter on Chesapeake Bay. They were picked up and deciphered at S.O.E. headquarters in London's Baker-street. The president began availing himself of this channel to Churchill in 1941. Since the files of messages that flowed through the other channels make no reference to ULTRA and MAGIC – the Oracles that certainly guided Mr Churchill's destinies – it is fair to speculate that these messages were exchanged by some such secret channel.<sup>11</sup> Hoover noted in July that Stephenson was proffering this clandestine traffic as his reason for denying access to his special cypher. When Hoover's superior, the attorney general Francis Biddle, learned of this later he was perplexed and furious. 'Several thousand cables a month,' he protested, 'and in code, are being received and sent through the F.B.I. radio station in Maryland.'<sup>12</sup>

Hoover voiced concern about the growth of B.S.C., and Berle joined him in insisting that the hundreds of agents now operating for Churchill on American soil register under the Foreign Registration Act. William Stephenson retaliated in his own way, telling an agent to 'get some dirt' on Berle.<sup>13</sup> Hoover's G-men caught the B.S.C. agent red-handed and gave

\* Traced and interviewed by this author in Paris, Stagg admitted requesting American assistance for ditching a refrigerator containing a German agent from a chartered plane – after he had first been relieved of a suitcase of dollars – but denied any recollection of the episode referred to in Berle's files.



Stephenson twenty-four hours to remove him from the country.<sup>14</sup> Many federal officials thought Stephenson should follow. Biddle told Lord Halifax that Roosevelt's cabinet wanted Stephenson replaced by a different type of man. Halifax retorted amiably that Stephenson was on the best of terms with Hoover. To Biddle, Hoover afterward complained that Stephenson 'tapped wires and shanghaied sailors.' The F.B.I. wanted his wings clipped too.<sup>15</sup>

Berle, Biddle, Hoover and the other federal officials were way out of their depth in the game now being played between No. 10 and the Oval Office. They had become pawns with neither voice nor authority. Another meeting was held, this time in the British embassy. Biddle challenged the B.S.C. claim that the F.B.I. channels were carrying clandestine Churchill–Roosevelt messages. Halifax countered that Stephenson denied ever making 'any such statement.' In vain Biddle brandished Hoover's written statement to the contrary.

Stepping out into Massachusetts-avenue afterward, Biddle glimpsed a smile flickering across Halifax's skeletal features. 'Somebody,' he scowled to Berle, 'has been doing some tall lying here.'<sup>16</sup>



Like some inverse Midas touch, everything that Churchill touched still seemed to turn to ashes. His moods swept by as suddenly as sunshine on a gusty day. Only the hopes he vested in his maternal America sustained him. Australian prime minister Robert Menzies wrote after one March weekend at Chequers, 'Winston is completely certain of America's full help, of her participation in a Japanese war, and of Roosevelt's passionate determination to stamp out the Nazi menace from the earth.' And he lamented, 'If the P.M. was a better listener and less disposed to dispense with all expert or local opinion, I might feel a little easier about it – he's a holy terror. I went to bed tired.'<sup>17</sup>

Increasingly the radiant bursts were clouded by sudden gloom, and Churchill took refuge, as old men do, in ill health. His cold had become bronchitis by that Monday March 10 and he funk'd returning to London – where a cabinet had been marked down for the bunker at Dollis-hill – and stayed at Chequers until his Tuesday luncheon at the palace.<sup>18</sup> He was worried about Africa, but did not show it. Bletchley had broken into the airforce cypher used by the new *Fliegerführer Afrika*: this revealed that a German Africa Corps was out there and that Rommel was its commander. More than one cabinet colleague now quietly regretted that Wavell's antitank guns, armour and troops were being shipped across to the Piræus in southern Greece, and murmured that he should have mopped up North

Africa while he could.<sup>19</sup> ‘War cabinet,’ Robert Menzies recorded on March 5. ‘The Middle East proposal is going bad. Why the devil should Eden purport to commit us on facts which he must know are most disturbing and which have Empire significance?’ The next day Menzies spoke ‘plain words’ about the need for Mr Churchill to consult the Dominions before taking grave decisions affecting them. Churchill decided to let Eden stay out there for a while. Ambassador Winant, viewing the Whitehall scene through a newcomer’s eyes, could see why the P.M. preferred to handle things by himself. ‘Outside of Churchill,’ he would tell Washington, ‘the people in the government seem to be mediocre.’<sup>20</sup>

LADEN WITH tangerines from Lisbon, a further Roosevelt emissary – William Averell Harriman – arrived with F.D.R.’s orders to keep Britain afloat. The forty-nine-year-old Harriman was handsome, wealthy and – what mattered more – a protégé of Harry Hopkins; Baruch enviously called him a ‘spoiled rich man’s son.’ But Churchill knew this banker and society mogul from chance encounters on the Riviera and had met him at Bernie Baruch’s around the time of the Wall-street crash.

His family took an instant shine to him. At Chequers in mid-March, the American revealed that F.D.R. undertook to build merchant ships and even convoy them to Britain. Churchill knew what that meant, and liked it: Harriman and Winant, he confided to his cabinet after that heady weekend, were hoping to trap Hitler into committing ‘some overt act’ of war.<sup>21</sup> ‘I am all for trusting Mr Harriman fully,’ the P.M. wrote to the indefatigable cabinet secretary Sir Edward Bridges, ‘and working with him on the most intimate terms.’<sup>22</sup> But, astute enough to recognise that Roosevelt would use Harriman to by-pass Purvis, Churchill decided to continue in secret correspondence with Purvis’s purchasing commission. Perhaps recalling the secret channels he had employed at Narvik and Dunkirk, he urged Bridges: ‘It should not be difficult to devise methods.’

Churchill had been driven to this jaundiced view of Roosevelt’s motives by the hard line adopted by Morgenthau over Britain’s interim payments for war supplies pending the signing of Lend–Lease. Refusing to be ‘hustled and rattled,’ he recommended Halifax to deadlock and remind the Americans that ‘their lives are now in this business too.’ ‘Morgenthau,’ he wrote tersely to the ambassador, ‘may have a bad time before his Committee, but Liverpool and Glasgow are having a bad time now.’<sup>23</sup>

His anger was evident, though never in outgoing messages to the president. ‘Are we,’ he reminded Kingsley Wood, ‘going to get our advances for building up factories in the United States repaid to us?’ ‘A small crash’ was his proposed remedy – a show-down preceded, as he put it, by

'a lie-down.' Britain should put on a 'dumb and immobile' act for the Americans:

As far as *I* can make out we are not only to be skinned but flayed to the bone. I would like to get them hooked a little firmer, but they are pretty well on now. The power of the debtor is in the ascendant, especially when he is doing all the fighting.<sup>24</sup>

Hitler's bombers had levelled more of the City that weekend. The new vista of St. Paul's was one which Wren would have given his soul to achieve. Churchill dourly double-checked the arrangements for his safety, ambling over with his mousy P.P.S., Eric Seal, to see a new bunker being constructed in the government quarter. Paddling through wet concrete and clambering down ladders, he asked the bystanding labourers: 'Are we downhearted?'<sup>25</sup>

With his porkpie hat and outsize Havana cigar, he put on a brave face. But it was not easy, burdened with his awesome insight into the future from the Oracle: the ineluctable defeat of Greece; the defection of Yugoslavia; the devastation of ports and decimation of shipping. 'I'm not afraid of the air,' he blurted out, baring his thoughts at the close of one cabinet. 'I'm not afraid of invasion, I'm less afraid of the Balkans – but – I'm anxious about the Atlantic.'<sup>26</sup>

The disciplines of discretion and the impulses of death-wish fought within him for control. He took immense pains over security. Even on the scrambler telephone he used guarded language. He pruned the lists of those receiving the codebreakers' intercepts – not even Anthony Eden was privy to the Oracle. He treated its products as gingerly as nitro-glycerine, as the following example shows. On April 2 he told Roosevelt that 'entirely authentic secret information' showed that the enemy had given Vichy permission to transfer *Dunkerque* to Toulon for 'disarmament.' Since Mers-el-Kébir he knew he could not trust Admiral Darlan, and he begged the president to lean on Vichy to cancel this transfer; for otherwise Britain would have to intercept the battlecruiser. In a frantic after-thought Churchill sent a second telegram warning that on no account must Admiral Leahy use the phrase 'permission of the Armistice Commission' since this would compromise his source.<sup>27</sup>

And yet in major strategy the P.M. was distressingly indiscreet. We have already remarked upon how Churchill's and Reynaud's indiscretions in March 1940 had prompted Hitler's rapid invasion of Norway. Churchill also indirectly ensured that the R.A.F. and American bomber crews would have to contend with the flak nightmare over Germany: 'We have Chur-

chill to thank that we got so much flak,' said the commander of Germany's air defences, Lieutenant-General Beppo Schmid, in July 1945. 'In one of his speeches in the House of Commons he explained, after being attacked over the poor showing of the anti-aircraft artillery, "I need the A.A. if only for reasons of population morale." Our flak people rushed off to the Führer and said, "You see, Churchill also says it!"'<sup>28</sup>

Now, in March 1941, Churchill began speaking all too frankly about Britain's shipping crisis. Formally welcoming Winant at a London luncheon, he underscored this 'potentially mortal' challenge,<sup>29</sup> and over the following months he missed no opportunity of referring to this chink in Britain's armour. Hitler pricked up his ears, and directed his airforce and U-boat commanders to complete the task by attacking ports and supply convoys. A year later he pointed out to Grand Admiral Raeder: 'Time and again Churchill speaks of shipping tonnage as his greatest worry.'<sup>30</sup>

On March 19 the P.M. called the first regular Wednesday meeting of a new Battle of the Atlantic committee.<sup>31</sup> Restlessly searching for ways of bringing America in, he cabled to Roosevelt an invitation to police the central Atlantic where the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were marauding: the Americans, he hinted, could at least report what they saw.<sup>32</sup>

Five hundred planes attacked the Port of London that night. After dining at No. 10 with Harriman and Anthony Biddle, American ambassador to the governments in exile, Churchill handed out helmets and invited them to join him on the air ministry roof, climbing up through a manhole to watch the spectacle. The bombing had stopped, but it exhilarated him – his secretary heard him quoting Tennyson above the distant gunfire – and nor were these two hours without effect on his transatlantic cousins.<sup>33</sup> By the time they retraced their steps and went down to the C.W.R. to see night duty officers marking up war maps among the ventilators, girders and stanchions, 1,700 fires had been kindled and 504 Londoners had paid the ultimate price for the night's 'fun' (as Colville heard Winston call it).

IN THE Balkans his Midas touch appeared again. Diplomacy having failed to win the Belgrade regime as a whole, S.O.(2) decided to topple it instead. They confided their plot to the Serb opposition factions behind closed doors at the British legation on Wednesday the nineteenth. They won the support of three ministers; when their colleagues approved the draft Nazi–Yugoslav pact on Thursday, these three resigned.<sup>34</sup> From Chequers, Churchill telephoned all that Saturday morning with the F.O., drafting a letter which went to Prime Minister Tsvetkovitch. It drew up the now-familiar balance sheet – of sixty-five million malignant Huns, already holding down

other 'ancient races,' confronted by nearly two hundred million Whites of the British empire and United States – and warned Yugoslavia not to become an 'accomplice in an attempted assassination of Greece.'<sup>35</sup>

The warning fell on deaf ears: Tsvetkovitch wanted, and Hitler promised, to leave Yugoslavia alone in reward for her signature to the pact.<sup>36</sup> On Monday March 24 Tsvetkovitch left for Vienna to sign with Hitler. On Tuesday Baker-street suggested to S.O.(2) that they wreck the train bringing him back to Belgrade. Casting about for action, Churchill rasped to Cadogan something about a man whom he helplessly called 'Sonofabitch.' The F.O. official took this to be Tsvetkovitch (Churchill had meant Dr Milan Stoyadinovitch, the former prime minister). Feeling helpless, with so little time to act, the P.M. could only urge his minister in Belgrade to 'continue to pester, nag and bite' the regime. 'This is no time for reproaches or dignified farewells.' The legation, he hinted, should resort to alternatives if the 'present government' were beyond recall.<sup>37</sup> With precious few days left, S.O.(2) had approached army officers without success, but the British air attaché had found support in the airforce. 'This was a comparatively small but united body of men,' reported station chief George Taylor, 'intensely anti-German, solidly against the policy of the Pact and the prince, led by an enthusiastic and energetic man, Bora Mirkovitch, the deputy chief of air staff.'<sup>38</sup>

That Wednesday rumours of a coming airforce putsch gripped Belgrade.<sup>39</sup> They were not without foundation, and conferring in secret that morning with Simovitch the attaché had outlined what help Britain would offer. During the night the regime collapsed like a rotten puffball, more swiftly than S.O.E. had dared to hope. Tanks took over the government area. Tsvetkovitch was arrested and Simovitch was brought from his suburban villa and installed in power.

At four A.M. on Thursday the S.O.(2) telegram bearing these tidings reached S.O.E. headquarters at No. 64 Baker-street. It was rushed to Churchill. He had instructed Dalton to 'set Europe ablaze.' Here was the first triumph. In Belgrade the seventeen-year-old Peter was proclaimed king. Excited crowds stormed the German tourist office, burned swastikas, and manhandled German diplomats. 'The money we have spent on the Serb Peasant Party and other opposition parties,' Dalton reflected that morning, 'has given wonderful value.'<sup>40</sup> S.O.E. had ignited its first European blaze – one that would shortly engulf seventeen thousand citizens of Belgrade and would in time kill two million more in the grimmest of civil wars.

More concerned with purple prose than human tragedy, the P.M. addressed a long-planned party conference at noon. 'Early this morning,' he announced, 'the Yugoslav nation found its soul.'

His bronchitis was forgotten. He was uplifted by this news. In his imagination he drew a new Balkan front with seventy divisions – if Turkey came in – confronting the thirty of the Axis.<sup>41</sup> But he was viewing the Balkans through the wrong end of a telescope: suppose Belgrade did not share his enthusiasm for fire and steel? At a joint luncheon given by employers and union leaders an hour later, he revealed something of this naïveté: 'Though I don't know what will happen,' he confessed, 'and one cannot be sure of anything, I believe that it is reasonable to expect that we will have a government in Yugoslavia which will repudiate the pact . . . and will be ready to defend the honour and frontiers of Yugoslavia against aggression. If that be so, Great Britain will recognise that government.'

At one P.M., even as Churchill was lowering his chin to the soup plate at No. 10, a most displeased Adolf Hitler was announcing to generals hastily summoned to his Berlin chancellery his resolve to 'smash' Yugoslavia. Previously he had not planned to pass his armour through that country at all. Later that day, even as Churchill was stepping forward under arc-lamps to sign the bases agreement with the American ambassador, in Berlin the Führer executed Directive No. 25 spelling out his new plan.

It would be unjust to point to Churchill alone for being outwitted once again. Even that wise statesman Jan Smuts shared his lack of foresight. 'The Germans,' he announced on hearing of the putsch, 'have lost the Battle of the Balkans,' and he fulsomely declared the new boy-king Peter the Great. But now the real Belgrade crisis began. The new cabinet retained most of the ministers and much of the flavour of the old; appalled at having already offended Germany, they declined Britain's offer of assistance. Simovitch even asked Britain to tone down the strident propaganda. Whitehall could not have predicted how swiftly Hitler's general staff was capable of regrouping its forces against a new target. By opening Yugoslavia to Hitler's tank columns after all, Mr Churchill had turned the Anglo-Greek line of defences and rendered Greece indefensible.



The putsch sealed one nagging problem in Churchill's mind. Its aftermath convinced him that Hitler was going to attack Russia.

On the one day that lay between Yugoslavia's signing the pact in Vienna and the putsch in Belgrade, Bletchley had deciphered German air-force signals proving that significant Wehrmacht units – including three Panzer divisions – had been ordered north from Romania toward Cracow.

(Hitler was regrouping Panzer Group Kleist, XIV Corps, and some Twelfth Army units for Operation BARBAROSSA, his campaign against Russia.) But a few hours *after* the putsch the astonished Germans halted the transfer and ordered the trains held in the sidings; moreover, Göring had ordered the chief of air staff Hans Jeschonnek and the commander of the Fourth Air Force Alexander Löhr to consultations in Berlin.<sup>42</sup> It was from these clues that Churchill reached his remarkable conviction.

We now know that Hitler had reiterated in a staff conference on January 9 his intention of invading Russia in the first half of May.<sup>43</sup> While Whitehall – the F.O. and military Intelligence – had consistently rejected this possibility, Churchill somehow possessed an overview that these floundering Intelligence services did not. The files do not reveal the origin of his certainty, but Stephenson's reports from New York, together with still unreleased intercepts, may hold the key. One thing is certain: while Churchill's ponderous and slow-witted Intelligence experts were effectively duped by enemy deception schemes and had expected Hitler to invade Britain throughout the summer of 1940 and the Middle East from October onward, and while early in 1941 the war office still regarded the build-up on the Soviet frontier as quite normal,<sup>44</sup> ever since late June 1940 the P.M. and his ambassador in Moscow, Sir Stafford Cripps, had consistently predicted an attack on Russia. They couched their statements in such categorical terms that mere speculation or 'gut feeling' can be ruled out.

On the last day of October 1940 the P.M. had reaffirmed his view orally to the defence committee: Hitler would attack Russia in 1941 for her oil.<sup>45</sup> He restated this on January 6. 'A great campaign in the east of Europe,' he said, 'the defeat of Russia, the conquest of the Ukraine and an advance . . . to the Caspian would none of them, separately or together, bring him victorious peace.'<sup>46</sup> Reinforcing his knowledge was what the Oracle told him: in December Bletchley had begun reading the manual cypher used by Hitler's military Intelligence, and this reflected a predatory Abwehr interest in Russia as well as the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> In February 1941 the war office had organised a major anti-invasion exercise. After dinner at Chequers on February 2, General Brooke used an overhead projector to lecture an impatient Winston on the 'invasion' and how he had countered it. 'Winston's reactions were very typical,' wrote Brooke. 'He was quite flattering . . . but considered that the umpires had exaggerated the German threat of invasion.'<sup>48</sup>

By that time Washington – and possibly No. 10 too – had obtained remarkable confirmation of the German plan. A Nazi traitor leaked to the commercial attaché at the American embassy in Berlin the actual

BARBAROSSA directive signed by Hitler on December 18, along with a record of his staff conference on January 9.<sup>49</sup> Intercepted Japanese messages – which Churchill was also getting from Bletchley and in the diplomatic pouch from the United States – provided background confirmation. One such MAGIC intercept on March 20 indicated that Hitler would attack Russia within two months.<sup>50</sup>

When later the more poorly informed F.O. obtained rather less coherent reports from Washington, Desmond Morton could afford the acid comment: ‘The Book of Revelations read backwards would be more helpful.’<sup>51</sup>

Hitler’s sudden change of mind – the signals following the Belgrade putsch – clinched it in Churchill’s mind.<sup>52</sup> On the twenty-ninth he delivered a little homily to his staff on other notables who had invaded Russia down the ages, and particularly on Charles XII of Sweden who had been trounced at Poltava in 1709.<sup>53</sup> Telegraphing Athens, Churchill tested the opinion of Eden and Dill: ‘The moment he [Hitler] was sure Yugoslavia was in the Axis,’ he suggested to Eden, setting out his own reading of the Oracle, ‘he moved three of the five Panzers towards the Bear, believing that what was left would be enough to finish the Greek affair.’ The sudden reversal of orders could only indicate that Hitler intended to attack Yugoslavia. ‘It looks,’ he said, ‘as if heavy forces will be used in Balkan peninsula and that Bear will be kept waiting a bit.’<sup>54</sup>

Military Intelligence remained incorrigible. Lacking Churchill’s background information, whatever it was, they dismissed the intercepts as ‘of interest.’ The F.O. applauded their ‘sane view.’<sup>55</sup> Winston let them stew in their own juice. It was remarkable how this autocratic old gentleman continued his lonely swim against the stubborn tide. He knew what he knew, and it was enough.



