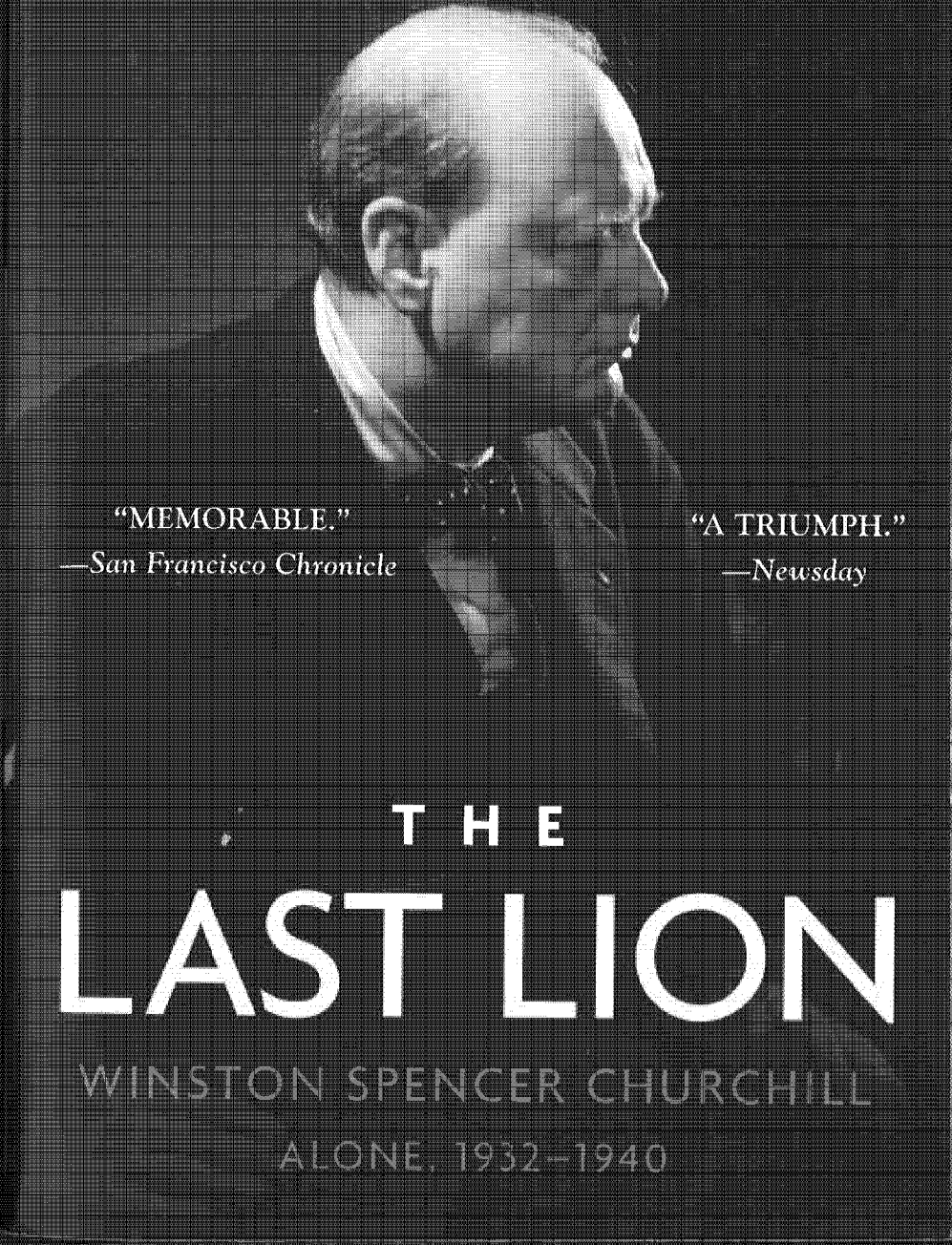


EXHIBIT 12

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
William Manchester



"MEMORABLE."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A TRIUMPH."

—*Newsday*

THE
LAST LION

WINSTON SPENCER CHURCHILL

ALONE, 1932-1940

2013 Bantam Books Trade Paperback Edition

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PART SIX

CATACLYSM

[The text in this section is extremely faint and illegible due to the quality of the scan. It appears to be a large block of text, possibly a chapter or a long letter, but the individual words and sentences cannot be discerned.]

At the Admiralty he was expected, recognized, and saluted as he passed through a gap between concertinas. No guide was necessary, of course; the once and present first lord went straight to a concealed entrance where Kathleen Hill, summoned earlier by telephone, and Captain Guy Grantham, who would be his aide, awaited him. Inside, Churchill raced up the stairway, with Mrs. Hill and the captain panting at his heels, and burst into his old lair, the first lord's office, known to those who had served under Winston between 1911 and 1915 as "the private office." Swiftly crossing the room, he "flung open a hidden panel," as Mrs. Hill put it, revealing "a secret situation map" on which he had last plotted the locations of Allied and enemy ships on that long-ago day when he had last worked here. "The ships," Mrs. Hill remembers, "were still there" — exactly as he had left them on May 22, 1915, when his daring Dardanelles strategy was, as he later wrote, "ruined irretrievably" by incompetent subordinates, and he himself was generally regarded as a ruined politician. Now, he reflected, "a quarter of a century had passed, and still mortal peril threatened us at the hands of the same nation. Once again defence of the rights of a weak state, outraged and invaded by unprovoked aggression, forced us to draw the sword. Once again we must fight for life and honour against the might and fury of the valiant, disciplined, and ruthless German race. Once again! So be it."¹

Churchill's early start at the Admiralty accomplished little; he was adrift in memories of the past — "filled with emotion," in the words of Rear Admiral Bruce Fraser, the third sea lord. That evening the first sea lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, introduced him to the senior men with whom he would be working, and in the boardroom Winston took the first lord's chair, as of old. Pound formally welcomed him; Churchill, according to one of the admirals, "replied by saying what a privilege and honour it was to be again in that chair. . . . He surveyed critically each of us in turn and then, adding that he would see us all personally later on, he adjourned the meeting. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'to your tasks and duties.'"

They left quietly. "Everybody," one of them later recalled, "realized what a wider responsibility he had" — his duties as a member of the War Cabinet and its Land Forces Committee, and his concern over the fighting in Poland and the strange lack of it in France.²

His original instinct had been correct; in the war at sea the early hours were crucial. Yet it is hard to see how anyone in the Admiralty could have prevented the war's first sea tragedy. When hostilities were declared late that morning, Admiral Karl Dönitz had thirty-nine U-boats cruising outside British seaports. One, the *U-30*, was lurking 250 miles off the Irish coast. At 7:45 P.M., as Pound was introducing Churchill to his fellow sea lords, the submarine's commander sighted the S.S. *Athenia*, no warship but an unarmed ocean liner carrying 1,103 passengers, most of them European refugees heading for asylum in the United States. Hitler had vetoed unrestricted submarine warfare in the early stages of the conflict, but the commander of the *U-30*, mistaking the liner for a British auxiliary cruiser, had torpedoed her. The 112 dead included 28 U.S. citizens. Two British destroyers and a Swedish yacht picked up the survivors, who signed affidavits testifying that the U-boat had circled the sinking steamship without offering assistance, though by then the sub's commander knew he had blundered. The Americans among them demanded transportation home shielded by a convoy of U.S. warships, which was not possible. Ambassador Kennedy sent his twenty-two-year-old son John F. Kennedy, a Harvard senior, to defuse their anger, reassure them, and find them safe passage to New York.