The Japanese foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka had arrived in Berlin. Through MAGIC, Churchill in effect eavesdropped on his luncheon with Hitler on the twenty-eighth. Having sagely assured his visitor that the Kremlin was behind the Belgrade putsch, Hitler added these measured words: ‘If the Soviet Union were to attack Japan, then Germany would not hesitate to launch an armed attack on the Soviet Union.’ Ribbentrop echoed that this was an ‘absolute guarantee.’<sup>56</sup>

When Matsuoka returned a few days later through Russia and the Trans-Siberian railroad to Japan, Churchill arranged for a letter to await him in Moscow. It asked eight mildly sarcastic – but prophetic, as it turned out – questions which he suggested that Tokyo consider before



becoming embroiled with the Axis powers against Britain. Seven concerned Germany's relative air and naval power, and the respective strength of Japan and the United States. The eighth gave the tenor of the rest:

Is it true that the production of steel in the United States during 1941 will be 75 million tons, and in Great Britain about 12½, making a total of nearly 90 million tons? If Germany should happen to be defeated, as she was last time, would not the 7 million tons steel production of Japan be inadequate for a single-handed war?<sup>57</sup>

THAT WEEKEND at Chequers had been brightened by a spectacular achievement of those innocent-looking cryptanalysts at Bletchley. They had established that the Italian fleet was preparing a raid into the Ægean or Eastern Mediterranean on Thursday the twenty-seventh.<sup>58</sup> This information was swiftly signalled to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham at Alexandria. He put to sea. At noon-thirty a plane from Malta sighted the Italian force. Off Cape Matapan the next day he sank three Italian cruisers and two destroyers, saving the vital British convoy to Greece which had been their intended target.

Never again did the Italian fleet seriously bother the British. Small wonder that Winston passed much of the weekend striding and even dancing up and down the Great Hall while a table gramophone tinkled marches and vulgar waltzes. But all the while he was sunk deep in thought, as his staff could see.<sup>59</sup> He was now certain that Hitler would shortly attack Russia. That weekend he decided he must notify the Kremlin. He telegraphed Cripps in Moscow and commanded him to deliver a cryptic warning message to Stalin in person – his first as P.M. to the Soviet head of state – telling him of ‘sure information from a trusted agent’ about the sudden halting of the move of the three Panzer divisions. The message concluded portentously: ‘Your Excellency will readily appreciate the significance of these facts.’<sup>60</sup>

It was *too* cryptic. Without the supplementary Intelligence available to Churchill, it meant nothing. Churchill later explained that he left it cryptic because of its ‘deadly’ content, hoping that its very brevity would ‘arrest Stalin’s attention.’<sup>61</sup> It did not arrest Cripps’s attention in the Moscow embassy: he scratched his head and filed Churchill’s message away – undelivered.

All the more inexplicable was the Intelligence failure that allowed Rommel, on the last day of March, to launch an all-out attack on the Brit-

ish forces remaining in Libya. By April 2 he was in Agedabia. Churchill sent an alarmed message to Wavell: to withdraw from Benghazi would, he said, 'appear most melancholy.' But by late on the third Wavell was evacuating Benghazi, and Rommel's offensive was gathering momentum.

Churchill's Oracle had let him down partly because the German army ENIGMA cyphers were still secure. The lack of evidence from airforce ENIGMA had produced a false sense of security: that Rommel would test the British defences was half expected, but not that he would attempt a major offensive beyond Agedabia, let alone Benghazi. The evidence pointed the other way. Hitler had directed that Rommel's 'main task' was to hold his current line and tie down enemy forces. Keitel had forwarded this directive to the Africa Corps on the third: Rommel was to restrain his troops until the 15th Panzer division arrived. Accordingly, 'Further major offensive out of the question until autumn.'<sup>62</sup>

Churchill's Oracle produced ENIGMA intercept CX/JQ/829 on April 5 proving that Rommel was flouting Hitler's instructions. Churchill immediately notified Wavell that Rommel was not under orders to conquer Egypt – quite the contrary. But Rommel was a disobedient, impulsive general, and this was a lesson Churchill and his generals still had to learn. Violating Hitler's directive, he continued the attack: on the seventh he took Derna, and at the end of the month he would hold the Halfaya Pass on the frontier of Egypt.

HITLER NOW put the torch to the Balkans.

Churchill watched it happening with a sense of fatalism. A decoded telegram from the Italian legation in Sofia had revealed that Greece and Yugoslavia would be attacked on April 5.<sup>63</sup> On Wednesday the second Bletchley told him about a German operation codenamed JUDGEMENT DAY, scheduled for April 6. Late on the fourth he passed a vague warning to Simovitch – all he could safely say – that German airforce formations were arriving 'from all quarters.'

Helpless to do more, with the eyes of Bletchley he watched as Hitler moved up reinforcements from France, Sicily and North Africa. Early on Saturday the fifth the codebreakers discerned that the enemy air attack would be sprung on Yugoslavia at five-thirty the next morning. Dalton, with some of S.O.E.'s best men still in Belgrade, noted that day: 'Our best information is that the balloon will go up to-morrow at dawn when the Germans will attack both Yug[oslav]s and Greeks and launch the most terrific blitz of which they are capable.'

The P.M. had invited Harriman for the weekend. An hour before midnight they telephoned the White House. Churchill spoke to Harry

Hopkins, indicating that 'there would be very vital moves in the Balkans.' He also spoke of 'the urgency of the situation by sea.' Evidently their mutual friend was not well, because when he asked to speak to Roosevelt the call was put through to the president in his doctor's office.<sup>64</sup>

JUDGEMENT DAY struck Belgrade at dawn on Sunday. Germany's air-force killed seventeen thousand people in the capital – Hitler's first and only strategic air raid of the war. Simultaneously, his Wehrmacht attacked Greece. Bombers hit the shipping in the Piræus. The British freighter *Clan Fraser* blew up with two hundred tons of high explosives, devastating the port.

For Churchill, the Balkan nightmare was beginning. For his adversary in Berlin, it seemed in retrospect that the Belgrade putsch had come at just the right time. Had Churchill waited until mid-May, the Wehrmacht would have been embroiled in BARBAROSSA and sorely vexed for a military solution in Belgrade. 'Luckily the enemy unmasked themselves now,' crowed Hitler on the day of the S.O.E. coup, '– while our hands are still free!' And he reflected to the Hungarian envoy in Berlin, 'I can't help believing in a Higher Justice.'<sup>65</sup>

41: *Mr Optimist Frog*

GETTING AMERICA into the war remained Churchill's highest priority throughout 1941. Keen to influence Washington opinion, he steered every American notable out to see the beleaguered ports and devastated cities for himself. Thus Thursday evening, April 10, found him aboard his train bound for the West Country, taking Ambassadors Winant and Harriman, on the pretext of conferring honorary degrees on them at Bristol University.

Regularly informed by his Oracle of the *Knickebein* beam settings, he may well have known that this port was Hitler's target for that night.<sup>1</sup> They passed the hours of darkness in a railroad siding outside Bristol until the raid, by nearly two hundred bombers, had ended. As they drove into the city outskirts the next morning troops were still fighting fires and the citizenry was visibly shaken. Fortunately the Grand Hotel had escaped damage and kitchen staff volunteered to carry hot water up to fill a bath for Winston.

Bathed and refreshed, he led his dishevelled transatlantic friends out to feast their eyes on a Bristol bruised and still noisy with time bombs, but going about its business. Like Mr Pickwick on a stagecoach, he clambered on top of the open car to wave his porkpie hat, then dismounted and walked rapidly through the freshly rubble streets. News spread rapidly ahead by word of mouth, and crowds flocked round shouting, 'Hello Winnie!' 'Good ol' Winnie!' 'You'll never let us down!' 'We'll never let you down!' or just, 'What a man!'

Flags stuck out of the ruins. Amidst one such heap the gas cooker still worked and neighbours were lining up to make breakfast as he walked past. He hid the anguish that gripped him well, but Winant did not fail to note that he changed the 'Cheerio,' spoken when leaving Swansea and Aberport the night before, to 'God bless you,' here in Bristol. What impressed the young ambassador was the determination and enthusiasm of Bristol's middle-aged women, particularly when these matronly homemakers glimpsed Clemmie at her husband's side. 'The look which flashed between her and these mothers of England was something far deeper and

more significant than the casual newspaper accounts of friendly social interchange,' wrote Winant privately to the president. 'The whole town,' he added, 'was back on its feet again and cheering within two hours of his arrival although no one had got any sleep during the night.'<sup>2</sup>

The mayor had been rescued by boat, his house having been flooded by a fractured water main. His wife was fainting from the strain. But nothing would deter immense crowds from packing the front of the university as Mr Churchill, its chancellor, arrived. A nearby building was on fire, and the choking fumes of burning wood drifted into the hall through the gaping window frames. Against this cruel backdrop the smoke-stained medieval procession of academic and civic worthies, laden with ceremonial maces and gold chains, swayed down the aisle to hear Mr Churchill, robed in his father's finery, bestow the honorary degrees. As he spoke, he glimpsed beneath more than one robe in his audience the sodden uniform or gumboots of a civil defence worker.

He ducked behind a newspaper as his train left Bristol, trying to hide the tears in his eyes. All these people, both inside the hall and out, showed such childlike confidence in him. The responsibility was almost too much to bear. He turned to Winant, still seeing all those trusting faces in his mind's eye. 'I am going to see to it,' he said, 'that the necessary tonnage is allotted for foodstuffs to protect them from the strains and stresses they may be subjected to in a period of great emergency.'

HE KNEW that things were going to get worse before they got better. Rommel's forces in Libya had turned out to be twice as large as anticipated. 'Only tonight,' wrote Robert Menzies on April 8, 'I was horrified to hear Churchill saying à propos of Tobruk, to which we are retreating and where we [Australians] hope to make a stand, "if stout-hearted men with rifles and machine guns cannot hold these people until the guns come up, I must revise my ideas of war."' By the tenth Rommel, this barely known Nazi general, had taken two thousand British prisoners, including three generals (O'Connor, Neame and Combe), but he was about to fail – despite several bloody attempts – to capture Tobruk. The C.I.G.S General Dill was despondent; he privately saw no way of victory, and told a visiting American general that their only hope was a repeat of 1918 when enemy morale 'cracked for no real reason.'<sup>3</sup>

Worried by Rommel's seemingly unstoppable advance to Egypt, the P.M. ordered Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham to accept major risks to cut the enemy supply line, even if it meant taking 'heavy losses in battle-ships, cruisers and destroyers.' It was a remarkable signal. Alerted by the Oracle that an enemy convoy was carrying units of the 15th Panzer divi-

sion to Tripoli, naval forces sank two merchantmen and three Italian escort destroyers on the sixteenth. Five days later Cunningham reluctantly sailed a bombardment force to Tripoli and shelled the port, but pleaded not to have to take such 'unjustifiable risks again.'<sup>4</sup>

By the end of April Churchill's latest débâcle, in Greece, would be complete as well, and he began to cast about for scapegoats. Anthony Eden provided one scapegoat. The foreign secretary had now returned from his peregrinations. Churchill, in a recalcitrant mood, told him he had never wanted to help Greece anyway.<sup>5</sup>

Wavell made another easy scapegoat. Ungraciously, the P.M. remarked to his nodding entourage that the general had been 'very silly' and should have been prepared for Rommel's attack.<sup>6</sup> Now he reminded Wavell by telegram that Tobruk had been well-fortified by the Italians, and suggested it be held to the death – 'without thought of retirement.' Pug Ismay was ordered to procure a model of Tobruk without delay.

It did not help Churchill's mood that he had been scheduled to propose the House's congratulations to Wavell for recent victories. He was due to make that speech on the ninth, but now events had overtaken him. 'If there were enough good and strong men in Parliament outside H.M.G.,' observed one worried minister, 'there would be danger of an upset. But there aren't and so there isn't – yet.'<sup>7</sup> As he entered the famous chamber on the ninth, sympathetic cheers greeted the familiar figure, with the ugly gold chain strung across his runaway paunch. He scowled as he waited between Labour ministers Arthur Greenwood and Clement Attlee, looking, as Lord Beaverbrook would later remark, like a bird of paradise perched between a sparrow and a jackdaw. He made a final alteration with gold pencil to the notes clutched in one heavily-ringed pink hand, then delivered his speech.<sup>8</sup> It was uninspired and he knew it.

At war cabinet [wrote a seething Robert Menzies in his diary on April 14] W.C. speaks at length as the Master Strategist – Tobruk must be held as a bridgehead or sally port, from which to hit the enemy!

'What with?' say I, and so the discussion goes on.

Wavell and the admiralty have failed us. The cabinet is deplorable – dense men, most of whom disagree with Winston but none of whom dares to say so. . . The Chiefs of Staff are without exception yes-men, and a politician runs the services. Winston is a dictator; he cannot be overruled, and his colleagues fear him. The people have set him up as something little less than God, and his power is therefore terrific.

That day the Australian leader decided to remain in London for two more weeks, because grave decisions would now have to be taken about the Australian forces in the Middle East – ‘and I am not content to have them solved by “unilateral rhetoric.”’

ON EASTER Saturday, as German forces began entering a Belgrade over which the stench of spent cordite and death hung no less than over Bristol, Churchill drove out to Chequers with the Americans, Winant and Harri-man.

There was some good news here – a telegram from Roosevelt announcing that he was pushing the American security zone far into the eastern Atlantic.<sup>9</sup> ‘We will want in great secrecy,’ the telegram said, ‘notification of movement of convoys so our patrol units can seek out any ships or planes of aggressor nations operating west of the new line of the security zone.’ Roosevelt’s intention was to report to Churchill, the ‘Former Naval Person,’ the position of these ships and planes. It was perhaps a bigger stride toward belligerency than the president appreciated: because, armed with his knowledge from the Oracle, Churchill would soon be able to route convoys *deliberately* so as to put American warships at maximum risk of confrontation with the Germans.

But that was the only good news that week. His appointment card for Wednesday April 16 was crowded with conferences. At 11:15 A.M. it listed the director of military Intelligence, Davidson, with ‘C’ – Brigadier Menzies. Bletchley had now revealed that Hitler’s troops had broken through the last Greek defences the day before and were advancing down the coast. An hour later Churchill met with his chiefs of staff and First Lord, then lunched with the Polish president, recorded a message to Australia – whose troops were at that moment fighting a heroic defence of Tobruk – and conferred on the Battle of the Atlantic at five. A few hours later a shocking telegram arrived from Wavell: the Greek general, Papagos, had formally invited Britain to remove her expeditionary force from Greek soil to avoid further ‘devastation.’ The cabinet agreed that the empire troops should be withdrawn to Crete.

With so much on his plate, it was small wonder that, when the sirens sounded that night – the Luftwaffe was attacking London in reprisal for his raid on Berlin one week earlier<sup>10</sup> – Mr Churchill was, uncharacteristically, still in London. There were many who quietly welcomed this, feeling that the P.M.’s attitude toward reprisal and counter-reprisal raids was altogether too sanguine. General Sir John Kennedy, the director of military operations, expressed private pleasure that this time Churchill himself

would get a taste of the 'kind of retaliation the Germans are capable of.' To continue harassing Hitler's distant capital, and against such odds, he argued, was like putting a middleweight boxer into the ring against a heavyweight with a longer reach.<sup>11</sup>

It was the enemy's heaviest raid on London so far. Railroad stations including Paddington were hit, and a bomb had struck the Thames embankment behind the Savoy, exposing the subway tunnel underneath and ripping thousands of windows out of the hotel. Oxford-street was blocked by avalanches of masonry released by two mines. Christie's auction house had burned out; Selfridge's, John Barker's and Derry & Toms department stores had been hit. Wealthy Mayfair was tattered, elegant Jermyn-street in ruins. Gas mains were flaring all the way down Piccadilly. Official photographers recorded grisly spectacles, including a woman stripped naked and scalped by the blast and a fireman with both legs torn off. As a lovely spring day dawned elsewhere, the sky over a bleary-eyed London was blotted out by smoke. John Colville strolled behind No. 10 and found Averell Harriman out walking with Winston's comely daughter-in-law Pamela – her husband Randolph was now out in Cairo – inspecting the new ruins.

The admiralty had been gashed by four heavy bombs, but Churchill, who had spent the night in the deep shelter, was unmoved by the fresh ruin. Taking his seat at the cabinet table at eleven-thirty he dryly commented on the improved view that Hitler had given him of Nelson.

News from Libya that the Australians were still holding out in Tobruk prompted him to talk of the weakness of the Germans in Libya. 'Then how the hell did they get there?' carped Cadogan in the safety of his diary, echoing what newspaper editors had been asking all week.<sup>12</sup>

This was the morning when another American, General H. H. ('Hap') Arnold, commanding the U.S. Army Air Corps, was due to arrive. His plane descended to Hendon airfield through veils of rising ash and smoke. 'Signs of bombing everywhere as we drove to the Dorchester,' he pencilled in his diary.

People salvaging what they could from wrecked stores. Glass all over the streets. Buildings flattened. Fire departments working everywhere. Traffic re-routed where streets were impassable. . . Report that Selfridges destroyed. Four bombs dropped within 150 feet of hotel. Two houses flattened. Glass everywhere but hotel unscathed. . . Britain back at work in a determined sort of way. Fires still burning this P.M.