Hitler was indifferent to American public opinion, but Goebbels, as the Reich's minister of propaganda, could not be, particularly after Churchill publicly declared: "The *Athenia* was torpedoed without the slightest warning. She was not armed." Goebbels interrupted a Radio Berlin broadcast to call Churchill "*ein Lügenlord*" ("lying lord") and denied Nazi responsibility for the sinking, saying the only source for such reports was "your impudent lies, Herr Churchill, your infernal lies!" Learning that in English Winston's initials stood for what Germans called *Wasserklosett*, zealous Nazis painted them on latrines. Berlin announced that Churchill had personally ordered a bomb placed aboard the *Athenia*. "This falsehood," Winston noted, "received some credence in unfriendly quarters." In the House of Commons he said the passenger ship "was not defensively armed — she carried no guns and her decks had not even been strengthened for this purpose." He added that he had expressed his "profound sympathy with the relatives of those who may be bereaved by this outrage." Privately, he told the War Cabinet, "The occurrence should have a helpful effect as regards public opinion in the United States."³

* * *

He did not, however, expect a call from the White House. Nevertheless, in early October, while he was dining in Morpeth Mansions with two Admiralty guests, the phone rang, and a few moments later his valet-cum-butler entered to summon him. Churchill asked who was calling. "I don't know, sir," his man replied. "Well," said Winston, "say I can't attend to it now." To his surprise, the butler said: "I think you ought to come, sir." Annoyed, Churchill went, and it was his guests' turn to be perplexed, at his answers to his caller: "Yes, sir. . . . No, sir." One of them later recalled that there were "few people whom he would address as 'sir' and we wondered who on earth it could be. Presently he came back, much moved and said: 'Do you know who that was? The President of the United States. It is remarkable to think of being rung up in this little flat in Victoria Street by the President himself in the midst of a great war.' He excused himself, saying, 'This is very important. I must go and see the Prime Minister at once.'"⁴

Roosevelt had told him of a strange warning from Admiral Raeder, commander in chief of the Kriegsmarine. The *Grossadmiral* had informed the Americans that his agents had discovered a British plot: the U.S.S. *Iroquois*, which had sailed from Cork the day war was declared, would be sunk "in similar circumstances to the *Athenia*," which, according to the current Nazi line, meant by the Royal Navy, on Churchill's orders. The implication was that England would try to blame the Reich for the ship's loss and thus get the U.S. into the war. After consulting No. 10 and his sea lords, Churchill cabled the White House: "*Iroquois* is probably a thousand miles West of Ireland. . . . U-boat danger inconceivable in these broad waters. Only method can be time-bomb planted at Queenstown. We think this not impossible." Roosevelt agreed and warned the ship's commander, who quickly sought, and found, safe harbor. But a stern-to-stern search produced nothing. The British accused Germany of trying to spread propaganda against England, and Raeder was embarrassed. The truth is that despite all these hypotheses of Byzantine intrigue, no one in high position was to blame.⁵

The real significance of this minor contretemps was that Roosevelt had taken the initiative in establishing a bond with a belligerent power — despite official U.S. neutrality, a policy which enjoyed the overwhelming support of the American people — and had cooperated with the British to a remarkable degree, even following up the first lord's suggestion that the Germans might have smuggled a bomb aboard the ship. With few exceptions the British people, unfamiliar with U.S. politics and the mood of the American public, were unaware of how grave a political risk the president was taking. One British historian observes that from the outset

Roosevelt's idealism was clear-sighted. He was well aware that at least four out of five Americans were unwilling to be involved in what they saw as the Quarrel of European states, the very lands from which their ancestors had fled in search of freedom and prosperity. He was equally aware that the Nazi threat was of greater than local significance. . . . He was determined to spare nothing in his endeavors to sustain the West European democracies . . . and he had the vision to determine that whatever advice he might receive to the contrary from his Ambassador in London, Joseph P. Kennedy, Churchill was and would remain the standard bearer of resistance.⁶

In bypassing No. 10 Downing Street, the Foreign Office, and his own embassy in London, the president had established a direct tie with the only man, in his view, who could save Europe from Hitler. And since Roosevelt had made this extraordinary move entirely on his own, Churchill was the passive partner in the establishment of the most momentous relationship in his life. Of course, on their level each man was known to the other. Six years earlier, as a rapt admirer of FDR's New Deal, Winston had sent a copy of his first *Marlborough* volume to the White House, inscribed, on October 8, 1933: "With earnest best wishes for the success of the greatest crusade of modern times."⁷

Actually they had met once, at Gray's Inn, London, on July 29, 1918, when both were guests at a dinner for the War Cabinet, though Churchill — to FDR's annoyance — did not remember it. Roosevelt professed to have enjoyed Churchill's subsequent books, and, as noted earlier, he had read *While England Slept*, though the president rarely read anything except newspapers; he liked to learn the views of contemporary writers by inviting them to his home and listening to them. Considering Churchill's present responsibilities that was impractical now, but already Roosevelt was pondering ways to manage a rendezvous, the more dramatic the better. He never doubted he could do it. After overcoming his appalling paralysis to become the greatest figure in American political history, he felt he could do anything. If he wanted something, he reached for it. No president has ever had a broader reach, and now his hand was extended across the Atlantic.⁸

He knew he could buy peace for a generation of Americans, but the more he pondered the character of the regime in Berlin, the more convinced he became that the next U.S. generation would lie at Hitler's mercy. On September 1, as the Wehrmacht's panzer tracks chewed their way toward Warsaw, Phelps Adams of the *New York Sun* had asked FDR: "Can we stay out of it?" Privately, Roosevelt was doubtful, but after a long pause he had replied: "I not only sincerely hope so, but I believe we can,

and every effort will be made by this Administration to do so." This amounted to duplicity, but the president could not become a great wartime leader unless he won a third term the following year. If he were blunt now he would lose then. However, on Sunday, the day Britain entered the war, he had sounded an unmistakable knell. It was "easy for you and me to shrug our shoulders," he told his countrymen in a fireside chat, and to dismiss "conflicts thousands of miles from the continental United States" as irrelevant to Americans. But "passionately though we may desire detachment, we are forced to realize that every word that comes through the air, every ship that sails the seas, every battle that is fought does affect the American future." In 1914 Woodrow Wilson had told the Senate that the "United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name. . . . We must be impartial in thought as well as in action." FDR now declared that impossible: "The nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well. Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind and conscience."⁹