Later Archie Sinclair showed the visitor the night's bomb-plot. 'In most cases,' noted Arnold, 'close to railroad stations, switching points, power stations, or transformers, bridges, arsenals, docks, warehouses. But a lot that was not.' Encouraged to stroll around the blitzed streets, General Arnold jotted down his impressions of Churchill's London in April 1941:

Glass, glass everywhere. Shops with crockery and beautiful knick-knacks and glass on shelves but windows and doors blown out. Baker shop with no front – women selling delicious hot bread and rolls. Antique shop with furniture, almost priceless, spread all over street and sidewalk. . . Pathetic sights of people trying to gather such of their belongings from wrecked homes. . . London is smiling only a little, in a grim sort of way. Hundreds of people killed and injured. . . The fire at Selfridges is still burning but steps are already being taken to open up on the ground floor. . . Six thousand bombs dropped last night, six hundred people killed, four thousand injured. . . Back of it all, a determination not to be wiped off the map.<sup>13</sup>



From the German airforce ENIGMA cypher Churchill could see that Hitler had been moving hundreds of gliders and towing aircraft down to the Balkans throughout March and April. The German chief of air staff Hans Jeschonnek shifted his headquarters there too, evidently preparing some major airborne operation. Even without the Oracle, it was obvious that it might be against Crete. But there just was not enough strength to go round. On April 18 Churchill decided to work up that island's defences later, because the evacuation of Greece and the defence of Libya must come first.<sup>14</sup>

That afternoon he did what he had never done before: he summoned a dozen Fleet-street editors to No. 10 and prepared them for the disaster in Greece. British troops would be evacuated, he said, as soon as 'honour was satisfied.' It would be more difficult than Dunkirk: the distances were greater, the shoreline less favourable. Hoping to avert criticism, he strongly implied that the fateful decision to switch Wavell's troops from Libya to Greece, snatching defeat as it were from the jaws of victory, had been taken 'by general agreement of the whole cabinet' and had been backed wholeheartedly by the generals on the spot.<sup>15</sup>

Not to be outdone by Hitler, he had again ordered Berlin bombed the previous night. Berlin, not to be outdone by him, announced that they felt

free to take reprisals against Athens and Cairo. Churchill, in staff conference when he heard of this broadcast, had instructions telephoned to the B.B.C.: if Hitler bombed either town then he, Churchill, would 'commence a systematic bombing of Rome.' That bold threat announced, he left for Oxfordshire, undoubtedly with foreknowledge that Göring had laid on seven hundred bombers to attack London that Saturday night.<sup>16</sup> Hap Arnold admitted in his diary that he was thankful to be accompanying the P.M. out to Dytchley.

Churchill had invited seven others to share Friday dinner with them at this refuge, including Harriman, Brendan Bracken, and several ladies. Arnold talked with Churchill until two A.M. and was struck by one cryptic reference to the Soviet Union. 'Russia,' Winston had said, 'is like an immoral crocodile waiting in the depths for whatever prey may come his way.'

Their talk touched many continents. 'The German army can roam at will over Continental Europe,' admitted the P.M. He underlined that Britain must win the battle of North Africa, but added that it would take American aid; he was frankly worried about Roosevelt's indifference to the Mediterranean. He himself was planning for a long war – for 1943 and beyond. They must build bases in Greenland, and the American navy should seize bases in the Portuguese Azores. 'Britain may not win many battles,' Arnold recalled the prime minister as saying, before he himself retired to bed in an ancient wing overlooking the garden, 'but she always wins the war.'

While the rain poured down all that Saturday Churchill mapped out for his American visitors his grandiose plans: he would build a base for them at Basra on the Persian Gulf, and an air depot a thousand miles from Cairo, to which he was sending 2,500 men. With coloured pencils he drew rings around places they could not afterward recall in Norway, Morocco, Greenland and Iceland, and spoke of the need to win over the American public by cunning propaganda – as in fact British Security Co-ordination had already begun to do from New York.

The little square-headed Czech president Beneš had joined them for lunch before they drove over to review Czech troops. In the car Churchill was still talking, his imagination charging and marching about Europe and the Middle East, projecting his listeners now into Spain, now Portugal, and then Persia, Tripoli, Sicily and Italy.



It was his first visit to the resurrected Czech army, two thousand troops looking keen and alert in British uniforms. When they ended the

visit by singing 'Rule Britannia,' the P.M. joined in, his eyes moist with tears. He let Beneš into his innermost thoughts, and a few days later the Czech president cabled his agents in these terms: 'Mr Churchill thinks that Germany will invade the Ukraine within two months at the latest.' Admitting that he himself was doubtful as to that, Beneš urged: 'If it does happen don't expect miracles, and try to restrain our people.' He predicted that the Russians would fight as they had always done: 'They will retreat as far as they can, and the Germans will occupy vast Russian territories.' The P.M. anticipated further reverses in the Balkans, but was sure he could hold Egypt and the Middle East. Churchill's strategy was simple: 'The bombing of Germany will be intensified,' reported Beneš. 'He is expecting real help from America late in the summer, and until then it is necessary to hang on. The real offensive war against Germany will start, according to him, in the spring of 1942. . . Any peace offer will be refused.'<sup>17</sup>

On Sunday morning, dictating letters in bed, Churchill sent for Arnold before the general left Chequers. 'Tell the President that with you we win!' he barked at the American general.

Arnold drove back to London. There had been another raid. Waterloo Bridge had been hit and was blocking the Thames, and two more tunnels had caved in. Beaverbrook's famous wine cellar at Stornoway House had been blown away by a direct hit in the kitchen. 'I notice that people don't smile as they walk along,' wrote Arnold that Monday, still completing his word picture of Churchill's city.

Seeing the damage to London that Monday morning appears to have strengthened Churchill's resolve. Worried by indications from the Oracle that Rommel was getting his second Panzer division, he decided to ship three hundred tanks to Egypt immediately – Operation TIGER – and to take the risk of running the convoy straight through the Mediterranean. At four P.M. that afternoon, April 21, a telegram came from Wavell urging him to evacuate as much as he could from Greece. With gathering memories of Dunkirk, the P.M. cabled back: 'Get the men away. We can re-arm them later.'

As the embarkation of the fifty thousand men began on the twenty-third, Churchill set up, like Hitler, indeed simultaneously, a 'tank parliament' to boost production. He wrote to Eden, the Prof., Margesson and others summoning the first for May 5. 'I myself,' he wrote across the invitation sent to Lord Beaverbrook, 'should like to discuss the organisation of Armoured Divisions and the present state of their mechanical efficiency, as well as the larger questions wh[ich] govern 1943.'<sup>18</sup>

At cabinet and staff level, criticism of Churchill – hitherto muted – grew in volume throughout April and May. Lord Hankey was registering dismay from every quarter at their new P.M.’s unfortunate record so far. ‘It is Norway all over again,’ reflected Hankey on April 22. ‘Just the same mistakes. The vital need for air forces overlooked. No-one seems to have realised that there were not enough aerodromes in Southern Greece.’<sup>19</sup> The origins of the disaster had been kept closely secret until now, but top general staff officers revealed that Wavell, the C-in-C, had warned all along that the Australian and New Zealand divisions were still inadequately equipped. General Macready, assistant chief of staff, described to Hankey how Menzies had held out for several days against the Australians going into Greece – but might now lose office in Australia in consequence of the débâcle. ‘The root trouble is,’ General Haining, deputy C.I.G.S., complained to Hankey, ‘that Churchill is running the war as a Dictator.’ The war cabinet rubber-stamped his decrees. Churchill had deliberately reduced the chiefs of staff to cyphers: Pound had never asserted himself anyway, Portal was bemused by the P.M., and General Dill – the C.I.G.S. – was with Eden in the Middle East. ‘So it looks as though Winston,’ recorded Hankey on April 22, ‘who as I always thought was mainly responsible for the Norwegian fiasco, was responsible for this also. And it looks as though it was going to put our whole position in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean in jeopardy. What will happen to Churchill if and when all this leaks out?’

Six days later Hankey wrote this troubled passage in his diary after lunching with General Haining: ‘He was very anxious about the complete subservience of the chiefs of staff to Churchill and gave an appalling account of the meetings of the war cabinet he had attended.’ He continued:

I had some experience of this, this evening as I was summoned to a meeting of the war cabinet about Turkish policy. . . I spoke for ten or twelve minutes. . . Except for a very short statement by Eden, and long harangues by Churchill, no one spoke at all, and they all seemed very bored and tired. Winston eventually drifted into a long monologue on the situation in the Mediterranean in general and Libya in particular, which left me very anxious indeed – but seemed to have no effect at all on the members of the war cabinet. They struck me as a set of ‘yes’ men, leaving the running of the war to Churchill. He struck me as a very tired man, and he has worn out his Chiefs of Staff by his late meetings ending long after midnight.

After that day's war cabinet, Robert Menzies also wrote an acid diary entry. Winston had assured them, 'We will lose only five thousand men in Greece.' Menzies knew that the true figure was closer to fifteen thousand. 'As usual,' he wrote, 'Beaverbrook supports me but "the rest is silence."'

He attended the defence committee on the twenty-ninth to ask the pertinent question, 'What next, if Egypt falls?' Churchill fobbed him off with a trite retort: 'Let us keep our minds on *Victory*.' Menzies argued alone, while the others remained silent.

Menzies [recorded Lord Hankey, learning of this the next day] had gone there to find out about intention if things went wrong in Libya, where the largest forces are from Australia & N.Z. Apparently Churchill burst out into one of his fervid orations as to how nothing would induce him to make plans or order preparations for such a contingency. . . They had to contest every inch and fight to the last and sacrifice their lives if necessary to defend Egypt & Palestine and so forth. No one else spoke a single word.

'Menzies,' Hankey was told, 'at first had fallen for Churchill, but gradually he had changed. He admitted now that it was dangerous to go to Chequers and spend an evening, because Churchill was so persuasive.' Lord Hankey – administrative genius of the interwar period – now realised that Churchill had deliberately smashed the cabinet system that he had created 'to increase his own power.'



Churchill was at his most incorrigible when he had just orated, whether in the House or by radio. From his study at Chequers, he broadcast about the Greek débâcle that Sunday. Into the B.B.C. microphone he decanted fiery phrases about the 'exaltation of spirit' which he had found in the blitzed cities of the north-east, and he spread a verbal rainbow across the dismal misfortune that Britain had suffered or was visiting on others.

'The Huns,' he reassured the unseen millions, knowing what he knew, 'may lay their hands for a time upon the granaries of the Ukraine and the oil wells of the Caucasus. They may dominate the Black Sea. They may dominate the Caspian. Who can tell?' To win the war, however, they must 'cut the ocean life-line' joining Britain to the United States, and here he repeated the arithmetic he had variously tried out on Matsuoka and the Fleet-street editors. 'There are less than seventy million malignant Huns – some of whom are curable and others killable – many of them already en-

gaged in holding down Austrians, Czechs, Poles, French and the many other ancient races they now bully and pillage. The peoples of the British Empire and of the United States number nearly two hundred millions.’\*

Dinner, delayed by the broadcast, became acrimonious when Major-General Sir John Kennedy ventured rather indelicate views on future strategy – speculating all too freely on possible empire plans to evacuate Egypt. The P.M. flew off the handle, but Kennedy relentlessly suggested that Britain had more important things to lose than Egypt.<sup>21</sup> His words festered in Winston’s mind all night, and on Monday he issued from No. 10 a brusque directive forbidding all talk of withdrawal. ‘The life and honour of Great Britain depends upon the successful defence of Egypt,’ he defined, and ordered all plans for evacuation called in: ‘The Army of the Nile is to fight with no thought of retreat or withdrawal.’

A naval officer summoned to meet the P.M. after dinner that month wrote this disturbing contemporary record of Mr Churchill’s war council:

Rendezvous was the underground Cabinet War Room. It was like a nightmare without emotion. The news from Greece and Yugoslavia and Libya was bad and the P.M. came in ten minutes late very depressed. He was puffy and very pink and white – pig like. Dressed in a grey siren suit, one hand clasping a cigar, the other, beautifully manicured, tapping the table impatiently, bearing a large four banded ring on the fourth finger. He was very depressed and desperately tired – in a sort of coma almost. His speech was rather slobbery and very slow.

The officer found their interview depressing. ‘The general atmosphere,’ he wrote in a letter afterward, ‘of sycophancy, and the old man’s lack of grasp and understanding apparently, made me leave to walk home convinced for the first time that we could not win the war.’<sup>22</sup>

THE EVACUATION of Greece was completed. One cabinet official wrote, ‘That’s all that we’re really good at! And we anticipate that five thousand German airborne troops are going to wipe us out of Crete! Our soldiers are the most pathetic amateurs, pitted against professionals.’ A minister

\* Describing a lunch with Churchill in February, newspaper executive Cecil King noted: ‘[He] calculated that there were 45 million of us here and 20 million Whites in the Empire, which exactly matched with 65 million real Germans – the others under German control being Czechs, Poles, Austrians, and what-not. So we start level,’ King heard him say, ‘and if we get American help with her 110,000,000 Whites, we shall be at an enormous numerical advantage!’<sup>20</sup>

found himself now steeled for the loss of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, as well as North Africa, Spain and Portugal, and probably part of the Mediterranean fleet. 'We are perhaps now in for a Twenty Years' War.'<sup>23</sup>

There was not much doubt about Hitler's next move. On April 25 the Oracle had supplied Churchill with intercept CX/JQ/889, revealing that Göring's Fourth Air Force was talking about an 'Operation CRETE,' and that the Eighth Air Corps commanded by Wolfram von Richthofen was requesting maps of that island. There were some – Wavell among them – who thought this blatant camouflage for another target, perhaps Cyprus or Syria, particularly now that an anti-British uprising had begun in neighbouring Iraq. Churchill disagreed. 'It seems clear from all our information,' he telegraphed to Wavell on April 28, 'that a heavy airborne attack will soon be made on Crete.'<sup>24</sup>

He did briefly waver, writing to Pug Ismay on the next day, 'We must not exclude the possibility that Crete is a blind, and Syria or Cyprus the quarry.' But on the first day of May he was reading the secret orders to Richthofen not to bomb Crete's airfields or mine Suda Bay; that seemed to clinch it. It was going to be an ugly battle. The Allied commander on the island, Major-General Bernard Freyberg, had only one division, while his air power consisted of six Hurricane fighters and seventeen obsolete planes.

Attention had been drawn to Syria after ex-premier Rashid Ali staged an anti-British coup in neighbouring Iraq on April 3. Local S.I.S. agents in this oil-rich country had given due warning, but this had not been passed to Downing-street. Berlin and Rome were equally startled, but on the fifth Bletchley deciphered an Italian diplomatic message from Teheran revealing discussions about funnelling German arms to the Arab insurgents in Iraq through Syria.

Churchill decided on maximum force. Since Wavell was reluctant to spare troops for Iraq, he called upon India to divert a division earmarked for Malaya to Basra. Recalling the fiasco in Romania, where they had failed to destroy the oilfields, the Prof. warned meanwhile that they must act at once to wreck the three hundred oil wells in Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Indignant about the unauthorised British troop disembarkations at Basra on the last day of April, Rashid Ali's ragged army massed to attack the main British base at Habbaniya, west of Baghdad. Churchill felt confident. Bumping into Sir Alexander Cadogan at that evening's defence committee, he said with a chuckle, 'So you've got another war on your hands tonight!'

He was at his most infuriating now. Robert Menzies, whose contempt for his former idol was now complete, waded into Churchill at the war

cabinet on April 30 for having dared to ask President Roosevelt to move the Pacific Fleet to the Atlantic ‘*without* reference to Australia, though I was in London!’ – as Menzies noted angrily in his diary.

But Churchill was in one of his inexplicable buoyant moods. That day he had hosted a diplomatic luncheon at No. 10. After the white-gloved butler and parlourmaid had removed the plates, and after two Johnny Walkers chased by two generous brandies had mellowed the prime minister, the Swedish minister felt it safe to ask him outright how Britain planned to pull through.

The reply that their host had lisped was in this vein: ‘Once upon a time there were two frogs, Mr Optimist Frog and Mr Pessimist Frog. One evening the two frogs hippety-hopped across the meadow enchanted by the smell of fresh milk from a dairy. They hopped through the dairy window and plopped right into a pail of milk.’

The P.M. applied a fresh match to his cigar, enjoying the attention that his fable was attracting. ‘The pail’s sides were too steep,’ he continued. ‘Mr Pessimist Frog soon gave up and sank to the bottom. But Mr Optimist Frog took courage and began thrashing around, hoping to get out somehow. He didn’t know how, but he wasn’t going to give up without a fight. He churned around all night, and by morning – oh joy! – he was floating on a pat of butter.’

Taking a long puff at his cigar, Churchill concluded, ‘I’m Mr Optimist Frog!’<sup>26</sup>



42: *The 'Telephone Job'*

**N**O OBLOQUY stung more than that heaped on Churchill by the triumphant warlord who addressed the Berlin Reichstag on May 4, 1941. 'A man who is as miserable a politician as soldier,' so Hitler characterised him, 'and as wretched a soldier as politician.' He invoked the shades of Narvik and Dunkirk, and blamed Churchill for Greece and Yugoslavia as well. 'If ever any other politician had met such defeats,' he rasped from his swastika-decked podium, 'if any soldier had encountered such catastrophes, he would not have kept his job six months. Unless, of course, possessed of the talent that distinguishes Mr Churchill: to lie with devout mien until in the end the most crushing defeats turn into the most glorious victories.'

Churchill was out at Chequers, whence he had broadcast a week before. He heard Hitler tell his cheering audience that parts of that broadcast could only be explained as the fevered outburst of a chronic drunkard. Many of Hitler's barbs like this one cut deep into his skin, because he quoted them over months to come.

In Whitehall there were many who nodded silent approval.<sup>1</sup> British generals privately confirmed to foreign diplomats what they already suspected, that the decision to go into Greece had been political, not military.<sup>2</sup> Americans like Harriman and Lee noticed 'growing apprehension' among Churchill's colleagues. Beaverbrook, still expecting an invasion, tackled the American airforce General Arnold one day and asked: 'What would you do if Churchill were hanged and the rest of us in hiding in Scotland or being overrun by the Germans? . . . We're up against the mightiest army the world has ever seen.'<sup>3</sup> Later in May, Churchill sent Pug Ismay over to the U.S. embassy to reassure the nervous Americans, but both Ambassador Winant and military attaché Lee were disturbed by blatant falsehoods in the reassurances.<sup>4</sup>

Beaverbrook could no longer take the strain, and adjured Churchill to let him go. His physician warned the P.M. that the minister had no health reason to quit, and quoted to Beaverbrook from his diary about how, as a battalion medic, he had kept sending a shell-shocked infantryman back to

the trenches in the Great War until he was killed. 'We do not count,' he rebuked Beaverbrook. 'Our own lives are nearly over.' Beaverbrook's real complaint was that Winston 'does not ask my advice,' indeed regarded him as quarrelsome. 'The P.M.,' he argued, 'needs tough men around him.' Instead, 'old Bottleneck,' as he called Winston, wasted time inspecting defences or sitting up all night drinking.<sup>5</sup> Churchill accepted Beaverbrook's resignation on May 1, appointing him a minister of state – a meaningless new title – with little power but some responsibility for supply.\*

The rising criticism of Churchill was not unfounded. Oliver Stanley blamed Greece on his 'vain and unreliable' foreign secretary as well: Eden had been cheered in Athens and bombarded with roses. 'How,' asked Stanley, 'could he keep his judgement clear?'<sup>7</sup> To Lloyd George the whole direction of the war seemed haphazard – the cabinet endorsed whatever Winston suggested.

Policy differences erupted between No. 10 and the ministry of information. Duff Cooper – Churchill belittled him as 'Duffy' – seemed incapable of discipline. Downing-street announced that three U-boats had been sunk: the M.O. warned editors that the third was a figment of Churchill's imagination.<sup>8</sup>

The dishonesty extended to shipping statistics. April's losses were the worst ever – over one hundred ships, half a million (581,251) tons. Labour M.P. Emanuel Shinwell accused Churchill of lying when claiming only five per cent of Britain's tonnage had been sunk; he pointed out that that was twenty-six per cent of Britain's *useful* tonnage. Shortly Winant learned that Churchill had not included the 187,054 tons sunk during the evacuation of Greece. Meanwhile, many of the merchant ships purchased from America proved unserviceable; they were filled with cement and sunk as block-ships.<sup>9</sup>

Former prime minister Lloyd George did not mince his language about Churchill. He had picked him out of the political gutter, he commiserated with Shinwell, but wished now he had left him there.<sup>10</sup> Together with the rumbustious Nye Bevan, Hore-Belisha and Lord Winter-ton, he and Shinwell cast about that spring for ways of preparing a negotiated peace with Hitler. Like Beaverbrook, Lloyd George had met and liked the German leader, and compared him shamelessly with Napoleon –

\* 'I never wanted to leave the ministry of aircraft production,' Beaverbrook admitted brokenly at a newspaper luncheon on June 5 after several whiskies. 'I loved that job. Don't believe anyone who tells you I left it of my own free will. I wanted to have a department that would help to win the war.' Dabbing his eyes, he rushed from the room.<sup>6</sup>

a genius, 'one of those men who appear once in a century out of the forest and can see beyond the well-rubbed field where we and they stand, into the green grass beyond.'

One day in May they found a note 'from the British workers' in the pocket of a new siren suit made for Mr Churchill: 'May God grant you the very best of health and strength to carry us through our Greatest Ordeal in History to keep the British Empire Free.'<sup>11</sup> It reflected what one Dominion representative called 'under-currents of anxiety' in British society. Morale was low and absenteeism high, even in the well-paid aircraft industry. 'Mr Churchill,' this envoy explained to Ottawa, 'has never been particularly concerned with social and economic matters and has little experience of problems relating to the organisation of industry and manpower.\* That said, he added that never had a prime minister experienced 'such immunity from criticism.' The British felt they owed him a debt. It had become almost disloyal to criticise him.<sup>12</sup>

Accurately gauging the rising anxiety, and realising that he could no longer browbeat the editors, on May 1 the P.M., looking pale and drawn, drove over to the Dorchester for a luncheon in honour of Sir Emsley Carr's fiftieth anniversary as owner of the *News of the World*. (Winston's contract to write for the newspaper still had several years to run.) The 150 newspapermen gave him an ovation; but he still left sunk in thought after two hours.<sup>13</sup>

Further up Park-lane, at the Grosvenor House hotel, Menzies arrived late at the Iron & Steel Federation's luncheon, and began his speech with caustic remarks about Mr Churchill's war cabinet. 'As Adeline and I walked away down Park-lane,' noted Lord Hankey afterward, 'we heard someone running and, lo and behold, it was Menzies himself. He burst out at once about Churchill and his dictatorship and his war cabinet of "yes-men." "There is only one thing to be done," puffed Menzies breathlessly, 'and that is to summon an Imperial war cabinet and keep one of them behind, like Smuts in the last war, not as a guest but as a full member.'

To Hankey it seemed that the mutiny was coming to a head. He consulted the Lord Chancellor, highest legal authority in the empire, that afternoon. Sir John Simon suggested that Menzies should tackle Winston. 'If he will not play,' continued Simon, 'there is nothing for it but for you, Hankey, to see Winston yourself.' He advised Hankey to wait, however, until next week's big parliamentary debate was over.

\* This view was echoed by newspapers. 'It is not practical,' suggested 'Scrutator' in the *Sunday Times* on July 20, 'that Mr Churchill, while putting the last ounce of his energy and brilliance into the conduct of the war, should exert a peace time Premier's control over home Departments. Yet such a control is more needed in war than in peace.'

The Australian P.M. bearded Churchill in private on May 2. He got nowhere with him. 'You see the people by whom I am surrounded,' Churchill said, excusing his manner in cabinet. 'They have no ideas, so the only thing to be done is to formulate my own ideas.' (He had deliberately got rid of all the men with ideas, observed Hankey upon hearing this.) 'I am desperately afraid of the future in Great Britain,' Menzies pencilled in his diary as he left London that day.

THE AIR RAIDS were approaching a vicious climax. Many regarded the night bomber as the biggest menace facing Britain. 'I don't think,' one official would write, 'the P.M. realises its supreme importance.'<sup>14</sup> Plymouth had just been savaged five times in nine nights by the bombers, and on May 2 Churchill toured the devastated town. If he was seeking a psychological lift as at Bristol, Plymouth offered only the reverse: the naval dockyard rang with hammering as coffins were nailed down all around. Shaken, he kept murmuring, 'I've never seen the like.'

How much longer before the Americans came in?

'With Hitler in control of Iraqi oil and Ukrainian wheat,' he mused aloud, 'not all the staunchness of "our Plymouth Brethren" will shorten the ordeal.'<sup>15</sup> Pathological despair choked him as his train pulled out of Plymouth. John Colville had never seen a mood like it before.

Out at Chequers that Friday evening there was a distasteful telegram from Roosevelt, discouraging Winston's perennial ambition to seize the Portuguese Atlantic islands. In perhaps ill-chosen words, the president voiced the belief that, 'even if you have to withdraw further in the eastern Mediterranean,' surely the P.M. would not allow 'any great débâcle or surrender,' and he suggested that 'in the last analysis the naval control of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean will in time win the war.' As for Hitler's gains, Roosevelt showed little concern: 'Personally,' he wrote airily, 'I am not downcast by more spread of Germany to additional large territories. There is little of raw materials in all of them put together – not enough to maintain nor compensate for huge occupation forces.' And he closed on an avuncular note: 'Keep up the good work.'<sup>16</sup>

Already depressed beyond measure by the carnage he had witnessed, Churchill was stunned by this easy anticipation of 'additional withdrawals.' It seemed, he remarked in a message to Eden, that there had been a 'considerable recession' in Washington. 'Quite unconsciously we are being left very much to our fate.'<sup>17</sup> It bothered him all night, and on Saturday afternoon he telephoned Winant about it. The ambassador could see he was sad and discouraged after Plymouth and tried to soothe him, saying that Roosevelt had only meant to send a message of support. Churchill

suggested they lunch on Monday and talk over a response. Unable to get it off his mind, however, he drafted a reply spelling out what the loss of the Middle East would mean to the empire. 'Therefore,' it read in part, 'if you cannot take more advanced positions now, or very soon, the vast balances may be tilted heavily to our disadvantage.'

Mr President [he continued] I am sure that you will not misunderstand me if I speak to you exactly what is in my mind.

The United States, he insisted, must range herself with Britain *immediately* as a belligerent. 'We are determined to fight to the last inch and ounce for Egypt, including its outposts of Tobruk and Crete.'<sup>18</sup>

He sent it off before Winant or Eden could stop him. The ambassador protested over lunch on Monday, and Churchill and Eden apologised. 'It will not happen again,' they said, but there is no doubt that sending it made Winston feel better.<sup>19</sup>

BY SATURDAY night, May 3, his mood had mellowed anyway: a buff box from the Oracle had brought proof that the Australians had inflicted a real defeat on Rommel at Tobruk. It was remarkable how soon Churchill cast off the 'Black Dog,' as he called his fits of depression. He stayed up talking until three-thirty, comparing Tobruk with Acre in the wars against Napoleon: it was 'a speck of sand in the desert which might ruin all Hitler's calculations.'<sup>20</sup>

What had been in that buff box? Berlin had flown out deputy chief of general staff General Friedrich Paulus to the Western Desert, alarmed by rumours of Rommel's disregard for casualties. On Friday the second, Paulus had issued this binding directive to Rommel: given the 'exhaustion' of his troops, he was to hold Cyrenaica, regroup, and refrain from further attacks on Tobruk unless the defences caved in; moreover, he was not to advance beyond Sollum into Egypt without sanction. Before flying home Paulus signalled a copy of this directive ahead to Berlin, using the airforce ENIGMA cypher. The intercept CX/JQ/914 was in Churchill's delighted hands soon after.<sup>21</sup>

If it made more sense to Churchill than to Rommel, this was because Churchill knew that Hitler was husbanding every ounce of strength for his attack on Russia. But Wavell also failed to grasp the directive's significance (Bletchley had sent it out to him directly). '[I] presume,' Churchill cabled him on Sunday, 'you realise authoritative character of information?'<sup>22</sup> It betrayed his waning confidence in Wavell that he reminded the general

that Tobruk's defenders must harry Rommel and force him to expend ammunition and fuel.

Wavell had other problems on his mind. Iraqi rebels were besieging the British airbase at Habbaniya. Though outnumbered, the airmen put up a stout defence. Hitler could only aid Rashid Ali through Syria, and Churchill read intercepts proving that Vichy had agreed to allow this. Churchill briefly suspected that the German airborne troops massing in the Balkans might swoop into Syria.<sup>23</sup> He urged Wavell to smash the Iraqi uprising rapidly. Wavell was loath to take on any new commitment. 'Your message takes little account of realities,' he admonished the P.M. on May 5. 'You must face facts.'

The general recommended a political solution, but the very notion was anathema to Mr Churchill. Deeply disturbed, he inevitably compared Wavell's tone with the brisk helpfulness of General Claude Auchinleck, commanding the troops in India. 'He seems,' the P.M. advised Ismay on the sixth, 'to have been taken as much by surprise on his eastern as he was on his western flank.' Wavell seemed 'tired out,' he concluded. Perhaps he was unjust in uttering these criticisms, since he had possessed substantially more evidence of Rommel's movements and events in Iraq than any general. New intercepts showed German chief of air staff Hans Jeschonnek in Athens, preparing a minor airforce operation from a Greek airfield, and thirty German planes being flown with Iraqi markings to Rhodes. But under Churchill's urging British troops advanced on the Iraqi capital from Basra. 'Every day counts,' he warned Wavell, 'for the Germans may not be long.' Soon Rashid Ali faced collapse. A Japanese diplomatic intercept from Baghdad showed this. Churchill sent it out to Wavell to bolster his resolve, adding tersely: 'Burn after reading.'

It was unusual for Churchill to reveal the Japanese intercepts. Like Admiral 'Blinker' Hall in World War One, he kept his special Intelligence close to his chest: it was his source of power – and glory. Probably he alone in Whitehall was reading the MAGIC Japanese intercepts – whether independently deciphered by Bletchley or supplied by Henry Stimson's war department in Washington. They told Churchill what Berlin was up to, because Hitler trusted the Japanese and kept their embassy closely informed of his intentions. But they also let him keep an eye on Washington. Only when Stimson now read the MAGIC intercepts himself did it dawn on him that they exposed the U.S. state department's 'double dealing' with Japan and 'very equivocal position' toward the British. Horrified, he noted in his diary, 'I fear they [the British] will not very much like the terms of the negotiations.' He frantically reminded the secretary of state of the late-1940 agreement over 'exchange of cryptology with the

British' under which his G-2 was routinely forwarding *MAGIC* to London. Cordell Hull was furious, because this gave Churchill the opportunity to read 'some of his messages.'<sup>24</sup>

ALONE POSSESSING the key to those vital buff boxes, Churchill faced the domestic carping in England with complacency. Rommel's wings had been clipped. Britain's fighter defences were equipping with night radar. Operation *TIGER* was rushing three hundred tanks to Egypt. (The convoy would arrive with the loss of only one ship.) Above all, on May 6 Bletchley deciphered the complete operational orders for Hitler's forthcoming assault on Crete.<sup>25</sup> On or after the seventeenth, this intercept revealed General Kurt Student's paratroops would land in the Maleme-Khania area and at Heraklion and Rethymnon; flak and mountain troops would follow by sea.<sup>26</sup>

'Ten million pounds!' triumphed Churchill: that was what this intercept was worth to him.

It was flashed to Wavell in Cairo, but for security reasons it could not be sent to Freyberg himself in Crete. A subterfuge was adopted. 'On the prime minister's decision,' recorded one of Bletchley Park's senior officers, 'the B.P. "U" Air Intelligence Section produced a paper purporting to be a compendium of German documents obtained through Secret Service channels from General Headquarters in Athens.' This was sent to Freyberg.<sup>27</sup>

When Parliament met on May 6 and 7 to pass judgement on Churchill's leadership, he could therefore afford to speak with rising confidence and elation. The pale, drawn look had gone. He waded two-fisted into Lloyd George and Hore-Belisha. A glowering Lord Beaverbrook watched the brilliant performance, and made a note of Churchill's boast that Crete and Tobruk would be defended 'to the death and without thought of retirement.' Napoleon too had won initial victories, the P.M. recalled, knowing what he knew, and it might well be that Russia would shortly furnish 'new chapters to that theme.' That said, he chivalrously offered to accept the blame for their reverses. 'I am the one whose head should be cut off if we do not win the war.' The vote of confidence showed 447 in favour, three against. Tears of triumph in his eyes, he walked out on air between cheering M.P.s standing on their seats. For better or for worse, they had Churchill for the duration – the mutiny had been stifled at birth. He went to bed early, elated by this victory.<sup>28</sup>

While going about his business – dining with Mr Deakin, debating in the House, receiving James Forrestal, banqueting at the Savoy – he pondered ways of saving Crete. In a little over a week the Nazis would at-

tempt to seize the island. On the ninth he suggested to Wavell that concealed troops and guns ambush the gliders and paratroops: after all, they now knew precisely when and where they were going to land. Briefly he toyed with sending over the actual intercepts for General Freyberg to read and burn afterward.<sup>29</sup> But generals might be captured, and the Oracle was too important to put at risk like that.

ON FRIDAY the ninth he drove out to Dytchley. A dazzling full moon was climbing into the sky, and he needed no whispering Oracle to tell him of the danger. A few minutes after seven P.M. on Saturday, Fighter Command was warned, 'There is reason to believe KG.100's target tonight will be London.' At 7:45 P.M. this information was hardened to: 'KG.100's target will be East of Regent's Park. Attack will be from 2300 hrs till 0130 hrs and there may possibly be a second attack at 0230 hrs.' Sure enough, that Saturday London's sirens wailed as the Luftwaffe made a farewell visit before removing to the eastern front.

It was the heaviest Blitz ever. Over five hundred planes attacked, killing fourteen hundred people, destroying railroads and termini, and levelling entire streets in the City and Westminster. Westminster Abbey, hall and school were scourged, and the main chamber of the House where Churchill had just won that vote of confidence was destroyed. Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, who had called on him after Question Time, sent him a letter offering cynical consolation: 'Such ruins are good assets – all round the globe, and especially in America!' Big Ben was damaged but still chimed the quarter hours. Fleet-street was in flames, Odhams Press burnt out, the Temple and St. Clement Dane's both gutted. Queen Victoria-street was ablaze, Regent-street blocked by unexploded bombs, a landmine had crumpled a corner of Bond-street, and Park-lane was blocked by craters. 'All this is hearsay,' wrote the P.M.'s secretary John Martin on Sunday, 'for we have been here since Friday in peace and sunshine, though still not in summer warmth.'



An hour before the sirens had sounded, a Scottish airfield detected a lone enemy fighter plane approaching Glasgow. The Observer Corps identified it as a Messerschmitt 110, which perplexed the wing commander on duty, the Duke of Hamilton, as it would not have the range to return to Germany. He scrambled a Defiant, but soon after eleven o'clock the Messerschmitt crashed. Later the police telephoned the astonished duke – the pilot was saying that he had come on a 'special mission' to the duke and had intended to land at his nearby estate, Dungavel. The wing



commander visited him a few hours later at a Glasgow barracks. The German pulled out a snapshot of himself and his infant son. They had met, he said, in Berlin at the 1936 Olympic Games. 'I don't know if you recognise me,' he prompted, 'but I am Rudolf Hess.'

As deputy Führer of Nazi Germany, Hess was second to Hitler himself. He had taken off at Augsburg at six p.m., flown single-handed eight hundred miles, arrived off Scotland while still light, circled ninety minutes, jettisoned the drop tank, reached his target area, and made his first-ever parachute jump after giving up the idea of landing in the dark.

Unlike the other Nazis he was modest, retiring and fanatically pro-British, as his prewar letters to his parents in his native Alexandria – intercepted by Intelligence<sup>30</sup> – showed. And his record was clean. His office had issued emphatic instructions forbidding anti-Jewish outrages on the Night of Broken Glass in 1938. He had attended none of Hitler's planning conferences. Touring the French battlefields with Hitler in 1940 he had heard the latter voice admiration for the British; later that summer he had endorsed Hitler's peace attempts and shared his dismay at the bombing raids that began early in September. Like Hitler, he was contemptuous of orthodox diplomacy, and secured permission from him to put out direct feelers to Britain.\* At the end of August he talked over ways and means with the doyen of geo-politicians, Karl Haushofer, his former teacher.<sup>31</sup> It was Haushofer's son Albrecht who had recommended the duke – they had corresponded in July 1939 about German war aims. Albrecht Haushofer had signed the first letter that went on Hess's behalf to Hamilton on September 23; it was posted to the duke via an Englishwoman in Lisbon, and suggested a meeting there.

British censorship intercepted the letter and handed it over to the security services. In October 1940 Hess had begun planning to fly over. He made three or four attempts, each time frustrated by bad weather. Meanwhile the security service embarked on a leisurely Intelligence 'game' to find out who was behind all this. Faking Hamilton's signature, they replied to Haushofer.<sup>33</sup> Not until mid-March was the duke shown Haushofer's letter. On April 25 the air ministry instructed him to arrange the meeting with Haushofer in Lisbon, but the canny duke demanded written orders.<sup>34</sup> More weeks passed. Frantic to stop the slide toward a bloodbath, on April 21 Hess had meanwhile sent the younger Haushofer to meet veteran League diplomat Carl Burckhardt in Geneva and the British ambassador in Madrid. An appointment with Samuel Hoare was actually scheduled for Monday May 12, but by that time Hess had taken matters into his own

\* This was probably on September 4, 1940. Twelve months later Hess would say within the hearing of British Intelligence, 'I went to the Führer one year ago and I told him.'<sup>32</sup>

hands: he had pocketed visiting cards of both Haushofers and flown by Messerschmitt to Scotland.

Churchill was still at Dytchley when his wiretapping service brought word of the gatecrasher and his message to the duke: 'Hitler wants to stop the slaughter.'

Who can say what thoughts inspired Churchill on hearing this, on Sunday May 11, 1941? He had an unbroken string of disasters to his name. He believed himself on the brink of his first tactical victory in Crete. If the war were to end now his name would vanish into oblivion.

The duke flew down by fighter plane and arrived by car at Dytchley while Churchill was dining before a private showing of a movie.<sup>35</sup> The duke handed Churchill the snapshots and said Hess had asked 'if I could get together leading members of my party to talk over things with a view to making peace proposals.' These embraced the familiar spheres of influence – Europe for Hitler, the empire for Britain. Hess, added the duke, had come unarmed – evidently believing he was to parley secretly with the highest officials. Hess was also expecting the king to guarantee his return to his own lines.<sup>36</sup>

'Well,' growled the P.M., 'Hess or no Hess, I'm going to see the Marx Brothers.' Churchill was floundering. Perhaps it was not Hess at all? He phoned Eden to investigate, then turned to more mundane matters – the appointment of a new principal private secretary – until his secretary John Martin put him to bed around two A.M.

Back in London on Monday he lunched with Lord Beaverbrook. After a while he pulled out the photograph and asked, 'Who's that?' Beaverbrook recognised Hess, and said so.<sup>37</sup> He had seen those bushy eyebrows often enough at the Reich Chancellery each time he visited Hitler.