His own mind was open and his conscience at peace. In time his commitment would be clear to the entire world. He had already planned one of his bold, ingenious strokes, renouncing freedom of the seas for Americans. "Danger zones" would be proclaimed, and U.S. citizens and ships would be barred from them; there would be no *Lusitania* this time. The isolationism bloc could find no flaw in that. But if they mulled it over, they would see that the policy in effect gave a free hand to Britain and France, who were controlling the seas despite German submarines. A further step came in November 1939, when the U.S. Neutrality Act was amended to permit the sale of arms to belligerents on a cash-and-carry basis. Although theoretically applying equally to all, cash and carry in fact favored whoever dominated the seas; now the Allies could place large orders with American munitions manufacturers and then sail over to take delivery. The impact of cash and carry on the Reich would be anything but neutral, and the orders would mean thousands of jobs for Americans. In all events, FDR intended to intervene personally whenever he could help the democracies and hurt Hitler.¹⁰

If Roosevelt had judged him right, Churchill was the man with whom he could join hands. Even before his phone call to Morpeth Mansions, he had sent the Admiralty's first lord an overture via the American diplomatic pouch. Dated September 11 it began: "My dear Churchill: — It is because you and I occupied similar positions in the World War [FDR had been assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy] that I want you to know how glad I am that you are back again in the Admiralty." Winston — and of course Chamberlain, he added as an afterthought — should know that "I shall at all times welcome it, if you will keep me in touch personally with anything

you want me to know about," sending "sealed letters through your pouch or my pouch." The president ended gracefully, "I am glad you did the Marlborough volumes before this thing started — and I much enjoyed reading them."¹¹

To Winston, who had looked westward when the appeasers were looking to Berlin, this letter bore enormous implications. Laying it before the War Cabinet, he pointed out that the president, as commander in chief, controlled the movements of all American naval vessels and could "relieve the Royal Navy of a great load of responsibility." By executive order he could declare a safety belt around the Americas, which would make it impossible for the Germans to attack His Majesty's merchantmen "approaching, say, Jamaica or Trinidad, without risking hostilities with the United States." The War Cabinet approved his reply, the first of 1,688 exchanges between the two men. It opened, "The following from Naval Person," and that would continue to be his salutation until he took over the government of Great Britain, when he altered it to "former Naval Person."¹²

Now that he was first lord, Churchill saw no reason to alter his daily regimen. He knew that his late hours, a consequence of his siestas, were a trial for his subordinates. But most of them were career officers; they knew the need for sacrifices in wartime. He had followed the same schedule the first ten months of the last war, and the Admiralty had adjusted to it. He had been forty then; now, at sixty-five, he found the nap an absolute necessity, permitting him, he said, "to press a day and a half's work into one." Mary remembers that after an hour's rest he "awoke a giant refreshed." If he could work sixteen or seventeen hours a day, he reasoned, they could adjust to his eccentric hours. At one time or another all those officers directly under him tried to sleep in the early afternoon. Somehow they couldn't drift off. The only exception was the first sea lord. Pound developed a habit of sleeping while sitting bolt upright. The only difficulty was that it became involuntary. Winston would pace the private office, delivering precise, detailed instructions on a matter of considerable importance, only to discover that the Royal Navy's senior admiral of the fleet was, and for a time had been, dead to the world.¹³

Winston's typical Admiralty day began at six or seven in the morning and continued, broken only by his rest after lunch, through a two-hour evening conference and on until two or three the next morning. Of course, this was not Chartwell; his first visitor each morning was Captain Richard Pim, RN, arriving to brief the first lord on overnight developments in the war at sea. Pim always began by describing changes in the Admiralty's situation map. He did this slowly; Winston carried a rough map around in

his head, and he needed time to switch, say, the little flag for this cruiser from here to there, or to remove — with great satisfaction — the pin representing a Nazi U-boat sunk by a British destroyer. Should Winston ever be captured by the enemy and successfully interrogated, using torture or drugs, the results would be catastrophic for the navy. Therefore, he never left Admiralty House without his pistol and a suicide pill in his pen.

During the first week of the war, while the first lord and his lady stayed in Morpeth Mansions, the Office of Works converted the nurseries and attics on the two top floors of Admiralty House into a flat for them. Clementine decided to keep the gay chintz curtains, hung by Lady Diana Cooper during Duff Cooper's tenure as first lord, but transformed the rest, as Lady Diana discovered when she came calling. In her diary she wrote: "O what a change . . . from my day!" She mourned her bed, which "rose sixteen feet from a shoal of gold dolphins and tridents; ropes made fast the blue satin curtains; round the walls Captain Cook was discovering Australia. Now all has suffered a sea change. The dolphins are stored away and on a narrow curtainless pallet bed sleeps the exhausted First Lord. My gigantic gold-and-white armoire holds his uniform. The walls are charts."¹⁴

First in Morpeth Terrace and then Admiralty House, Pim had to do a bit of shouting to make himself heard while Winston splashed about in his bath. The new first lord was eager to leave Morpeth Mansions; he disliked sleeping so far from his maps, framed in wood and hung on the walls of Admiralty House's elegant, 217-year-old library, which overlooked the Horse Guards Parade. This became the upper war room, a floor beneath the flat, created by Pim as directed in one of Churchill's first wartime orders. It was soon the nerve center of the navy. The maps — covered with black cloth to hide them from unauthorized Admiralty personnel passing through — bore small pins with flags which identified the last known position of His Majesty's warships, convoys, enemy vessels which had been spotted, and — with the help of Lloyd's of London — all British merchantmen. Details were at the fingertips of the Prof, who occupied an office next to the war room.¹⁵

This was in Lloyd's interest. Submarines were not the only peril awaiting British ships which left home waters. German raiders also lurked over the horizon: enemy warships and armed steamships disguised as peaceful freighters. A British skipper spotting a tramp steamer in the South Atlantic could send the Admiralty a coded inquiry and, within minutes, receive a reply telling him whether the vessel was registered and, if so, her mission and whether she was supposed to be where she was. "If a Raider was reported in any specific area," Pim wrote in his unpublished memoirs, "we were able in a few minutes to say what British ships were in

the vicinity and what was their speed so that a wireless message could be sent ordering them, if necessary, to alter course to avoid the danger."¹⁶

Pim's assignment was formidable. Thousands of merchantmen flew the red ensign, feeding and arming England, and at any given moment at least half of them were at sea. Pim recalled how, when he believed the war room was ready, he sent word to the first lord. "Very good," said Churchill after inspecting it, "but the maps will all have to be replaced. When you know me better you will know that I only paint in pastel shades, and those strong colours under the lamps would give me and you a headache." Churchill required Pim and his staff to check the position of all known ships and convoys every twelve hours and replot them on the maps. The plotting was determined by a stream of signals, arriving around the clock, reporting losses of shipping to enemy attacks, details of attacks by Allied warships and aircraft, tonnage sunk by both sides, and graphs of imports arriving safely in England. If any signal of importance arrived after Winston was installed in his flat over the upper war room, Pim wrote,

a very few moments would elapse before he arrived in the War Room and was in complete possession of all the facts. I had always heard that he was an indefatigable worker and there is no other word to describe his activities. His day started with a visit in his multi-coloured dressing gown to the War Room generally soon after seven — although often it was a far earlier hour. . . . With the exception of about two hours' rest each afternoon he continued hard at it with a short respite for meals until one or two o'clock next morning when he used to pay us a final visit on his way to bed.¹⁷

The evening conference usually began at 9:00 P.M.; two hours later the first lord would start dictating speeches. ("Are you ready?" he might remark to his typist. "I'm feeling very fertile tonight.") The Prof would arrive in the private office around midnight, settle on a sofa in front of the fire, and remain until Churchill retired. Before bed Winston would tour the operational rooms in the basement — "terribly good for the naval staff," a private secretary recalls — and end his day with a final visit to the war room. Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, parliamentary secretary to the Admiralty, writes that once, well after midnight, Winston asked a secretary, "Where is the OIL?" Baffled, the secretary replied, "What OIL?" Churchill said: "I want Admiral the OIL" — he meant "Earl" — "of Cork and Orrery." Shakespeare adds: "It was nearly 3 A.M. We were dropping with fatigue."¹⁸

Although the King waited patiently in Buckingham Palace, ready to present the Admiralty's seals to his new first lord, Churchill did not kiss

hands until the third day after his appointment. He was far too busy. His prewar informants had kept him apprised of urgent naval issues, and as a critic of Anglo-German naval treaties, he had undertaken a detailed study of Raeder's new Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine (navy high command). But now he had to explore the whole of his new realm, launch projects, devise strategies, propose offensive operations, assign priorities, prepare defenses for the vast arsenal of challenges Raeder — after six years of planning aggressive naval war — was hurling at the Admiralty around the clock. Moreover, he had his other War Cabinet responsibilities, and was deeply involved in plans for the expansion of the army.

Nevertheless, if the Admiralty did not have his undivided attention, he gave it far more than any of Chamberlain's other ministers could have done. "His energy and stamina were prodigious," the historian Arthur Marder writes. "A stream of memoranda, virtually ultimata, issued from the Private Office covering every aspect of the war at sea and leaving the recipient in no doubt as to what the First Lord wanted." These memoranda became irreverently known as the First Lord's Prayers because they frequently opened with "Pray inform me . . ." or "Pray why has . . . not been done." Captain G. R. G. Allen recalls that the "one thing that remains firmly in my mind about Winston's arrival in the Admiralty was the immediate impact which his personality made on the staff at all levels, both service and civilian." Allen was among those who "began to receive little notes signed 'WSC' from the private office demanding weekly reports of progress direct to him. If the required report was a good one . . . one might get a reply in red ink: 'v.g. press on.' It was like the stone thrown in the pond, the ripples got out in all directions, galvanising people at all levels to 'press on' — and they did." He adds: "The same stimulation was at once felt in the fleet."¹⁹

The most fundamental source of conflict between Churchill and his staff would arise from polar opposites — his instincts and their traditional discipline. In peacetime the gravest sin a captain can commit is to lose his ship. If the vessel lost is a British or American warship, a court-martial is mandatory. Naval officers know that some ships must be lost in wartime, but their early training makes them cautious strategists, shrinking from risky plans and daring maneuvers. The battle of Jutland, in 1916, wasn't really a battle. On both sides the officers making the decisions were intent upon returning home with the fewest possible losses. Both succeeded — historians called Jutland a draw — because neither put up a real fight. If the man on the bridge believes, even on a subliminal level, that sinking is, for him, the ultimate disaster, he will remain secure in his command. He will also remain a cypher. Jellicoe and von Hipper, the commanders at Jutland, are forgotten. Nelson, Farragut, and Yamamoto

will be remembered as long as fighting men go down to the sea in ships.²⁰ Churchill loved risks and always sought ways to carry the war to the enemy. On the evening of his second day he again gathered his senior subordinates and subtly let them know, in a deceptively offhand talk, that his grasp of the Royal Navy was profound. His predecessor, the languid Lord Stanhope, had been a Gilbert and Sullivan first lord, celebrated for his ignorance of ships, of naval strategy, even of the sea. "Tell me," he once asked a sea lord, "what is a 'lee' *exactly*?" Winston's very language was nautical. He casually mentioned that after the naval treaties of 1930 and 1935, which he had opposed in Parliament, he had studied the design of the new German cruisers; and, as the admirals took notes, he reeled off figures and concise analyses of gunnery, engine room pressures, and keel design which would have been the envy of a flag officer lecturing at the Royal Naval College. He told them he was studying a convoy system to protect merchant shipping and was considering the laying of a mine barrage between Scotland and Norway; that he believed twelve destroyers could be "scraped" from other theaters for the Atlantic, where the enemy's "prime attack" could be expected, and that trawlers he had ordered reconditioned were being equipped with antisub devices, including Y-guns for firing depth charges. Since the Admiralty had assumed responsibility for the safety of merchantmen, they must faithfully follow zigzag courses to foil U-boats. Royal Navy officers would examine their logs and charts when they docked, and captains who had not zigzagged as instructed would be deprived of their papers. At present the war's big question mark was Italy. Her intentions were obscure. As long as they remained so, merchant shipping must avoid the Mediterranean by taking the long Cape route to India. But Mussolini could not drift forever. Churchill felt the Admiralty should "press" the government to bring the situation "to a head . . . as soon as possible." Rising, he said that "the First Lord submits these notes to his naval colleagues for consideration, *for criticism and correction*." He wanted them treated as bases for discussion, he explained, not as direct orders.²¹

Admiral Sir William M. James thought Churchill displayed a "remarkable grasp of sea warfare," and that this mastery was also evident "in the numerous minutes he wrote." These memoranda, which would grow in fame as the war progressed, were described by one of his staff officers. "The First Lord," he wrote, "devised special red labels with just three words printed on them: 'ACTION THIS DAY.' This ensured that any important document . . . would be dealt with at once, and the reply was expected to be on not more than 'one sheet of paper.'" Winston also stressed that instructions from him were to be obeyed only if he put them in writing, immediately or immediately thereafter.²²

During his years out of office, Churchill had, of course, been preoccupied with the widening gap between the Luftwaffe and the RAF. He had anticipated the need for an expanded army, and urged that plans be made to raise and equip one. The service which had troubled him least was the navy. It was still the most powerful fleet in the world, the "senior service" in an island nation which had dominated the high seas for over three centuries. When Stanley Baldwin, slashing naval estimates, had told Parliament that Britain's might at sea was an "expensive toy" and Churchill had rebuked him, for once in those lonely years he had heard an approving murmur of "Hear, hear" on both sides of the House. Winston had denounced the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, but its provision that the Nazi navy be permitted to build two warship tons for every seven built by Britain did not alarm the Royal Navy. Even the navies of other countries thought Admiralty hubris, though infuriating, was justified. On the first day of the new war Admiral Raeder had written that the Führer's Kriegsmarine was "in no way" prepared "for the great struggle with Great Britain." He thought his surface forces were "so inferior in number and strength to those of the British fleet" that they "can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly"; and "*die U-bootwaffe*" — the submarine arm — was "still much too weak to have any *decisive* effect on the war."²³