The foreign office chose more laborious methods, flying a diplomat who had worked for the S.I.S. at the Berlin embassy, Ivone Kirkpatrick, up to Glasgow with the returning duke. It would be nearly ten P.M. on Monday before they landed at Turnhouse airfield, and meanwhile the news could not be released.

At eight P.M. Berlin announced the disappearance of Hess, coyly suggesting that he had been behaving erratically of late.<sup>38</sup> Exasperated, Churchill phoned Eden, and Eden phoned Glasgow, but Kirkpatrick had decided to dine out before even visiting the prisoner. The B.B.C. lamely repeated the German communiqué at the tail end of its main nine o'clock bulletin, commenting with less than utter objectivity that Hess had either committed suicide or been liquidated by the Gestapo.

If the propaganda exploitation so far was unimpressive, Mr Churchill was partly to blame: his minister of information knew nothing of Hess's

arrival until the German broadcast; not until ten P.M. did Churchill confirm it to him.<sup>39</sup> In an unguarded moment of candour, the P.M. proposed announcing that Hess had flown to Britain 'in the name of humanity'; but Eden, shown this draft toward midnight in the C.W.R. bunker, stopped him. Cadogan also objected. 'It looks like a peace offer,' he remarked in his diary, 'and we may want to run the line that he has quarrelled with Hitler.' Thus truth was the casualty, and over at *The Times* the next day's main headline was set up: HITLER'S DEPUTY ESCAPES TO BRITAIN.

Hours later Eden telephoned Kirkpatrick, who was still reeling from a lecture by the deputy Führer. It was Hess alright, he confirmed. He had come 'without the knowledge of Hitler' but swore that he knew the latter intimately and that the Führer 'would sincerely regret the collapse of the British empire.'<sup>\*</sup> Hess knew even less than Kirkpatrick about Hitler's intentions toward Russia. There was one snag, which Hess had delivered as a parting shot to him as he left: 'Mr Churchill who had planned the war since 1936 and his colleagues who had lent themselves to his war policy were not persons with whom the Führer could negotiate.' This detail was passed on to Mr Churchill, who could scarcely have cared less.<sup>41</sup>

Kirkpatrick's report from Scotland was dynamite. Churchill stamped it MOST SECRET, and restricted it to Attlee, Eden and Beaverbrook. A D-notice on Tuesday warned Fleet-street not to mention the duke. At midday Cadogan brought Kirkpatrick's interview reports to Churchill – who was just off to lunch with the king – and discussed the ugly possibility that Hess had indeed brought proposals. Hess was again saying that Hitler just wanted a free hand in Europe. Churchill busied himself only with the histrionics of the affair – what to call their visitor. 'I want him to be a State prisoner,' he said, and ordered him brought down to the Tower.

At a special meeting with Eden, 'C' and 'Duffy' on Wednesday evening he mulled over the parliamentary statement he proposed to make the next day. Cadogan sighed: it was all wrong – it would have tallied exactly with what the Germans had just announced. 'Then it is true, what our dear Führer has told us,' the Germans would say. 'Our beloved Rudolf has gone to make peace.' No: the Nazis must fear that Hess had turned traitor. Churchill threw a tantrum and decided to make no statement at all. He refused to give any directives – only that the media must not make a hero out of Hess.

\* 'At this point,' reported Kirkpatrick facetiously, 'Hess tried to make my flesh creep by emphasising that the avaricious Americans had fell designs on the empire.'<sup>40</sup> The author's history of the Rudolf Hess affair, *Hess, the Missing Years*, based on unpublished documents, was published by Macmillan (London) Ltd. in 1987. The electronic version can be downloaded at [www.fpp.co.uk/books/index.html](http://www.fpp.co.uk/books/index.html).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the bold night flight of Rudolf Hess had – in the words of a worried White House adviser – ‘captured the American imagination’ no less than that of Charles Lindbergh. But that also suggested how Hess could be exploited. ‘No amount of conversation about economic penetration of South America or Nazi trade wars,’ suggested this official, ‘or even the necessity for survival of the British navy seems to have convinced the American people, particularly the middle and far West, that this country is in danger from the Nazis. But if Hess were to tell the world what Hitler has said about the United States, it would be a headline sensation.’

Given our present knowledge of the German archives, this might appear naïve, but for nearly a year British Security Co-ordination had been planting forged evidence of ‘Nazi plots’ against the Americas. It was natural for the gullible White House to hope that Hess could flesh these plans out. Urging his idea on F.D.R.’s private secretary, the official unconsciously provided an important clue as to how Roosevelt and Churchill were, by May 1941, accustomed to do business outside the regular channels. The idea, said the official, would get nowhere with the career men in the British embassy or state department. Rather,

It is a ‘telephone’ job between the president and Churchill . . . because time is of the essence.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the hour was too far advanced to telephone London decently. Roosevelt sent an overnight telegram to Winston instead.

If Hess is talking, or does so in the future, it would be very valuable to public opinion over here if he can be persuaded to tell your people what Hitler has said about the United States, or what Germany’s plans really are in relation to the United States or to other parts of the western hemisphere, including commerce, infiltration, military domination, encirclement of the United States, etc.

The notion that Germany could ‘encircle’ the United States reveals the extent to which William Stephenson had succeeded in unbalancing American opinion. Roosevelt urged that the story be kept alive. ‘If he says anything about the Americas . . . it should be kept separate from other parts and featured by itself.’<sup>43</sup>

Hess was questioned along these lines that same day. Mystified, he volunteered only that Hitler had no designs on the United States or the

empire. 'If we made peace now,' he confided to Kirkpatrick that Thursday, 'America would be furious.' Roosevelt wanted to 'inherit the British empire.' Churchill kept this unhelpful riposte to himself, and – neatly twisting the president's arm – informed him that the deputy Führer had rather disparaged the United States and cast doubt on 'the degree of assistance that you will be able to furnish us.' He had decided how to use Hess – as a silent pawn in international power politics. His very presence in Britain would put pressure on Washington and, in due course, Moscow. Hess was a reminder that at any moment Britain could end the war – the enemy spokesman already being on the threshold. That same Thursday Beaverbrook summoned the editors to lunch with him at Claridge's and instructed them to *speculate* about Hess as much as they liked. The P.M., he assured them, would do nothing to end such speculation.<sup>44</sup>

The Kirkpatrick interviews were kept going.<sup>45</sup> By mid-May, however, Hess wanted to speak with the organ grinder and not the monkey. He demanded to see a cabinet minister and named a German prisoner to act as adjutant in the forthcoming 'talks.' Stringing him along, Churchill decided that the Lord Chancellor Sir John Simon should visit him. Visiting Hess at an S.I.S. villa near Aldershot he concluded that Hess was telling the truth: he had come on a peace mission. 'We must decide how best to exploit H.,' recorded Cadogan, and proposed: 'mendaciously.'<sup>46</sup>

Desmond Morton, Winston's liaison officer to the security services, suggested that since the villa was bugged they publish the transcripts. 'The longer we wait,' he warned, 'the rottener the apple.' The texts would reveal the 'ignorance, stupidity, falsity and arrogance of the Nazi leaders.'<sup>47</sup>

Hess knew he had failed. Alternating between hope and despair, and fearful that the S.I.S. would use truth drugs on him, he made a suicide leap at the villa, but managed only to break his thigh-bone.

'Mum's the word!' said Churchill, referring to the Hess mission.<sup>48</sup> It has been ever since. When Dr Beneš made an incautious Czech broadcast about the mystery, based on what S.I.S. friends told him,<sup>49</sup> Churchill was challenged in the House to make some authoritative statement. He declined. Hess remained in captivity, effectively silenced, from that day on.\* 'He firmly believes,' Morton guffawed in a note to Churchill late in July, 'that the Government will one day wish to send him back to Germany with an offer of peace terms.'<sup>50</sup>

\* At the time of his death in August 1987, Hess was forbidden to speak about the past. His letters were censored, his daily diary regularly destroyed. Aged ninety-four, he outlived Churchill and his entire cabinet, as well as all the Nuremberg judges and defendants.

Cleared of war crimes but convicted of conspiring against the peace, Rudolf Hess would be sentenced in 1946 to life imprisonment. He served forty-six years in captivity, the last twenty-one of them in solitary confinement.

*Unlike the citizens of  
Britain's large cities,  
Churchill was fore-  
warned by British  
Intelligence of coming  
Nazi air raids. He  
would flee the capital,  
only to return the  
next day and show the  
familiar bulldog  
expression in London's  
devastated streets.*





*London docks ablaze after a German mass fire-bomb raid in September 1940. This photograph was censored at the time and not released for publication for many years. It was marked, 'Not passed by censor.'*



*Churchill's vision of London in ruins came true — and there were those who said he would not have wanted it otherwise.*

## 43: *Turning Point*

FOR A TIME late in 1940 Churchill had eyed the islands in the eastern Mediterranean, and he had ordered models made of Leros and Rhodes, the fortress island between Crete and Turkey.<sup>1</sup> January 27, 1941 saw him inspecting the models in his bunker. Subsequently he had sent two thousand Commandos round the Cape to spearhead an invasion force, but after the Greek fiasco all his attention was devoted to Crete instead.

Ten thousand Greeks and 32,000 British and New Zealand soldiers with six or ten years' service had been evacuated to the island. But although Britain had been in occupation for six months, little had been done for its ground or air defence; the costly lessons of Norway in 1940 had not been learned.

Crete had had five commanders, and now he suggested a sixth: his old New Zealand friend, the much-wounded and much-decorated Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg V.C., should command the island's defences.

Freyberg took fright when he saw the defence plans. On May 1 he



*Mr and Mrs Churchill pay a visit to gun pits in London.*



urged his own government to 'bring pressure to bear' on Whitehall, either to improve the defences or to evacuate the island while they still could.<sup>2</sup> It was a realistic view, but Churchill could not take another humiliating retreat. Knowing the enemy plans as he did, he did not see how he *could* be defeated in Crete. He did what he could to impart this confidence to Freyberg, and on May 12 a courier took the enemy plan out to Crete. The general's confidence grew. 'With help of [the] Royal Navy,' he reported after touring the island, 'I trust Crete will be held.'<sup>3</sup>

The S.O.E. had also laid its plans in Crete. Since 1940 its station chief Captain John Pendlebury had been bribing every newspaper. He had paid fortunes to procure the thick-skulled Cretans for the British cause, and he had established cells throughout the island. 'Our captains,' he wrote to his wife on May 5, 'will fight in the hills and so will the women and girls if necessary.'<sup>4</sup>\*

On Thursday May 15, Bletchley reported that the enemy's D-day for Crete had been postponed to Monday. Churchill left for the country that weekend satisfied he had done all he could. 'The P.M. himself has been most affable,' wrote John Martin, now his principal private secretary, in a letter home, 'and gave me a friendly poke in the ribs when he went off to the country.'<sup>5</sup> He made no secret of the political moment of this operation – exhorting Wavell on the Sunday eve of battle that victory in Crete would affect the entire world situation. 'May you have God's blessing' he signalled to the commander-in-chief, 'in this memorable and fateful operation, which will react in every theatre of the war.'<sup>6</sup>

General Sir John Dill, the C.I.G.S., watched the exchange of signals between Churchill and Wavell with silent anger. Lunching with Lord Hankey on the thirteenth he had expressed himself 'profoundly disturbed' about the P.M.

He confirmed [recorded Hankey in his diary] that [Churchill] sends all the telegrams to Wavell & drafts them himself, but said

\* Pendlebury may sound like a Bernard Holloway character from an Ealing film, but German Intelligence took a dim view of him in their 236-page report on his work. J. D. S. Pendlebury had been a Cambridge high jumper. He had gone to Crete as an archaeologist in 1934, became a curator at Knossos, and returned after S.O.E. training in 1940. His account books showed that he doled out 302,000 drachma for agents and 100,000 to every Cretan newspaper. Ten days after the British defeat, German Intelligence warned: 'As long as he is at large the subjugation of the island cannot be guaranteed.' His files proved that 'war crimes' against the paratroops by the Cretans had been prepared well ahead by 'the British secret service,' long before the military took an interest in Crete. Pendlebury was wounded in a shoot-out and subsequently shot out of hand by the Germans.<sup>7</sup>

that in fact they were always shown either to him or someone in his confidence before. What bothered him was not Winston's direction of policy so much as his meddling in matters of detail down to such questions as supplies of maps. . .

He asked me what a C.I.G.S. could do if he thought the P.M. was endangering the safety of the country. . . 'Can one resign in war?' he asked.

PERHAPS HE had been too confident about Crete. Even after the island had been identified as Hitler's next target, he had still fretted about Syria — that vast, sparsely-populated area through which Hitler might march to Suez. On May 14, alarmed by intercept evidence that Damascus was permitting thirty German planes to reach rebellious Iraq, Churchill took the far-reaching decision to allow General de Gaulle's Free French forces into Vichy-controlled Syria.

Latterly he had seemed disenchanted with both the quixotic general and his British Sancho Panza, Louis Spears. Britons freely described the latter as 'a born intriguer' and 'unscrupulous,' while de Gaulle's French opponents called him 'bent' (*louche*).<sup>8</sup> Dakar had left bitter memories,<sup>9</sup> and Churchill had recently let Marshal Pétain secretly know that the general had been 'no help to the British cause.'<sup>10</sup> But de Gaulle's growing following in occupied France could not be ignored, and on March 7 he had been invited to Chequers. Pétain was perplexed by this evident reconciliation and told an American he failed to understand why Churchill did not 'eliminate him from the problem.'<sup>11</sup>

De Gaulle did all he could to torpedo Churchill's flirtation with Vichy. It was his agents who furnished evidence of Nazi 'activities' in Damascus. Although Bletchley warned him that there was no supporting evidence from the MOST SECRET sources, Churchill fell for it and briefed Wavell on May 19 to improvise an invasion. General Catroux, the Free French leader in Transjordan, claimed that the Damascus French would welcome the British. Told on May 20 that German planes had landed in Syria — which was untrue — Churchill approved an immediate 'political' intervention. (He decided on this new commitment while driving from the House to No. 10.) Wavell rightly disbelieved Catroux: he knew that blood would flow if Britain invaded and, when London ruled against him, he offered to resign. Churchill, already unhappy with Wavell, was about to accept when Catroux climbed down. He now accepted that the Vichy troops *would* fight any Anglo-French intervention.

But it was too late to call off the intervention: once laid, such plans gain a momentum of their own.

SINCE SYRIA bordered on British-mandated Palestine, a third party declared an interest. In February 1941 the Jewish Agency had used the hiatus created by Lord Lloyd's death to invite Churchill to allow into Palestine the Romanian Jews in danger of being massacred. Jewish Agency director Chaim Weizmann reminded him that, even if the policy of the 1939 White Paper were adhered to, there were still forty thousand certificates available. In a scarcely veiled threat, while apologising for adding to the P.M.'s burdens, he hinted that if the refugees were not allowed into Palestine peacefully every shipload might give rise to 'painful incidents which we all would wish to avoid.'

Churchill strung him along, referring to 'practical difficulties.'<sup>12</sup> Seeing Weizmann for a few minutes in March, the P.M. silkily amplified that there was 'no need' for a long conversation, as 'their thoughts were ninety-nine per cent the same.'

He was constantly thinking of them, and whenever he saw Dr Weizmann it gave him a twist in his heart. As regards the Jewish Force, he had had to postpone it, as he had had to postpone many things.

He promised not to let the Zionists down, but advised them to curry favour with King Ibn Saud. Even if Saud became Lord of the Arab countries, or 'Boss of the Bosses,' as Churchill termed it, 'he will have to agree with Weizmann with regard to Palestine.'

He led Weizmann to the door, 'I will see you through.'<sup>13</sup> In a cabinet paper on Syria on May 19 he argued that Britain too should negotiate with Saud over a Jewish state of 'Western Palestine' with 'the fullest rights of self-government, including immigration and development, and provisions for expansion in the desert regions to the southward, which they would gradually reclaim.'<sup>14</sup>



The German D-day arrived. Early on May 20 thousands of paratroops swooped on Crete after an hour's bombardment. It was a matter of deadly prestige for Hitler no less than for Churchill. The paratroop division was the flower of German manhood – an elite among elites. But Churchill was confident that he had the edge on Hitler this time. He had read Hitler's plans, and he was not going to be outwitted again. 'Dead on time!' triumphed Freyberg, as the first Nazi paratroops spilled out of five hundred low-flying Junkers transport planes over the airfields in western Crete.

In London Mr Churchill went to lunch with the king. Meanwhile, in Crete the killing began. The paratroops found the ground defences at Maleme and Canea neither old nor derelict, but well-camouflaged and viciously efficient. True, Freyberg had no planes and little anti-aircraft defence, but his troops outnumbered the attackers by over four-to-one and were hidden at the very points selected as dropping zones.

Only seven planes of the first wave failed to return, and the Germans flagged off the second wave to Crete all too blithely. The planes arrived over Heraklion and Retimo badly scattered; half of the paratroops were dead within seconds of landing. But Freyberg was in trouble too. The bombing had shredded his communications, and his officers were not familiar enough with the tactical plan. There was no front line, just soldiers digging in like ants and killing where they could. The island was a slaughtering ground. At ten P.M. Freyberg sent an ominous signal to Cairo: the margin was 'a bare one,' he said; 'It would be wrong of me to paint [an] optimistic picture.'



Some hours after Churchill returned from Buckingham Palace to No. 10 he received a chilling message from Sweden. The enemy's battleship *Bismarck* was out. The danger was acute. Eleven Allied convoys were at sea.

Brand new, with 2,300 sailors on board, *Bismarck* was the most powerful battleship in the world. She and the eight-inch cruiser *Prinz Eugen* had marched proudly out of German waters the day before, wearing the black-and-white flag of Admiral Günter Lütjens.

She was heading north. Unsinkable, rakish and arrogant, *Bismarck* displaced fifty thousand tons when fully oiled and armed. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder was sending her on a three-month raiding cruise in the Atlantic. Units of the Swedish navy had sighted her heading north, and British naval attaché Captain Henry Denham reported the grim news from Stockholm at nine P.M. Some time after midnight it was passed by telephone to Admiral Sir Jack Tovey, commanding the Home Fleet in the new *King George V*. As recently as the seventeenth, Bletchley had picked up airforce signals showing that the enemy was reconnoitring the iceline off Greenland and to the north-west of Iceland.<sup>15</sup> That suggested the planned route. Nor could there be any doubt as to *Bismarck*'s predatory intention: the Oracle had just deciphered, with some weeks' delay, messages in the intractable naval ENIGMA, and these revealed that the battleship had embarked prize crews to bring home captured merchant ships.<sup>16</sup>

For two days, while the cruel fighting raged in Crete, there was nothing new on this threat. There was one aircraft sighting which suggested that the battleship would break through the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. That would take her into the newly-announced American-controlled zone. Churchill cabled to Roosevelt on Friday May 23: 'Should we fail to catch them going out your Navy should surely be able to mark them down for us.' To this he added buoyantly, 'Give us the news and we will finish the job.'<sup>17</sup>

HIS HOPES for a rapid triumph in Crete had been frustrated. Surprised by the unexpected vigour of the defenders, on Wednesday the Germans re-focused their effort on Maleme airfield alone, leaving the other lodgements to fend for themselves. Churchill's Oracle could not help in a fast-moving situation like this. That afternoon Junkers transport planes loaded with mountain troops began landing recklessly on the cratered airfield, regardless of machine-gun fire and shells smashing all around; each plane disgorged forty or fifty fresh troops into the battle.