German admirals had always suffered from an inferiority complex; in their country the army was the senior service. But Hitler knew how dependent England was upon imports, and how close she had been brought to her knees in 1917, nearly starved into submission by German submarines lying athwart Britain's sea lanes and sinking all ships approaching England, regardless of nationality. To Birger Dahlerus he swore that he would create a great *U-bootwaffe* and destroy first the Royal Navy and then the merchant ships flying the red ensign. When the Swede looked skeptical, the Führer had given history one of its unforgettable moments. Flinging out his right arm and striking his breast with his left, he had cried: "Have I ever told a lie in my life?"²⁴

If the Führer's confidant and the head of his navy expected little from the Reich's forces at sea, it is unsurprising that England's peril there was unknown to Churchill. He wasn't even aware of Germany's new naval strength. Here his intelligence had failed him. In the early summer of 1934 Hitler had given secret orders for the construction of the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, battle cruisers of 26,000 tons, exceeding by 16,000 tons the limit imposed on Germany at Versailles. By 1939 the yards at Kiel and

Bremen had built three battleships, eight heavy cruisers, an aircraft carrier, thirty-four destroyers and torpedo boats, and, at Krupp's Germania shipyard, the first litter of the Kriegsmarine's newly designed U-boats, vastly improved over those of the last war. Two vessels of particular interest to *Jane's Fighting Ships*, the celebrity register of warships, were the *Graf Spee* and the *Deutschland*. The Germans called them *Panzerschiffe* (armored ships); to *Ausländer* they were "pocket battleships."

The *Panzerschiffe* were masterpieces of miniaturization. Powered by diesel engines, which gave them a range of 21,500 miles, each carried six eleven-inch guns and was capable of a 28-knot top speed. In the view of *Jane's*, they were mightier than almost any warship fast enough to overtake them. Moreover, at the outbreak of the war shifts of German shipbuilders were working around the clock to finish a battle cruiser, two battleships with tonnages of 41,700 — British, French, and American capital ships were limited to 35,000 tons — and the *Bismarck*, a superbattlewagon of 45,000 tons. Some military experts thought that in challenging Britain's naval superiority, the Führer was repeating the kaiser's mistake. They underestimated him. The British Admiralty's classic strategy had been the blockade. It had defeated Napoleon and the kaiser. The German counter to this was to sink ships provisioning Britain. Their argument was that sinkings were no more monstrous than a blockade which starved German children — they never answered the charge that leaving the survivors of the ships they sank to drown was another matter — and in any event they intended to launch torpedoes whenever they thought the loss of a target vessel would hurt England.²⁵

One would have expected that the Royal Navy, after its harrowing duel with German submarines in the last war, would have been alert for signs that the Nazis were plotting a rematch. But all British naval glory seemed to lie in the past, and not the recent past. During the interwar years the sea lords had been refighting, not Jutland, but Trafalgar. They still glowed in anticipation of battles between ships of the line, firing broadsides that raked the enemy's decks and maneuvering to cross his T. The U-boat threat, they assured their civilian superiors, had been solved by surface ships in 1918, and, besides, they had a new secret weapon. This was the asdic, "the name," Churchill wrote, for "the system of groping for submarines below the surface by means of sound waves through the water which echoed back from any steel structure they met. From this echo the position of the submarine could be fixed with some accuracy." Lord Chatfield, the first sea lord, had driven him to Portland for a demonstration on June 15, 1938. Afterward Winston wrote excitedly, "I could see and hear the whole process, which was the sacred treasure of the Admiralty." He wrote Chatfield: "What surprised me was the clarity and force of the [asdic]

indications. I had imagined something almost imperceptible, certainly vague and doubtful. I never imagined that I should hear one of those creatures asking to be destroyed. It is a marvellous system and achievement."²⁶

It wasn't, not then. Later versions, which Americans came to know as sonar, fulfilled the promise of the primitive device Churchill saw and would prove valuable antisub weapons, but during Churchill's tenure as first lord the asdic was almost worthless. The clarity with which he had heard its unmistakable "ping" derived from the fact that its target subs were far from the transmitter. The shorter the range, the weaker the ping, and if a U-boat approached within fifteen hundred yards — the lethal range for torpedoes — the asdic signal was lost completely. U-boat commanders could hear the ping, too, and they would quickly learn how to take evasive action and approach at a deadlier angle. These problems challenged the most experienced asdic operators, of which there were very few in 1939; in the opening phase of the war at sea the transmitter-receivers would be in the hands of civilians who had been rushed through a three-month training course and assigned a task they simply could not grasp. Finally, the asdic could only be operated underwater. Admiral Karl Dönitz, a heroic submariner in the last war and now *Befehlshaber der U-boote*, simply ordered his commanders to attack at night from the surface. In the Royal Navy the asdic would be discredited, and its return to favor, like Churchill's, came slowly.

Dönitz, who knew the weaknesses of 1918 U-boats from personal experience — his had been sunk in the Mediterranean, and he had escaped drowning only to serve ten months of POW imprisonment — had devoted the 1920s to designing a tougher, more versatile underwater vessel. Ten days after the Anglo-German pact became effective in 1935 he had launched his new *U-7* from a tightly guarded shed in the Kiel shipyard. Unlike its predecessors, the *U-7* was equipped with heavy-duty batteries, which meant she could hide underwater for a much longer time. Of even greater importance was the revolutionary design of her torpedoes. Electrically powered, they left no telltale wakes, and each bore a magnetic firing mechanism which exploded it directly under the target vessel's keel, where a ship is most vulnerable.

If he had a fleet of a hundred U-boats, Dönitz believed, he could paralyze England by waging what he called a "tonnage war" — sinking all merchantmen carrying cargoes to England, whatever flag they flew. And with three hundred of them, organized in "wolf packs," he could sink over 700,000 tons of shipping a month in the Atlantic, even if the merchantmen sailed in convoys, escorted by warships. Events later in the war proved he could have done it in the first year of hostilities, but Dönitz was plagued

by Hitler's chimerical moods and by interservice rivalry. Despite his vow to Dahlerus, the Führer blew hot and cold on submarine warfare. Yet sinking ships, particularly when civilians were aboard, appealed to the broad nihilist streak in him, and in that regard he found the reasoning of his *Befehlshaber der U-boote* flawless. In that last meeting with Dahlerus he had screamed: "*Ich U-boote bauen, U-boote bauen, U-boote, U-boote, U-boote, U-boote!*" ("I shall build U-boats, build U-boats, U-boats, U-boats, U-boats, U-boats!")²⁷

Had he followed through and given Dönitz his three hundred submarines, it is hard to see how England could have avoided starvation. But the *Kriegsherr* liked the idea of powerful warships flying the swastika even more; when they sailed into European ports they contributed to the Third Reich's intimidating image. Furthermore, the senior admirals in Berlin, as in London, preferred to envision battles between surface ships, with enormous battleships trying to huff and puff and blow their enemies into submission. So Hitler let Britain's misfortune slip from his hands.

Even so, the war on the Atlantic shipping lanes opened with a series of savage, unexpected jolts for Britain. In the first week eleven merchantmen — 65,000 tons of shipping — were sunk, half the weekly losses of April 1917, the peak month of U-boat attacks that year, when England's Admiral John Jellicoe confided in his American counterpart that one freighter in four was going down, there was six weeks' supply of corn in the country, and he expected an Allied surrender by November 1. By the end of September 1939, twenty-six ships had been sunk by torpedoes. The fighting at sea, Churchill told the House of Commons on September 26, had "opened with some intensity," but, he assured the House: "By the end of October we expect to have three times the hunting force which was operating at the beginning of the war."²⁸

At the same time, he felt he ought to inform Parliament that German *Schrecklichkeit* had reared its loathsome head. The Royal Navy had scrupulously observed the "long acquired and accepted traditions of the sea." When the RN sank enemy vessels, their crews were picked up. Even when German ships had deliberately sunk themselves to avoid the formalities of the prize court, the Royal Navy had rescued their crews, and no ship flying the flag of a neutral nation had been attacked. "The enemy, on the other hand," said Churchill, had behaved very differently; in their zeal to prevent supplies from reaching England, the Nazis had torpedoed Finnish, Dutch, Swedish, Greek, Norwegian, and Belgian vessels "on the high seas, in an indiscriminate manner, and with loss of life." Churchill acknowledged that "from time to time the German U-boat commanders have tried their best to behave with humanity. . . ." But many cruel and ruthless sea crimes had been committed. They all remembered the *Athenia*.

Her "tragic end" had been followed by the loss of the *Royal Sceptre*, "whose crew of 32 were left in open boats hundreds of miles from land and are assumed to have perished. Then there was the *Hazelside* — only the day before yesterday — twelve of whose sailors were killed by surprise gunfire, in an ordinary merchant ship." His Majesty's Government "cannot at all recognize this type of warfare . . . as other than a violation of the laws of war, to which the Germans themselves have in recent years so lustily subscribed." Such, he said, "is the U-boat war — hard, widespread and bitter, a war of groping and drowning, a war of ambush and stratagem, a war of science and seamanship."²⁹

Speaking over the BBC a few days later, he described the first U-boat onslaught — how "they sprang out upon us as we were going about our ordinary business with two thousand ships in constant movement . . . upon the seas," and how, in consequence, "they managed to do some serious damage." But Britain was meeting the challenge with a threefold response: convoys, the arming of merchantmen and fast liners, and, "of course," the "British attack upon the U-boats." The *Athenia* had scarcely disappeared beneath the waves when "the Royal Navy . . . immediately attacked the U-boats and is hunting them night and day — I will not say without mercy, for God forbid we should ever part company with that — but at any rate with zeal and not altogether without relish."³⁰

His voice vibrated with confidence, but in fact he was uneasy. Because the navy occupied a special place in the hearts of Englishmen, the Exchequer's knife, which had slashed so deeply into War Office and Air Ministry budgets in the 1930s, had been relatively gentle with Admiralty estimates. But since prime ministers, Fleet Street, and the public had been united in their scorn for all uniformed men, morale had slumped throughout the services. At the docks, ports, and naval bases Churchill inspected, he saw tarnished brass, scuffed shoes, and sagging coils of rope — insignificant in themselves but symptomatic of an institutional *défaillance*. If Nelson had relied on men like these he would have lost the battles of the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar, and Napoleon would have galloped up the Mall at the head of his *vieille garde* to demand the palace keys.

Nor was the fleet the force-in-being Churchill had ruled a quarter-century earlier. All that had been needed to keep it supreme had been hospitality to innovative ideas, supported by simple maintenance. The one new concept which both he and his admirals largely rejected was the enormous limits air power now placed on sea power. In all her wars till now, England had been able to control an island simply by stationing a warship offshore, or bottling up the enemy by sending a flotilla to bar a strategic strait. The kaiser's *Kriegsmarine*, for example, had been confined

to the Baltic Sea during most of the last war because British warships had guarded the Skagerrak, the narrows separating the Baltic from the North Sea, thus keeping Germany from, among other possible objectives, the long coast of Norway. But if the fleet was vulnerable to Luftwaffe bombers, which the Admiralty would not concede, German ships could no longer be denied passage through the Skagerrak. Under an umbrella of Nazi planes, they could steam through unchallenged. Because the first lord and his sea lords would not fully accept this in 1939, within eight months the lesson would be forced upon them, and at a bitter price.

Maintenance was another matter. It seemed inconceivable that equipment vital to the navy should have been permitted to rust away, but that had happened. The sea lords blamed the small Admiralty appropriations under MacDonald, Baldwin, and Chamberlain. That wasn't good enough. During the 1930s their budgets had been large enough to build five new battleships, six aircraft carriers, and nineteen heavy cruisers. They just let small matters slide. In the first war Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, trying to console Winston in the dark hour of his dismissal from the Admiralty, had reminded him of his thorough preparations for the war. "There is one thing at any rate they cannot take from you," K of K had said. "The fleet was ready." This time, Churchill was discovering, the fleet was not.³¹

On the evening of September 15 he boarded a London train with Bracken, Sinclair, and Lieutenant Commander C. R. ("Tommy") Thompson, the first lord's flag commander. Their destination was Scotland and the sea anchorage of England's Home Fleet — the sea basin of Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. There, if anywhere, the Royal Navy should be buttoned up. Later he recalled how "on two or three occasions" in the autumn of 1914, most memorably on October 17, "the alarm was given that there was a U-boat inside the anchorage. Guns were fired, destroyers thrashed the waters, and the whole gigantic armada put out to sea in haste and dudgeon." Scapa was that important.³²

Anxiety over the sea basin had returned, and this time the threat was real. In his lap lay a locked box of secret documents, among them a shocking report from the Chiefs of Staff Committee revealing that Scapa's defenses would not be ready until the spring of 1940. Arriving, he called on Sir Charles Forbes, the commander in chief, aboard H.M.S. *Nelson*, the admiral's flagship. Sir Charles confirmed that the basin's entrance channels were "not properly netted." The old steel webs had rusted, rotted, broken up, and drifted away. Winston immediately issued an order, stamped "urgent," calling for nets, booms, blockships (sunken ships barring entrance channels), anti-aircraft guns, patrol craft, balloons, and searchlights. Until they were in place Scapa was insecure, an inviting target for daring German submarine commanders.³³

And U-boat *Kapitän*s, so successful in sinking merchantmen, were now turning their periscopes toward Britain's ships of war. The enemy had actually laid a minefield across the mouth of the Thames, disabling one warship. After a second RN ship was sunk, the government, worried about civilian morale, had suppressed news of the loss. Two days before Churchill entrained for Scotland a U-boat had fired a salvo of torpedoes at H.M.S. *Ark Royal*, an aircraft carrier; they missed, and the carrier's destroyer escort sank the sub, but it was disquieting to know that Dönitz's vessels were lurking in British waters, capable of striking one of His Majesty's capital ships at any hour.