Nothing made up for Freyberg's lack of air cover. He counter-attacked, but too late. He could not dislodge the Germans. A few hours later he pulled out of the bomb-blasted defences – the only hard-topped positions he had prepared – and began a retreat that would end on the southern coast a week later.

There was an important psychological reason for the erosion of morale among his troops. Churchill would maintain in the House that Crete was a battlefield where there was no retreat for either side. But this was true only of the German paratroops: they were outnumbered, trapped like rats, and fighting for their lives. But – short of victory – Freyberg's defenders knew that personal survival equally lay in retreat by land and evacuation by sea. Late that Thursday a destroyer had already discreetly evacuated from the island the King of Greece and the British minister.

In the waters north of Crete disaster befell the navy. Anticipating a major seaborne invasion, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham had stationed his Alexandria fleet out of enemy aircraft range, but where it could intervene north of Crete if need be. The Germans had planned only to send over reinforcements in two groups of caiques – unarmed motor schooners robbed from the Greeks. Two-score of these little ships had been organised to carry 2,250 mountain troops to Maleme on day two, and nearly forty more were to ferry four thousand to Heraklion on day three. The admiralty got wind of this audacious plan on Tuesday the twentieth, and Cunningham ordered two cruiser squadrons up from south of Crete to thwart it. One squadron intercepted the first schooner group on Wednes-

day, mauled it like a pack of wolves in a sheep pen, and reported it totally destroyed. In fact ten schooners were sunk, and just under three hundred soldiers drowned; the rest were picked up by German and Italian rescue boats.<sup>18</sup>

These were meagre pickings given the casualties which the navy now sustained, exposed to German air power. Early on Thursday Admiral Cunningham's second squadron chanced on the other German schooner convoy; this group made smoke, scattered and escaped. The British force came under heavy air attack and Cunningham's battleship group had to hurry to assist. The battleship *Warspite* was bombed and badly damaged. By May 23 the British had lost two cruisers and three destroyers with shocking casualties. Unable to fathom the frenzied importance that Churchill attached to securing victory in Crete, that day Cunningham concluded a signal to Whitehall with asperity that it was perhaps fortunate that the carrier *HMS Formidable* was immobilised at Alexandria, 'as I doubt if she would now be afloat.'<sup>19</sup>

Churchill insisted that Cunningham risk his ships regardless of enemy air supremacy. The admiral did so, but the price was rising – it would finally cost two thousand British sailors their lives. In his postwar memoirs, Churchill would suggest that the costly attacks on the schooners had been justified: 'It was estimated that about four thousand men were drowned that night.'<sup>\*</sup> In fact the two skirmishes had merely postponed the final defeat in Crete by two or three days.

By Friday May 23 that defeat was in sight, though Churchill would not admit it. He was bitterly shocked at this outcome. All the auguries had been favourable, but now the German command was landing – or crash-landing – troop-carrying planes on the shell-pocked Maleme airfield at three-minute intervals.

Plagued with remorse for not having insisted earlier on more tanks for the island, Churchill streamed imperious signals out to Crete and Cairo.<sup>21</sup> To Freyberg: 'The whole world is watching your splendid battle, on which great events turn.' To Wavell: 'Crete battle must be won,' and: 'Fighting must be maintained indefinitely in the island.' But Freyberg was pulling his troops back from one improvised line to another, only to see each outflanked by the enemy's mountain troops.

Dispirited and thoughtful, the P.M. drove out to Chequers for the weekend. It was indeed a 'turning point.'

\* Churchill, *The Grand Alliance*, page 255. German records give the real figure as 297. While Playfair wrote in *The Mediterranean and the Middle East* of eight hundred drowned, Roskill in *The War at Sea* was more circumspect: 'The exact enemy losses in this action are not known but were certainly heavy.'<sup>20</sup>

That was the phrase he himself had used.

SINKING THE *Bismarck* might be his last chance, but until late this Friday she and *Prinz Eugen* had eluded observation.

Then that fickle goddess of fortune who had smiled alternately on the opposing war leaders seemed to turn Churchill's way again. At seven-fifteen P.M. a lookout in the cruiser *Suffolk*, followed shortly by *Norfolk* too, sighted the battleship: she was in the Denmark Strait plunging south toward the open Atlantic. Alerted three hundred miles away by radio signal, the elderly but mighty battle-cruisers *Hood* and *Prince of Wales* began converging at speed on the Germans, heading into the teeth of a rising north wind.

Churchill brightened. There seemed an excellent chance of catching *Bismarck* at dawn in the strait. For a while he sat up, glass in hand, talking quietly with Averell Harriman, his ears cocked for the ring of the telephone. But no call came by three A.M. and he went to bed drained by the day's events. 'I awoke,' he later recalled, 'in peaceful Chequers about nine A.M. with all that strange thrill which one feels at the beginning of a day in which great news is expected, good or bad.' Toward nine A.M. that Saturday morning a private secretary came into his bedroom. 'Have we got her?' the P.M. asked. But the news was not good.

In the Arctic twilight sometime while he slept, lookouts aboard the rival battleships had spotted each other's squadrons almost simultaneously at a range of seventeen miles. Like mounted knights in armour levelling their lances at one another's breastplates, they had charged into the gloom, closing head-on at sixty knots or more. *Hood's* fifteen-inch guns had belled first, then *Bismarck's*. As at Jutland, the German gunnery had been superb: within seconds *Hood* had been grazed by one hit, then pierced by a shell that touched off her main magazine. The volcano of molten steel and fire killed all but three of her fifteen hundred sailors – as many as the French who had died under her guns at Mers-el-Kébir. That left the *Prince of Wales*. Moments later a fifteen-inch shell swept through her bridge killing everybody on it except captain, chief yeoman and navigating officer. Reeling from four hits by *Bismarck* and three by *Prinz Eugen*, she fled trailing a cloud of angry black smoke.

When the stunning news reached the admiralty, the First Lord went down to the admiralty shelter and fingered the harmonium, playing 'Oh God our Help in Ages Past.'<sup>22</sup>

The skies were leaden and a gale was sweeping southern England. Rain lashed down.

At Chequers, Churchill stumbled into Harriman's bedroom and told him what had happened. He was taut and silent when he went downstairs, unable to break the awful news to his family. Sensitive to Winston's moods, Clemmie poured him a glass of port. Less sensitively, Vic Oliver – Sarah's Vienna-born comedian husband – played a few bars of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' on the piano until Winston shouted at him to stop. 'Nobody plays the Dead March in my house,' he cried.

Only one hope sustained him that day: that *Bismarck* had not escaped the gun-duel unscathed. There was a report that she was trailing oil. The admiralty ordered counter-measures: an ancient battleship from Nova Scotia, an even older one from Newfoundland, two cruisers from the Azores, a battleship from the Clyde – all were ordered to converge on the German's probable position. But where was she heading?

Throughout Saturday they shadowed the scurrying, victorious Germans through the North Atlantic mist and rain. By afternoon *Victorious* was moving up to launch torpedo planes; *King George V* and *Repulse* would probably be within range the next morning. Irritably pacing the Great Hall, glass in one hand and cigar in the other, Churchill dictated a signal ordering Admiral Wake-Walker in *Norfolk* to continue the pursuit even if it meant running out of fuel. Later, he ordered the admiral to be asked for his intentions about re-engaging the Germans. Hundreds of miles away, the admiral took the hint, crept up on *Bismarck*, and attacked her from astern. Under cover of this firefight, Admiral Lütjens managed to detach *Prinz Eugen* to continue the Atlantic sortie which he himself was now being forced by loss of oil to abort. A few hours later *Victorious* was within aircraft range, but a torpedo from one of her brave biplanes merely grazed the paintwork on *Bismarck's* armourplate. She seemed impregnable.

Early on Sunday the cruisers lost their quarry completely. But Lütjens seemed unaware of this and, instead of imposing radio silence, he transmitted three lengthy messages between nine and eleven A.M. to Germany. The admiralty got fixes on these signals, and they showed that *Bismarck* had moved south and east during the night. Evidently she was running for France.

GOING TO bed that night he would remark that these were the worst days he had ever spent. His mental turmoil must be born in mind when examining his actions on this particular weekend. But out at Chequers he was waylaid by temptations as well as torments, for here in the country he was perilously free from the constraints and bridles that London imposed on him with its constantly hovering ministers and staffs. Out here he could take independent decisions, and often did.



In his eyes extreme actions were justified. He was going for broke. Crete seemed lost, and he was mortally afraid that the sacred, mighty *Bismarck* was slipping away too. He pored over maps, made calculations, rasped orders down the telephone to London. His intuition told him that Admiral Lütjens was returning north, to Germany. Far out to sea Tovey believed that too, and had begun heading north. On Churchill's orders<sup>23</sup> a signal went to *Rodney* to conform with Tovey's movements toward the Iceland–Faroes gap, and *not* to steer for France. Tovey in turn read this signal and assumed that London knew things that he did not.

Thus for most of this Sunday Tovey was galloping away from the limping Lütjens. At 4:21 P.M. he uneasily signalled London. 'Do you consider the enemy is making for the Faroes?' Perhaps Pound had to consult Chequers for a reply: after waiting nearly two hours Tovey turned back of his own accord to the south-east, toward France, at 6:10 P.M.

Five minutes before that, the admiralty had suddenly cancelled Churchill's instructions to *Rodney* and told her to assume that *Bismarck* was heading for France.<sup>24</sup> Once again the Oracle at Bletchley had provided the vital clue. We now know that Hans Jeschonnek, Göring's chief of air staff, was in Athens directing the Nazi assault on Crete. From there he had signalled an anxious inquiry about where the damaged *Bismarck* was heading — his son was aboard the battleship.\* In airforce ENIGMA code Berlin replied, 'Brest.'<sup>25</sup>



Not satisfied with acting as unofficial 'First Sea Lord' that Sunday, Churchill watched the battle in Crete and wished that he was commander-in-chief in Cairo too. 'I would gladly lay down the premiership,' he told his secretaries, 'Yes, and even renounce cigars and alcohol!'<sup>26</sup>

But at Chequers both commodities abounded, and extraordinary orders winged into the ether that weekend. In one, despatched over the admiralty's signature — a familiar Churchill expedient — he countermanded an order by Admiral Cunningham to the fast troop transport *Glenroy* to withdraw from Crete to the south. (Cunningham ignored the London signal.)<sup>27</sup> Envious at reports of the enemy's 'blind courage,' fearful that Hitler was shipping still more reinforcements into Crete (he was not), and apprehensive that his craven admirals might hesitate to risk their warships against them, the P.M. lisped that Sunday: 'The loss of half the Mediterranean fleet would be worthwhile in order to save Crete.' Again he ordered

\* His son survived. Jean Howard, the Bletchley Park analyst who handled the decrypt of Jeschonnek's signal, vividly recalls the thrill as it arrived.

Cunningham to intervene north of the island, even in broad daylight. 'Only experience,' the admiralty's wounding signal, initiated of course by Churchill, suggested, 'would show how long the situation could be maintained.'

Knowing whose hand had drafted this, Cunningham retorted: 'Their Lordships may rest assured that [the] determining factor in operating in Ægean is not fear of sustaining losses, but need to avoid loss which, without commensurate advantage to ourselves, will cripple Fleet out here.'<sup>28</sup> Taking a less sanguine view of losing half his fleet, Cunningham would shortly write to the First Sea Lord, again offering his resignation.



Jeschonnek's paternal inquiry about his son had settled the fate of *Bismarck*. A Catalina – piloted in fact by an American – was immediately sent out to search the Atlantic off Brest. It sighted the fugitive battleship at ten-thirty on Monday morning May 26, seven hundred miles from the port, still leaking oil but seemingly too far ahead for *King George V* or *Rodney* to catch. Admiral Somerville's Force H was moving an aircraft carrier between her and Brest.

Back in London for his five o'clock cabinet, Churchill was edgy and despondent. The cabinet handled him roughly, ganging up on him and forcing him to abandon notions he had adopted without consultation. Only labour minister Ernie Bevin supported him over conscription in Ulster. Beaverbrook was pugnacious as a stuck pig, and Dalton noted the 'general sense of gloom.' The convoy HX126 had been sunk by U-boats in the Atlantic, and news of the heavy Mediterranean losses in the battle against the schooners had arrived. 'Thus,' lamented Churchill, 'the Germans have established a unit superiority over us.' *Hood* was sunk and *Bismarck* had evidently escaped. 'This,' he cried, 'is the most injurious and distressing naval incident since we missed the *Goeben*.'<sup>29</sup>

'Poor Winston will recover all right,' assessed one witness of that cabinet, 'if we get a bit of good news. Tonight he was almost throwing his hand in. But there is a bit of the histrionic art in *that*.'

Afterward, the P.M. found a warm and human note from Anthony Eden. While this might be a bad day, the foreign secretary reminded him, on the morrow they would enter Baghdad, and *Bismarck* would be sunk. 'On some date the war will be won,' he encouraged the P.M. in this note, 'and you will have done more than any man in history to win it.'<sup>30</sup>

Just now, Winston could not see how. With tears of mortification in his eyes, he read that evening a signal from Admiral Tovey warning that he would have to break off the pursuit to refuel unless Lütjens reduced speed

by midnight; *Rodney's* fuel was also running out. Shortly Admiral Somerville signalled Tovey curtly, 'Estimate no hits' – referring to the Swordfish attack by *Ark Royal*. (They had fired their torpedoes at *Sheffield* instead, which had been shadowing *Bismarck*, without hitting her.)

FOR SOME reason Churchill was incapacitated that grim evening, May 26. Perhaps it was his old curse, the 'Black Dog.'

News reached London on which he took no action for several hours. Left to his own devices in Crete, General Freyberg decided that evening to evacuate the bloody island. 'The limit of endurance,' he signalled to Cairo, 'has been reached.' Perhaps Churchill could not bring himself to read the signals. 'Your glorious defence,' he would signal to Freyberg the next day, 'commands admiration in every land. We know enemy is hard pressed. All aid in our power is being sent.' And to Cairo: 'Victory in Crete essential at this turning-point in the war. Keep hurling in all aid you can.'<sup>31</sup>

His mood was suicidal. His appointment card for that Monday evening, May 26, shows a dinner at eight-thirty with the Winants. Whatever it was that happened there, the U.S. ambassador's concern was profound enough for him to make immediate plans to fly back secretly to Washington on Wednesday to report to Roosevelt at first hand. Ripples lapped as far as the state department, where Cordell Hull was heard to murmur over and over again: 'Everything's going hellward.'<sup>32</sup>

It looked like the end of the road. Frantic at the thought that Tovey's two battleships might soon break off the pursuit, at some time during those dark hours Churchill drafted this extraordinary signal to the admiral:

*Bismarck* must be sunk at all costs and if to do this it is necessary for *King George V* to remain on the scene, then she must do so, even if it subsequently means towing *King George V*.<sup>33</sup>

Given his mood, it would be uncharitable to criticise him for having penned this signal. But that Admiral Pound sent it on without remonstrance is surely the final proof how far he was beholden to his master. As has been pointed out,<sup>34</sup> enemy submarines were gathering in the area: the order, if obeyed, would have signed the death warrant for *King George V* and her crew.

Six hundred and fifty miles out in the Atlantic, the pursuit had entered its final stage. At nine P.M. the seemingly puny Swordfish torpedo planes had repeated their attack on Hitler's fifty-thousand-ton naval giant. They seemed to have missed, but after a while something strange was seen hap-

pening: *Bismarck* had begun turning in huge, aimless circles. Her steering must have been jammed. She was doomed after all.

Five destroyers closed in as daylight failed and loosed off torpedoes for several hours; none actually scored a hit in the darkness. But as day returned on Tuesday May 27, the battleships *King George V* and *Rodney* arrived and opened fire at twelve miles. Just before nine A.M. the first hits were scored on the German, now blind, crippled and hopelessly out-gunned. An hour later, battered by hundreds of tons of shells and torpedoes but still flying her battle ensign, *Bismarck* was a blazing hulk, the screams of the dying mercifully masked by distance and the towering seas.

The biggest battleship in the world was no longer a fighting machine, but she was unsinkable. Her guns fell silent by ten A.M., their last ammunition spent. A message from Admiral Tovey arrived in London: the battleship could not be sunk by gunfire. It did not matter, because even as Churchill's cabinet met at ten-thirty A.M. to accept the loss of Crete, engineer officers aboard *Bismarck* were blowing open her seacocks to scuttle her. She went down at eleven A.M.<sup>35</sup>

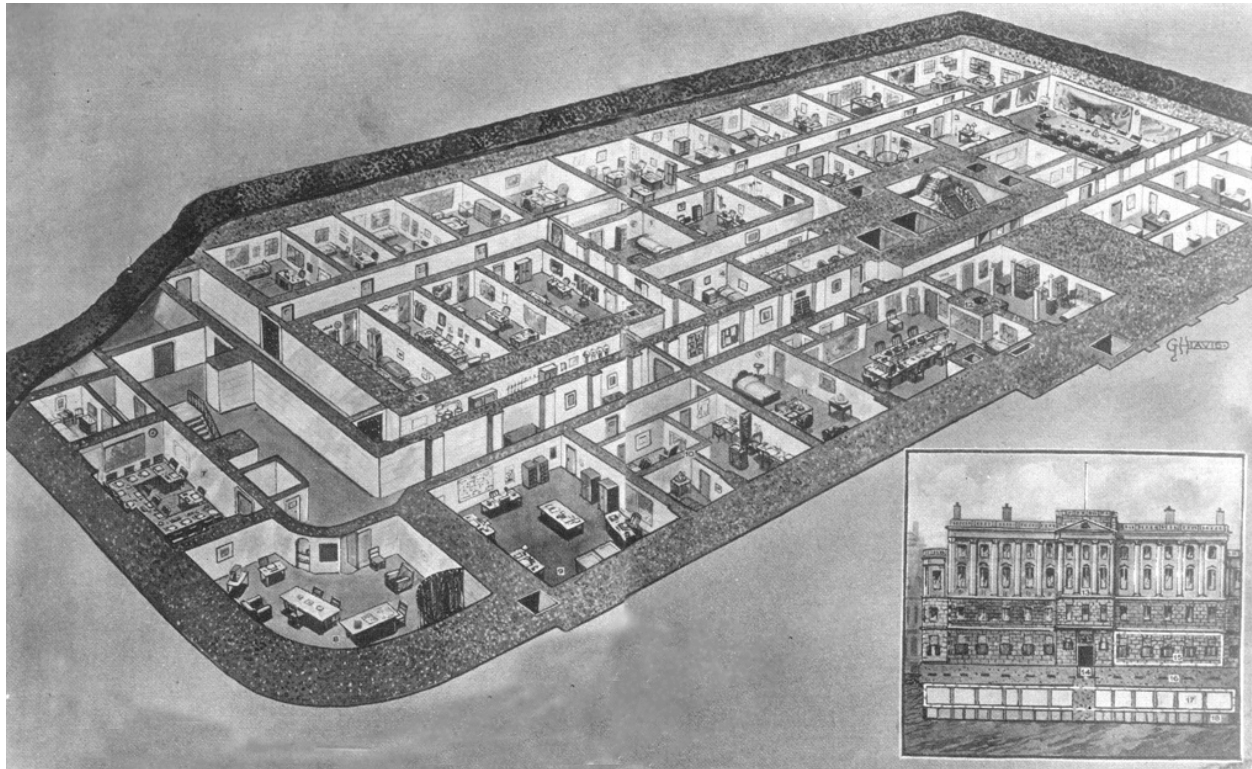
Moved at the infernal spectacle and by the death of two thousand German sailors, Admiral Tovey, the British Home Fleet's commander-in-chief, signalled to London this chivalrous request: 'I should like to pay the highest tribute for the most gallant fight put up against impossible odds' – meaning by the *Bismarck*. Churchill forbade it, citing 'political reasons.'<sup>36</sup>

Thus was lifted the curse of defeat from Churchill's brow. In an hour he was to address the Commons – now at Church House since Parliament had been bombed – and this would allow the kind of staged drama in which he excelled. To the restless Members he recounted, as only he knew how, the whole epic from the sinking of the *Hood* right up to the disappointments of the previous evening. Even at this moment, he continued, the great warship was, he said, steering in uncontrolled circles while our own fleet bore down on her. Shells were without effect on her, and torpedoes would be the only finish – 'That process is in action as I speak.'