Indeed, it happened while Churchill was slumbering aboard H.M.S. *Nelson*, as he learned the next day. He and his party returned from Inverness to London aboard an overnight sleeper, and "as we got out at Euston," Winston wrote, "I was surprised to see the First Sea Lord on the platform. Admiral Pound's look was grave. 'I have some bad news for you, First Lord. The *Courageous* was sunk yesterday in the Bristol Channel.' " The ship had been an aircraft carrier, "a very necessary ship at this time," as Churchill wrote, and Bristol Channel, lying between South Wales and Somerset, was very close to home. Churchill told Pound, "We can't expect to carry on a war like this without these sorts of things happening from time to time. I have seen lots of this before." But within he was seething. He knew there would be questions in the House of Commons. To bring unconvoyed merchantmen into port he had been using carriers as escorts. *Courageous* had been attended by four destroyers, but two of them had been detached to hunt a Nazi submarine elsewhere. As the carrier turned into the wind to receive her aircraft, another U-boat *Kapitän* ran up his periscope and saw her naked flank in his cross hairs. He emptied his torpedo tubes and 518 Englishmen drowned, including the captain, who chose, as captains in those days did, to go down with his ship.³⁴

Churchill's anxiety over Scapa Flow continued and mounted after His Majesty's Government spurned a peace feeler from Hitler. The offer had reached London via Birger Dahlerus. In Göring's presence, the Führer had proposed that a British representative — Ironside's name was mentioned — meet Göring "in some neutral country." Halifax on October 5 told the War Cabinet that "We should not absolutely shut the door"; Hoare suggested that Britain "damp down" her "anti-Göring propaganda"; Kingsley Wood also thought Göring the man to back, because "he would be glad to secure the removal of Herr Hitler." They had learned nothing, could not grasp the strength of the Führer's hold on his people, did not realize that the life expectancy of any German who moved against him would be measured in minutes. Churchill swiftly disposed of their arguments. If the overture was insincere its "real object might be to spread

division and doubt amongst us"; if sincere, it had been inspired "not from any sense of magnanimity, but from weakness." The war, he suggested, might not be so popular in Germany as Goebbels insisted. On October 12 Chamberlain rejected the Nazi approach in the House. Winston had written the firmer parts of his speech, and afterward he told Pound that "one must expect a violent reaction from Herr Hitler. Perhaps quite soon." He ordered "special vigilance," suggested that "the Fleet at Scapa should be loose and easy in its movements," and concluded: "Pray let me know anything else you think we can do, and how best to have everything toned up to concert pitch. The next few days are full of danger."³⁵

Danger appeared outside Scapa Flow at seven o'clock the following evening in the form of *U-47*, commanded by a thirty-one-year-old Dönitz protégé, Lieutenant Commander Günther Prien. In the first war, Dönitz knew, two U-boats had attempted to penetrate the deep, almost landlocked basin, and neither had returned. But studying aerial photographs of the anchorage, Dönitz reached the conclusion that an adroit navigator could thread his way past the three sunken ships meant to block Holm Sound.

Prien was his best U-boat *Kapitän*, and he almost failed. It took him nearly six hours to do it — at one point he seemed hopelessly ensnarled in a cable from one of the blockships — but at 12:30 on the morning of October 14 he was inside the basin. Dead ahead, at four thousand yards, lay the battleship *Royal Oak*. His first salvo missed, but the second time his spread of four torpedoes exploded in concert, mortally wounding the capital ship. In his log Prien wrote: "There is a loud explosion, roar and rumbling. Then come columns of water, followed by columns of fire, and splinters fly through the air." Thirteen minutes later *Royal Oak* rolled on her side and sank, carrying with her 833 officers and men, among them their captain and the rear admiral commanding the Second Battle Squadron.³⁶

"Poor fellows, poor fellows," Churchill said when told, "trapped in those black depths." He wept, then thought of the unknown submariner's achievement and murmured: "What a wonderful feat of arms." It was not so wonderful for him, however. He "understood," he wrote, "how First Lords of the Admiralty are treated when great ships are sunk and things go wrong. If we were in fact going over the same cycle a second time, should I have once again to endure the pangs of dismissal? Fisher, Wilson, Battenberg, Jellicoe, Beatty, Pakenham, Sturdee, all gone!" He set down some lines of the nineteenth-century Irish poet Thomas Moore:

*I feel like one
Who treads alone
Some banquet hall deserted,
Whose lights are fled,*

*Whose garlands dead,
and all but he departed.*³⁷

Hoare wrote His Majesty's ambassador in Washington: "Winston has been through some rough moments over the Scapa incidents. Being for the moment the war hero, he has come through it fairly well. I shudder to think what would have happened had there been another First Lord and he had been in Opposition." Exactly. Chamberlain could hardly dismiss the chief critic of the prewar governments which had been responsible for Scapa's vulnerability; the whole country knew that Winston bore no responsibility for the peacetime Royal Navy. Nevertheless, he took the setback personally, and took it hard. In the House he tried to balance the loss against the number of U-boats the navy had destroyed, but the books wouldn't balance. Germany's submarines were expendable; British warships were her lifeline. After informing the War Cabinet that the Home Fleet was being moved to the Clyde estuary in southwest Scotland as a "temporary disposition" prior to a move into an east coast base, Rosyth, he declared that the loss of the *Royal Oak*, "though an extremely regrettable disaster, does not materially affect the general naval position."³⁸

It did, though. Germany was jubilant, Hitler ecstatic, Lieutenant Commander Prien a national hero. Even William L. Shirer was impressed, writing in his diary that the British battleship had been sunk in "the middle of Scapa Flow, Britain's greatest naval base!" Dönitz had scored a coup for *U-boote*. At the outset of hostilities the Führer had instructed U-boats to conform to the Hague Convention, which prohibited attacks without warning on enemy passenger and merchant ships. Prien's achievement opened Hitler's eyes to the possibilities of submarines and their lethal torpedoes. On October 16 Grossadmiral Raeder, speaking in Hitler's name, formally announced that "All merchant ships definitely recognized as enemy can be torpedoed without warning." So, it developed, could those flying neutral flags — except those of the United States — if their destinations were English ports. Neutral shipping had been sunk before, inadvertently or by reckless commanders. Now it was Kriegsmarine policy.³⁹

All the billboards urging Englishmen to "Talk Victory" seemed to mock the Admiralty, and Clementine Churchill wrote her sister Nellie at Chartwell: "The war news is grim beyond words. One must fortify oneself by remembering that whereas the Germans are (*we hope*) at their peak, we have only just begun. Winston works night & day — He is well Thank God & gets tired only when he does not get 8 hours sleep — He does not need it at a stretch but if he does not get that amount in the 24 then he gets weary."⁴⁰