That said, he tantalisingly deferred to other speakers.

Shortly a slip of paper was handed John Martin in the official box, and he passed it forward to the front bench. Aware that every eye was upon him, Churchill unfolded the paper. 'Mr Speaker,' he said rising to his feet, interrupting another Member. 'I crave your indulgence. I have just received news that the *Bismarck* is sunk.'

As wild cheers lifted to the roof, the P.M. shot a triumphant glance across at the Opposition benches: Shinwell winked broadly at him; Bevan scowled with chagrin.<sup>37</sup> It looked like Churchill was going to be prime minister for a long time.



From September 1940 Churchill could use the bombproof bunker installed beneath Whitehall. But he still preferred not to be in London when the moon was full.

## 44: *Beaverbrook, BATTLEAXE and BARBAROSSA*

THE BULLDOG face with its familiar folds and dewlaps was almost a caricature of itself. Somebody once remarked on Winston's 'knack for looking crumpled,' and on his 'self-satisfied smile that trembles between a grin and a pout.' The face was memorable, but it was hard to say why. The ears were unobtrusive, the chubby features neither aristocratic nor 'English.' The mouth was soft and effeminate, the lower lip protruding in a permanent moist pout. The eyes were small and twinkling, with pouches that underlined their mood. Clemmie (whom he called the 'Cat') dubbed him 'Pig.' Worried at the load he was carrying, this marvellous woman would confide to Harry Hopkins: 'I can't bear his dear round face not to look cheerful and cherubic in the mornings, as up to now it has always done.'

Winston was beginning to regard it as a 'most unnecessary' and 'obstinate' war. Once a month he could escape from it when he dined with The Other Club. He and F. E. Smith had founded it one Thursday thirty years before. It was here in June 1941 that he cornered H. G. Wells and chaffed him: 'Well, H.G. — how're your "war aims" getting on?' He continued, barely pausing for the reply, 'There's only one war aim for the present. — K.B.O.' The great novelist harrumphed and raised his eyebrows. Churchill happily translated for him: 'Keep Bugging On!' 'Ay yes, Mr Prime Minister,' the writer called out, 'but ye can't go on fighting rearguard actions all the time!'<sup>2</sup>

There were powerful voices who felt that now he should admit failure and accept Hitler's very favourable peace terms. Among them was David Lloyd George, who justified his views in a furtive talk with Lord Hankey in Kensington on May 29. 'We agreed all along the line,' Hankey wrote that day:

Churchill has great gifts of leadership, and can put his stuff over the people, Parliament, his cabinet colleagues and even himself.

But he is not what he thinks himself, a great master of the art of war. Up to now he has never brought off any great military enterprise. However defensible they may have been, Antwerp, Gallipoli and the expedition to help the White Russians at the end of the last war were all failures. He made some frightful errors of judgement between the two wars in military matters, e.g., obstructing the construction of new ships in 1925; the adoption of the Ten Year Rule ("no major war for ten years") in 1928; his false estimates of the value of French generals & French military methods. . . It was he who forced us into the Norwegian affair which failed; the Greek affair which failed; and the Cretan affair which is failing.

Lloyd George astonished Hankey by revealing that he had rebuked Churchill in private a few days earlier for 'his constant reiteration that he would never make peace with Hitler or any of his gang.'

The war [as Hankey noted his words] was likely to be long in any event, but this attitude made it interminable because Hitler & his crowd had rescued Germany from the Slough of Despond and raised it to the strongest military Power. In the circumstances it was inconceivable that the Germans would overthrow the Nazis. Besides, the Germans were entitled to have the Government they want. . . When L.I.G. had said this kind of thing to Winston, the latter had replied, 'Nothing would induce me to treat with these fellows.' Whereat Mrs Churchill had piped in with, 'Well, Mr Lloyd George, we can all change our minds, can't we!'

In June 1941 the P.M. still had more reason to pout than to grin. Among the few in whose company he sought solace was the restless Lord Beaverbrook. Bracken would declare with more than an ounce of justification that 'Max' took up more of Winston's time than Hitler.<sup>3</sup> Another minister would surmise that overthrowing Asquith in 1916 had gone to his head – 'He has been trying to repeat his success ever since.'<sup>4</sup> But Churchill admired Max as a trouble-shooter, and he had recently appointed him minister of state to increase arms supplies to the services.

Beaverbrook was also deputy chairman of the defence committee (supply). His office was two doors from No. 10, and he soon found Churchill's interventions tiresome. The P.M. had set up a 'tank parliament' of generals and production experts, and asked Beaverbrook to chair it. It held only three meetings – Beaverbrook chaired the first, the P.M. the other

two.<sup>5</sup> This was only one example. Early in June Beaverbrook itemised the prime minister's meddling in a letter.<sup>6</sup> Churchill drafted a reply jealously pointing to his wide powers as minister of defence, but decided not to send it.

At the root of Beaverbrook's unhappiness was a fundamental opposition to this war. Britain had come to a pretty pass, he would blurt out a few weeks later to Rudolf Hess: 'I was very much against the war,' he recalled. 'I [hoped] greatly that we wouldn't be involved in this terrible world crisis.' Out of minor events had grown a major tragedy which could no longer be stopped. 'It bothers me a great deal,' he added. 'I used to go to Germany quite often before Hitler came to power. My newspapers always gave him a good hearing.'<sup>7</sup>

At the end of February 1940 his evening newspaper had leaked details of peace talks between Lord Tavistock and the Germans. On March 5, 1940 he had invited John McGovern of the Independent Labour Party and two colleagues to dinner and, confiding to them that he saw no sign of Germany's defeat, he had offered £500 and newspaper backing for every peace candidate they fielded.<sup>8</sup> During the Crete crisis, a disenchanted McGovern blew the gaff in a by-election speech.<sup>9</sup> Beaverbrook, embarrassed, would only comment that the dinner had lasted until two A.M. and that they had quaffed two bottles of 1911 Pommery, as well as port and brandy. He soothed his irate prime minister with ten cases of Deidesheimer Hofstück 1937 from his own cellar. Winston found the liquid gift 'exhilarating' and forgave him; asked in the House on June 25 about Max's 1940 misdemeanour, he dismissed the allegation as 'communist vapourings.' McGovern was furious about what he called the P.M.'s 'vicious and false' answers.<sup>10</sup>\* But Beaverbrook was indispensable and knew it. A few days later Churchill promoted him to minister of supply.



Thirty-two thousand troops had been defending Crete. 'I don't see how we can expect to get any of them out,' a haggard C.I.G.S. had said to the American military attaché as the evacuation began. 'Freyberg was left with no air support at all.'<sup>12</sup> But in four nights 16,500 men, including General Freyberg – too good a man to lose – were embarked from the island's southern fishing ports. Five thousand more were authorised by

\* In 1942 U.S. censorship intercepted a supportive telegram from Beaverbrook, then in Washington, to an anti-Churchill candidate at Rugby; Churchill's candidate was defeated.<sup>11</sup>



Wavell to surrender – ‘a shameful episode,’ in Churchill’s view. He felt troops should not surrender with less than thirty per cent fatalities.

On May 31 Churchill drove down to Chequers to reflect. The dispirited tone of Wavell’s telegrams unsettled him; he muttered about ‘defeatism.’ ‘He sounds a tired and disheartened man,’ he remarked to his secretariat.<sup>13</sup> Then he turned to his weekend guests. Harriman had brought his daughter Kathleen with him; she found Winston smaller than expected, and less plump. In his airforce blue rompers he looked ‘rather like a kindly teddy bear,’ she wrote to her sister. Harriman, worried about the Middle East, obtained his permission to fly out and investigate the situation for himself.

CHURCHILL SUFFERED the same weakness as Hitler: he would grumble volubly about the most senior commanders for many months before summoning up the necessary resolve to replace them. Thus he now grumbled to his staff about Wavell’s caution and pessimism, and wrote to Dill about the general’s reluctance to launch armoured offensives. Wavell, he suggested, should do so ‘while his fleeting authority remains.’<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the Mediterranean crisis bore more heavily on Wavell in Cairo than on Churchill in the serenity of Chartwell, whither he repaired that Whit Monday evening, June 2. Denied effective air cover, the British ships evacuating Crete had been attacked without mercy, and hundreds more were killed – 260 in the cruiser *Orion* alone. Churchill, after grumbling for months about Air Chief Marshal Longmore, the Middle East airforce commander, now replaced him with Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder.\* Tedder was one of Winston’s most felicitous appointments: he rapidly earned the affection of the desert airmen and would prove a real asset when North Africa became an Anglo–American theatre of war.

The naval disasters at Crete had cost Churchill the supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean which Cunningham had won for him at Taranto and Cape Matapan. But Hitler had burnt his fingers too: capturing the island had cost him more than his entire Balkan campaign – five thousand troops and 150 Junkers transport planes, including twenty crews; the operation had broken the back of his only paratroop division. While Hitler vowed never to use paratroops again, Churchill, casting about for new initiatives, decided to raise an airborne division on the German model.

Crete finally taught Churchill the importance of air supremacy in invasion operations. He even decided to relinquish Cyprus to Hitler, if he decided to invade.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, Hitler remarked petulantly that if Mussolini

\* For a time he considered Sir Hugh Dowding instead of Tedder, but neither Sinclair nor Portal would hear of it.<sup>15</sup>

wanted Cyprus he should get it himself. 'Occupying Cyprus would have some point for us only if we wanted to influence Syria from there,' he said, 'otherwise there's no point at all.'<sup>17</sup>

The Axis had no interest in Syria. On May 31 Bletchley issued categorical reassurances to that effect.

In Iraq, Hitler ordered a last stand by the Arabs at Baghdad, only to reverse the decision hours later upon learning that the uprising had been crushed. He diffidently dismissed Iraq as a 'blemish' to his grand strategy.<sup>18</sup> Churchill read Hitler's secret orders about Baghdad on June 1, but – we shall never know why – refused to heed Bletchley's reassurances about Syria and decided to invade it, regardless of his secret agreement with Marshal Pétain.

Perhaps he was impressed by the assurances of General Georges Catroux, de Gaulle's commander in the region, that Britain could stage an easy coup in Syria. He called a staff meeting, ostensibly to discuss the pros and cons, on June 4. 'Actually,' recorded Cadogan resignedly, 'there was only desultory conversation about anything that came into the P.M.'s head – in that order.'

To invade a strongly-garrisoned Vichy territory one week before BATTLEAXE, Wavell's major summer offensive against Rommel, was surely tempting providence. To his defence committee later that evening Churchill adopted a frivolous argument: he might as well invade Syria now, since he had to face the Commons music over Crete anyway on the tenth, and he could ride out both storms in Parliament together.



To some advisers it looked like studied nonchalance. To others it seemed that he was floundering – but he was treading water to a purpose. The optimist in him was waiting for America to come in, and more immediately for Hitler to attack Russia. He alone was one hundred per cent certain that this was imminent.

Even after Belgrade, the F.O. remained adamant that Hitler had no such intention.<sup>19</sup> Military Intelligence, seeing no Panzer divisions moving eastward yet, also insisted that his main enemy was still Britain.<sup>20</sup> On May 6 the C.I.G.S. sent a paper to No. 10 stressing 'on the highest professional authority' the danger to Britain, and not mentioning Russia at all.<sup>21</sup>

Churchill had sources not available to either Eden or the war office, and he had taken a different view since July 1940. Even his own chief of staff seemed unaware of these sources: 'The night before,' Pug Ismay remarked to the Canadian prime minister in August (and in some wonder-

ment), 'one would never have thought that Germany would attack Russia.'<sup>22</sup>

This perhaps explained why the diplomats were curmudgeonly when Churchill had first tried to warn Stalin. Eden had advised him on April 3 not to do it; Cripps, the ambassador in Moscow, had not even bothered to forward Churchill's cryptic warning to Stalin. Mortified by Cripps's insensitivity but unwilling to unmask his sources, Churchill had lectured his youthful foreign secretary: 'The Ambassador is not alive to the military significance of the facts. Pray oblige me.' Stalin had made no reply to his warning.<sup>23</sup> Considering how Stalin had treated Britain in 1939 and 1940, Churchill had decided to let him stew in his own juice and made no further approach.

On April 24 the Oracle detected further creakings as Hitler's assault circus lumbered eastward. This time it was a pivotal Luftwaffe signals unit being transferred from the Channel coast to Poland. The airforce and railroad ENIGMAS now bulged with cypher traffic as elite units were shifted east, including bridging units and the Hermann Göring flak regiment. Eden, with only diplomatic evidence to go by, remained convinced that this was just the paraphernalia of Nazi blackmail: his instinct had been blunted by weeks of incestuous rumours – whispered from one diplomat to another and back again – that Hitler was merely blackmailing his Soviet allies for concessions, possibly German control of the Ukraine.

Churchill kept his sources to himself. The raw intercepts told him all he needed to know. On May 5 cryptanalysts noticed a P.O.W. guard unit being moved from Zagreb to Poland. Later they would underscore this: 'The quiet move . . . of a prisoner-of-war cage to Tarnow looks more like business than bluff.'<sup>24</sup> On the eighth they deciphered a German airforce signal linking the Fourth Air Force to an unidentified operation BARBAROSSA; on the twelfth came one linking the Twelfth Army to FALL B – 'CASE B.' (All of Hitler's offensives had been 'CASES': WHITE against Poland, YELLOW and GREEN against the Low Countries and France.) What clinched it was evidence that General von Richthofen's Eighth Air Corps and the First and Second Flak Corps – the combat-hardened spearheads of the western and Balkan campaigns – were being rushed to Poland.

On May 14 the buff box submitted by 'C' to Churchill contained Bletchley's firm conclusion that Hitler was planning a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. 'A ceaseless movement,' he telegraphed to General Smuts in South Africa two days later, 'of troops, armoured forces, and aircraft northward from the Balkans and eastward from France and Germany is in progress.'<sup>25</sup>

A week later the Joint Intelligence Committee – a ponderous body on which all three services were represented – belatedly addressed the question. Churchill, scornful of ‘collective wisdom,’ had long before prudently demanded to see original intercepts himself.<sup>26</sup> By studiously ignoring these, the J.I.C. concluded that Hitler was bluffing. The Japanese ambassador in Berlin was heard speculating that Hitler’s real interest was in India. (Hitler had not yet initiated him.) Echoing the wholly incorrect ‘economic blackmail’ theory, on the last day of May the chiefs of staff advised General Wavell that Germany was making drastic demands on Stalin and would march if he refused them.<sup>27</sup>

By then the codebreakers had heard Göring’s commanding generals asking for maps of new operational zones – all areas still under the Russian heel: the Baltic states, eastern Poland, north-east Romania. ‘It would no doubt be rash,’ assessed Bletchley Park on the last day of May,

for Germany to become involved in a long struggle on two fronts. But the answer may well be that the Germans do not expect the struggle with Russia to be long. An overwhelming eastward concentration, a lightning victory, an unassailable supremacy in Europe and Asia – such may be the plan behind this procession of troop trains from the Balkans to the eastern frontier.

It was as though they had been reading Hitler’s mind: and, in a sense, they had.

On June 3 German ambassador Count von der Schulenburg assured his Italian colleague in Moscow that *no* negotiations were going on. Churchill read the Italian’s cypher telegram. That ruled out ‘blackmail.’ On the fourth Göring summoned his commanding generals to a conference. Orders went to Richthofen not to move forward ‘for CASE B’ before the sixteenth. ‘It looks to me more and more likely,’ Churchill wrote privately on June 8 to his son Randolph, who had telegraphed to him a disturbing report on the British set-up in Cairo, ‘that Hitler will go for Stalin.’<sup>28</sup>

Washington was also in the picture, though from different sources. In 1940 Hitler’s former chief economist, Dr Hjalmar Schacht, had tipped off the U.S. chargé in Berlin about CASE YELLOW one week in advance. Now he told the same diplomat that it was a *feststehende Tatsache* (established fact) that Hitler would invade Russia on about the twentieth.<sup>29</sup> Churchill may well have been told. He certainly learned of Göring’s indiscretions. Late in March the Reichsmarschall had told a Swedish industrialist friend about BARBAROSSA;<sup>30</sup> in June he would add the date, and on the eighteenth or nineteenth the Swede would pass it to London. The Polish exile leader

in London learned from this source that Göring was stating that Germany would 'launch an attack against Russia on Sunday, June 22.'<sup>31</sup>



Churchill's address to the House on Tuesday June 10, 1941 would be crucial.<sup>32</sup> He began dictating it at No. 10 as the week ended. The first draft was cantankerous and even smug – he claimed that no error had been made in Crete 'from this end.'<sup>33</sup> He tried out this line on the senior Fleet-street editors after they trooped in through the famous front door for a private briefing on Saturday morning. Conciliatory, even jocular, he revealed secretly that he had known of Hitler's airborne plan a fortnight in advance. He had felt sure that Freyberg could hold off both this and the seaborne invasion to follow. Freyberg, he claimed, could have had more tanks if he had asked. He voiced genuine surprise at the public anger over what was, after all, 'only one episode' in the Middle East: it was unreasonable to call him to account each time 'any little thing' went wrong. Besides, he claimed, Britain had destroyed four hundred enemy planes and killed fifteen thousand Germans for only ten thousand British killed and missing. And this, he argued triumphantly, was why Hitler had been unable to spare more than forty planes for Iraq.

The red meat of this confidential briefing was his revelation of BARBAROSSA. Hitler had, he suspected, demanded oil from Stalin, along with part of the Ukraine. If he was asking for Baku and its oilfields as well, Stalin would have to refuse – 'even though he knows his army could not stand up to the Germans.'<sup>34</sup>

WITH TUESDAY'S address still hovering over him – he expected Hore-Belisha to snivel about the lack of flak on Crete – he drove out to Dytchley, looking forward to the nightly movies and other reliefs from the grinding mills of war. He instructed that General Dill, who was wearying of the whole business, should come too. 'A man of simple tastes,' Lord Hankey learned two days later, 'he had to partake of an enormous dinner with quantities of champagne. After dinner, instead of discussing business, he had to see a cinema, which lasted until midnight. *Then* the business. He did not get to bed until three A.M. Characteristic.'

Churchill had just completed his King's Birthday Honours List: a welcome chance to rebuff and outrage his critics. He had put down the Prof. for a peerage and A. V. Alexander as a Companion of Honour; Morton and Seal would become Companions of the Bath. Reading the smoke-

signals correctly, *Mirror* editor Guy Bartholomew commented, 'Evidently Churchill realises this will be his last Honours List!'<sup>35</sup>

His family was now far-flung. Offended by her husband's surliness, young Pamela had farmed out baby Winston to Max Beaverbrook so as to spend more time with the visiting Americans.<sup>36</sup> Randolph, when in England, treated her like a pasha. 'I want you to be with my son,' he shouted and, when Pamela retorted that he was *her* son too, he rudely snorted: 'No, *my* son. I'm a Churchill.'<sup>37</sup> Everyone but the prime minister could see what was happening to the marriage.

Harriman was leaving for Cairo. Churchill wrote to his son out there, commenting ingenuously on the friendship that Harriman's daughter had struck up with Pamela. 'I hope,' he added, 'you will try to see Averell Harriman when he arrives.' The bunkered Annexe was now complete, but he rarely took shelter there (as he knew from the Oracle the Blitz on London was over anyway). 'Your Mother,' he explained to Randolph, 'is now insisting upon becoming a fire watcher on the roof, so it will look very odd if I take advantage of the securities provided.'

Some twenty-five hundred miles away, that Sunday June 8 his assault on Syria began. 'No one can tell,' he wrote to Randolph, 'which way the Vichy French cat will jump and how far the consequences of this action will extend.' He was on tenterhooks the next day, as his field commander Jumbo Wilson sent no word. Churchill, still anxious about the Commons speech he had to make, grumbled: 'It's damned bad manners.'<sup>38</sup> The news was bad: Syria was not going to be a walkover. There were twenty-five thousand Vichy regulars and ninety tanks there. Ten thousand Allied and Vichy soldiers would be killed or wounded in the following five weeks. The military benefits of this unwanted new front were negligible; the political ramifications were vast. In particular, Churchill had violated the 'gentleman's agreement' with Pétain, and from now on their relations were marked by unremitting hostility.



His 'largest problem,' as he described it, remained embroiling the United States. In mid-April Canada's prime minister deduced from a visit to his southern neighbours that they would not willingly go to war: Roosevelt talked only about his people's defeatism, Morgenthau about Canada's refusal to turn over French gold, and Hull about his daily homilies to the Japanese ambassador on the wisdom of peace. 'If a fight came at all,' Mackenzie King remarked to Lord Halifax, 'it would probably come at the outset between Britain and Japan, not the U.S. and Japan.'<sup>39</sup>

But there were moves in the right direction. Iceland was one. In 1940 British troops had occupied key points there; now Roosevelt agreed to replace this garrison, since Iceland was in his newly-defined western hemisphere. The British division could be released to the Middle East.<sup>40</sup>

There were other possibilities. Churchill tried to persuade Roosevelt to transfer elements of his fleet from Pearl Harbor into the Atlantic; for a time he nearly succeeded.<sup>41</sup> After *Bismarck's* destruction and the escape of her consort, he sent a new idea over to the admiralty in a locked box. 'The bringing into action of *Prinz Eugen* and the search for her,' his secret suggestion read, 'raises questions of the highest importance.' In short, an American warship should be invited to find and shadow her. 'This,' he explained, 'might tempt her to fire upon that ship, thus providing the incident for which the United States Government would be so thankful.'<sup>42</sup>

A further method suggested itself in June, even as the U.S. Marines began moving into Iceland. He now revived an earlier plan to stage an Allied propaganda summit in London. (It had been thwarted in December by Greece's pettifogging refusal to attend, not being at war with Germany.) 'At a time when the Germans are trying to declare peace in Europe,' he telegraphed to Roosevelt from Dytchley, inviting America to participate, 'it will be useful to show that the inhabitants of the occupied countries are still alive and vigorous.'<sup>43</sup> Roosevelt declined because of 'domestic considerations.'<sup>44</sup>

The banquet went ahead, and Churchill spoke before the microphones at St. James's Palace. If the exile leaders expected him to state his war aims, at long last, they got no more than H. G. Wells. He used them as a sounding board for crashing arpeggios of rhetoric, thundering at these innocent exiled statesmen about concentration camps and German firing squads working every dawn. 'Such is the plight of once glorious Europe,' he cried, 'and such are the atrocities against which we are in arms.' His message was simple: Hitler was doomed. 'It is here, in this island fortress, that he will have to reckon in the end.' 'Our air power will continue to teach the German homeland that war is not all loot and triumph.'

'Lift up your hearts,' he concluded in his hymn-like peroration. 'All will come right. Out of the depths of sorrow and sacrifice will be born again the glory of mankind.' They were great and often moving phrases, but they boiled down to the same prosaic strategy: Keep Bugging On.

THE TIGER convoys had shipped more tanks – Churchill called them his 'Tiger Cubs' – to Egypt, and munitions were arriving directly from their American manufacturers. BATTLEAXE would begin on the fifteenth. But he was worried: Rommel now had his 15th Panzer division, and Wavell

seemed to be losing his grip. After hearing a first-hand account of Crete, Churchill complained to the chiefs of staff of the lethargy displayed in acting on the very precise Intelligence he had furnished to Wavell.<sup>45</sup>

He would face the House on Tuesday June 10 with little enthusiasm. 'People,' he had grimly observed to his cabinet on the eve of this debate, 'criticise this Government. But its great strength – and I dare say it in this company – is that there's no alternative!' 'I don't think it's a bad Government,' he continued. 'In fact there never has been a Government to which I have felt such sincere and whole-hearted loyalty!'

Underlying the forced joviality was a deeper worry about his own political survival: John Martin saw him labouring on his speech until three A.M. that night.<sup>46</sup>

AT THAT cabinet Churchill had broached the BARBAROSSA issue. Should they risk telling the Soviet ambassador now? It was still 'a big if,' felt Eden, unaware of the decrypts from the Oracle.<sup>47</sup> But in cabinet he finally conceded that the political benefits that Hitler might expect from a crusade against communism might outweigh the economic disadvantages. 'All the evidence,' he agreed, 'points to attack.' The chief of air staff suggested, to general approval, that if Hitler did invade Russia, Britain undertake to 'draw off German air forces' by bomber action in the west.<sup>48</sup>

Whitehall had cold-shouldered Ivan Maisky since the Nazi–Soviet pact, and he was flattered to be summoned to the foreign office on the tenth. Looking the perfect stage foreigner, with his goatee beard, this affable diplomat earnestly denied to Eden and Cadogan that Moscow and Berlin were conducting talks.<sup>49</sup> Eden outlined to him the troop movements eastward, adding that if Hitler attacked – which possibility Whitehall 'could not ignore' – Britain was willing to assist Russia with air action, a combat-experienced military mission for Moscow, and economic aid.<sup>50</sup> Across Downing-street on that same day Churchill was reading intercept CX/JQ/1048: Göring had summoned all airforce commanders to his private estate Carinhall in five days' time.

The picture was clearing fast. Now Bletchley's Japanese section, monitoring the PURPLE traffic between Tokyo, Berlin and Rome, belatedly deciphered a message which Baron Oshima had sent to Tokyo on the fourth after seeing Hitler at Berchtesgaden.<sup>51</sup> Hitler had told him that he had resolved to eliminate communist Russia; if he postponed it by five or ten years it would cost twenty times the sacrifice; he would always be first to 'draw his sword' against a hostile opponent; Romania and Finland would join in. 'If Japan lags behind when Germany declares war on Russia,' the Führer had said, 'that will be up to her.' Ribbentrop was chill-



ingly precise: it would all be over in two or three months. He did not say when the campaign would begin, but he did advise that Japan prepare 'in as short a time as possible.'<sup>52</sup> This shook even the Joint Intelligence Committee. 'Fresh evidence,' they announced, 'is now at hand that Hitler has made up his mind to have done with Soviet obstruction and to attack.'<sup>53</sup>

These final days of waiting frayed Churchill's lonely nerves. The official Soviet news agency might dismiss the rumours as 'absurd,'<sup>54</sup> but everything pointed the same way in mid-June. The airforce ENIGMA carried cypher signals about a 'chief war correspondent' arriving in Kirkenes in northern Norway, data about Russian camouflage, and restrictions on overflying the frontier before the 'general crossing.' Cripps took leave from Moscow on the tenth and dined with Churchill two days later. He felt that Russia would hold out under Nazi attack for four weeks at the most.

Whitehall agreed. The war office gave the Red Army ten days.<sup>55</sup> The Joint Intelligence Committee thought six weeks more realistic. One red-tabbed colonel visiting Bletchley Park gazed at the map of the eastern front smothered in little flags, rubbed his hands and said, 'Splendid! Six weeks' breathing space!'<sup>56</sup>

Churchill also anticipated a Soviet collapse. Congratulating Hugh Dalton on S.O.E.'s success in blocking the Danube, Churchill asked him about preventive sabotage operations against Soviet oil installations. He also spoke of bombing the oilfields at Baku with the Middle East airforce to prevent Hitler getting them. 'All this,' the minister dictated in his notes, 'should be prepared as quickly as possible.'<sup>57</sup> That day, June 16, Bletchley appreciated that Hitler might begin CASE B in three days' time. On June 21, the airforce ENIGMA detailed targets for the Fourth Air Corps's opening attacks on Russia.



Churchill briefed Roosevelt about all this on June 14. He told of the reinforcements he had sent out for BATTLEAXE, the desert offensive beginning on the morrow. 'As it will be the first occasion,' he added, 'when we hope to have definite superiority in tackle both on the ground and above it, I naturally attach the very greatest importance to this venture.' Then he hinted at the other extraordinary coming event, and inquired Roosevelt's likely attitude:

From every source at my disposal including some most trustworthy it looks as if a vast German onslaught on the Russian frontier is imminent. Not only are the main German armies deployed from

Finland to Romania but the final arrivals of air and armoured forces are being completed. The pocket battleship *Lützow* which put her nose out of Skaggerak yesterday and was promptly torpedoed by our coastal aircraft was very likely going north to give naval strength on the Arctic flank. Should this new war break out we shall of course give all encouragement and any help we can spare to the Russians, following the principle that Hitler is the foe we have to beat. I do not expect any class political reactions here and trust that a German–Russian conflict will not cause you any embarrassment.<sup>58</sup>

BATTLEAXE began the next day – Sunday. Wavell confidently hurled 25,000 troops and 180 tanks at Rommel. Rommel was expecting the stroke: on Monday afternoon his own tank forces appeared, twice as numerous and far better equipped than anticipated. On Tuesday mid-day Churchill called his home commanders-in-chief to what one general called a futile conference, overstuffed with ‘rather moth-eaten old admirals’ and shocked them with the revelation that BATTLEAXE was a major offensive just like the week-old assault on Syria. Even at this distance from the operational theatre, General Alan Brooke suspected that Britain could scarcely attempt offensives on two fronts in the Middle East when she was barely strong enough for one.<sup>59</sup> Outflanked in the desert by Rommel, Wavell’s raiding forces had to withdraw, leaving 150 dead and over one hundred tanks on a battlefield dominated by the enemy.

PROBABLY LEARNING of this fresh fiasco from Rommel’s own signals before he was officially notified by Cairo, Churchill cancelled his appointments for the evening and retreated to Chartwell for a rare, melancholy visit. The house was shuttered, but he wanted to be alone where he could wander disconsolately about the valley.

By Wednesday this lionhearted man was back at No. 10 and already casting about for some new means of launching an offensive.<sup>60</sup> At around 10 A.M. he telephoned Beaverbrook and asked to see him that evening. He talked of holding an inquest on his desert generals.<sup>61</sup>

Against this background, it is not surprising that his war leadership was called into question. His popularity had slipped three points, down to eighty-five; his government had slumped to fifty-nine.<sup>62</sup> *The Times* published a broadside against the cabinet. When the *Sketch* echoed this, it evoked from yet another editor the observation that even the mice were leaving the ship.<sup>63</sup>

Churchill's interventions became crabby and unhelpful. When he cabled to Roosevelt suggesting an Anglo–American tank board the president was able to point out that one already existed.<sup>64</sup> Churchill snapped at Margesson, his half-forgotten secretary of war, for having foisted the suggestion on him. Private secretaries Colville and Peck were worried by his 'inconsiderate treatment' of the service ministries: only the personal loyalty of Sinclair, Alexander and Margesson prevented serious trouble. Colville quietly observed that while Winston supplied 'drive and initiative,' he was often just meddling, and operations might profit if he would turn instead to labour and production.<sup>65</sup> These were serious criticisms. Eden echoed them a few days later to his own private secretary: a separate minister of defence ought to be appointed – no doubt he had himself in mind.<sup>66</sup>

Against these criticisms must be set one compelling fact: Churchill had greater experience of government, and knew more than any other person. Neither Eden nor Beaverbrook nor his private secretariat had access to his secret sources. This gave him the right, if not always the ability, to interfere.



That Friday morning, June 20, he took his train down to Dover, seeking inspiration among the big railway guns and South Coast flak defences. On the return journey he stopped off at Chartwell again. He seemed to be seeking his roots. He dozed all afternoon, then donned purple dressing gown and battered grey felt hat and wandered round the garden with his private secretary, chasing random thoughts out loud – about the marmalade cat and the goldfish pond, and about Tobruk and resuming the offensive.<sup>67</sup> But swimming at the bottom of his mind was a decision to replace the commander-in-chief in Cairo.

No single episode had impelled him to this decision. To Ian Jacob and Pug Ismay he said afterward, clutching imaginary fishing rods, 'I feel that I have got a tired fish on this rod, and a very lively one on the other.' The Western Desert needed a 'fresh eye and an unstrained hand.' He telegraphed this phrase to the viceroy of India that day, asking him to take Wavell in exchange for General Claude Auchinleck.<sup>68</sup> That was the lively general who had shown such alacrity over Iraq. Citing 'the public interest' for the change, he broke it to Wavell.

Improper though the occasion may have seemed – since Churchill's own Syrian adventure had contributed to the failure of *BATTLEAXE* – Wavell's replacement was correct in the long term: after so many reverses no general could command confidence, and confidence was crucial on the

battlefield. Moreover, Churchill's survival was more important than Wavell's, and the general's prestige and experience would be invaluable for an august, semi-political command like India.

True, Wavell might sulk, as Colville warned the P.M., and write unfavourably of the episode in later years.

Churchill retorted: 'I can use my pen too, and I will bet I sell more copies!'



It was growing oppressively hot. On Wednesday he had gone up to Norfolk to see rockets tested against unmanned target planes, and he had sweltered in the heat – realising only later that the steam heating had been left on in his train after the endlessly cold spring.<sup>69</sup>

The weekend that now began was even hotter. Those who could, fled to the country. That Saturday, June 21, he himself lunched at No. 10 with Lord Louis Mountbatten, and listened distantly to his tales of how German aircraft had sunk his destroyer off Crete. 'Every single one of our plans has failed,' he lectured Ismay in a note this day. 'The enemy has completely established himself in the Central Mediterranean. We are afraid of his dive-bombers at every point.'<sup>70</sup>

He drove down to Chequers alone that afternoon, his mind on the broadcast he proposed to make that night about Russia. Hitler might unleash BARBAROSSA any day now. Upon reflection, he decided to postpone the broadcast. He conversed with his private secretary, who arrived in time for dinner, about the attack and about whether Hitler was right if he assumed he could enlist rightwing sympathies in Britain and America. After dinner he made his own intention plain: 'I will go all out to help Russia.'

Colville was surprised. He remarked, as they strolled around the croquet lawn, that for an anti-Bolshevik like Churchill to back Stalin would be to bow down in the house of Rimmon. His life, the P.M. replied, was simplified by one single purpose: the destruction of Hitler. 'If Hitler invaded Hell,' he said, 'I would at least make a favourable reference to the Devil.'<sup>71</sup>

A FEW hours later his adversary threw three million troops, three thousand tanks, and two thousand planes across the entire Russian line from the Arctic to the Black Sea.

Since Churchill, knowing what he knew, refused to be wakened before eight unless Britain was invaded, he was allowed to sleep on. Wakened with the news, the P.M. grunted that he would broadcast that night.

It occurred to him to send Sawyers the valet to Eden's bedroom with a cigar on a silver salver: Churchill had been proven right, after all. Shortly General Dill arrived from London with the details. The general gave the Red Army six weeks. 'I suppose,' he commented, 'they'll be rounded up in hordes.'

Another man than Churchill, dogged by the fiascos that had littered his military career, might have hesitated before supporting Stalin – a shipwrecked seaman seeking rescue by the Titanic? He summoned the foreign secretary and announced that he would broadcast at nine P.M.

The gamble seemed immense. The diversion into Syria had lost him BATTLEAXE; what great empire territories might he now forfeit if he furnished its materials and military aid to Stalin instead?\*

He telephoned Beaverbrook's successor at the ministry of aircraft production. 'Do you not think,' the P.M. challenged him, 'we ought to help?' Colonel Moore-Brabazon agreed that they should.

Roosevelt had also sent word by Gil Winant, at that moment returning from Washington. Churchill had the ambassador fetched from the airfield. He arrived at Chequers dishevelled after a transatlantic trip by bomber. The oral reply from Roosevelt was this: if Churchill pledged support for Russia, then he would back him to the hilt.<sup>72</sup>

That Hitler had struck on a weekend – as was his wont – was fortunate: it relieved Winston of the need, if not the obligation, to consult his king, his cabinet, or his party. He began drafting his broadcast script soon after breakfast, and fetched Cripps and Beaverbrook down from London for advice, still uncertain about how far to go. Ambassador Cripps counselled circumspection, while Beaverbrook was ebullient. 'If you are going to accept Russia as an ally,' he said, 'you must go all out.'<sup>73</sup>

Churchill's script was ready just in time – but too late to show to Eden or the mandarins in the foreign office.

'Any man or state,' he had dictated,

who fights against Nazism will have our aid. Any man or state who marches with Hitler is our foe. . . It follows therefore that we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and the Russian people.<sup>74</sup>

After predicting an increasing tonnage of bombs on Germany, 'making the German people taste and gulp each month a sharper dose of the miseries they have showered upon mankind,' he had dictated a piece of thoughtless

\* This controversy would arise after the fall of Singapore.

rhetoric that sounded well, but boded ill for the peoples of the territories freshly occupied by Stalin's armies:

The Russian people are defending their native soil. The Russian soldiers are standing on the threshold of their native land.

In truth, they stood *outside* the threshold. Their boot trod firmly on the freshly-expanded crust of the Soviet empire, whose frontiers had been sanctified by Stalin's pact with Hitler: they were on Finnish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Polish and Romanian soil.

Chequers, nine P.M., June 22, 1941. As he took his seat before the microphone installed in his study, this was not the hour for Churchill to dwell upon the fine print. It was as though a clap of thunder had sounded and lightning had lit up the horizon of his mind; it was one of two Great Events he had been living for since the summer of 1940.

His grand strategy was taking effect. He still waited for that other Great Event – the entry of the United States into the war. After that there could be no doubt as to the outcome of Churchill's War.