* * *

England needed, not talk of victory, but the real thing. Any bright news would almost have to come from the high seas; there was no fighting, nor the prospect of any, on land or in the air. So out of this nettle, frustration, the navy must pluck this flower, triumph. The issue was not merely civilian morale. Captain Pim's maps told a sad tale, growing gloomier as autumn waned. Britain's loss of shipping would approach 745,000 tons by spring — over two hundred vessels. On November 21 H.M.S. *Belfast*, a new cruiser just launched, was gravely damaged by a mine in the Firth of Forth; two days later the British merchant cruiser *Rawalpindi*, armed with only four six-inch guns, was destroyed by the *Scharnhorst*, which then returned safely home with her sister ship, *Gneisenau*. But the Admiralty's greatest worry lay in the South Atlantic, where the pocket battleship *Graf Spee* was running amok. There, on the hundredth day of the war, an England famished for glory was about to be fed.

During the first weeks of the war Hitler had held back his fast, lethal *Panzerschiffe*, hoping to impose his peace terms upon a dispirited England. Once it became clear that His Majesty's Government meant to stay the course, he unleashed them as surface raiders. Of his two pocket battleships, *Deutschland* proved a disappointment. She was recalled after sinking only two merchantmen, one a neutral, and capturing a third, the U.S. freighter *City of Flint*, a prize Hitler did not need. *Flint* became the eye of a diplomatic storm which ended only after a Norwegian vessel intercepted her and returned her to her American crew. The tale of *Graf Spee* was very different, however. Commanded by Hans Langsdorff, a gallant, Wilhelmine anachronism, *Spee* had sent nine British cargo ships to the bottom without the loss of a single German life.

His adversary now was Commodore Henry Harwood, RN, and His Majesty's South Atlantic Fleet. Finding a single ship in so broad a vastness was almost impossible, but it was also crucial; *Graf Spee* was not only terrorizing merchant captains; the hunt for her was tying down over twenty Allied warships badly needed elsewhere, among them the carrier *Ark Royal*, the battle cruiser *Renown*, and the French battleship *Strasbourg*. Harwood believed that sooner or later Langsdorff would be irresistibly drawn to the fat, rich merchantmen emerging from the broad estuary of the River Plate, bound for England. He was right. Unfortunately, when the *Spee* hove into view at 5:52 on the morning of December 13, Harwood's force was no match for her. His heavyweights were elsewhere, too far to be recalled in time. He commanded three vessels: the British heavy cruiser *Exeter*, with six eight-inch guns; and two light cruisers, *Ajax* (his flagship) and the New Zealand *Achilles*, with six-inchers. The range of the German battleship's eleven-inchers was fifteen miles.

The commodore had issued a standing order to all RN vessels in the South Atlantic; should they find a Nazi battleship they were to "attack at once by day or night." Now, after scattering his small command so that Langsdorff would confront warships from three different directions, he sent *Exeter* racing toward Langsdorff at flank speed, 33 knots. Because the enemy was lunging forward at 28 knots, the two vessels were approaching one another at 50 miles an hour. *Ajax* and *Achilles* were also pouring it on, but *Exeter* was the first to come within range of Langsdorff's guns, and moments after she did, a 670-pound shell killed the crew manning the starboard torpedo tubes and crippled both communications and the ship's gun control.

But *Exeter* kept closing. Her gunners had just straddled the German ship when another huge shell demolished the wheelhouse and tore away one of the British gun turrets. Still she continued to close. The captain, though wounded, took a compass from one of the lifeboats and organized a line of tars to relay his orders to the helmsman abaft, where the strongest men in the crew, straining aching muscles, turned the cruiser's rudder by hand. They did it, to no avail; two more German shells hit the *Exeter*, one tearing up the deck and gouging out a huge gash on a flank, just above the waterline, while the other left a gaping wound in her port flank. Several fires had broken out in the ship; she was enveloped in smoke; fifty-one seamen lay dead. But *Exeter* had done her job, for *Ajax* and *Achilles* now had the *Panzerschiffe*. They were within range, their gunners were skilled veterans, and their six-inch shells were riddling the *Graf Spee*. After ninety minutes of continuous combat, with the pocket battleship swinging about, trying to decide which of the three attackers threatened her most, Harwood ordered his captains to make smoke and break off action.

The mauled *Exeter* headed for the Falkland Islands and repair. *Ajax* and *Achilles* were less battered, though the captain of the *Achilles* had been wounded in both legs and *Ajax's* after gun turrets had been knocked out. The real loser, however, was Langsdorff. He himself had been hit by one British shell; his casualty list included thirty-seven men killed in action. His ship was a wreck. She had been hit eighteen times. Gaping holes had been opened in the deck and both flanks, several guns no longer functioned, her galleys were ruined, and she was almost out of ammunition. A voyage home was out of the question; even if unchallenged she could never make it. Repairs were essential. He limped into neutral — but anti-Nazi — Uruguay and asked for two weeks to put his ship in shape. He was given seventy-two hours. *Ajax* and *Achilles*, he knew, would be radioing for reinforcements. He did what he thought was sensible. His men were given berths on German freighters in the port, his ship was scuttled, and he himself, after wrapping himself in an old banner of

imperial Germany — *not* the Nazi swastika — shot himself. He left a note: "For a captain with a sense of honor, it goes without saying that his personal fate cannot be separated from that of his ship."

The Royal Navy's triumph, wrote Churchill, "gave intense joy to the British nation and enhanced our prestige throughout the world. The spectacle of the three smaller British ships unhesitatingly attacking and putting to flight their far more heavily gunned and armoured antagonist was everywhere admired." His youngest daughter remembers: "It was a glorious victory, and brought a gleam of light into a dark December." Harwood was knighted and made an admiral. The sea lords proposed to leave *Exeter* in the Falklands, unrepaired, until the end of the war, but Winston would have none of it. Instead, he proposed to bring Sir Henry and his British ships home. He had not exaggerated the country's elation; acclaiming the heroes would guarantee their remembrance and give civilian morale a badly needed lift.⁴¹

By now Churchill had established his authority over the Admiralty. "Conveniently forgotten," one historian writes, was "his role in scaling down the navy's cruiser-building programme when Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1924-29. Remembered was his experience of the Admiralty, his love of the sea and the navy, his deep knowledge of the role of sea power in British history, and his reputation for getting things done." His weakness was his love of gadgetry and wildly improbable schemes. Admiral J. H. Godfrey notes: "Anything unusual or odd or dramatic intrigued him: Q ships, dummy ships, the stillborn operation 'Catherine' (of this, more presently), 'deception, sabotage, and, no doubt influenced by Professor Lindemann, the application of novel scientific methods.'⁴²

In retrospect some of his projects seem absurd. "White Rabbit Number 6," as he called it, was a "trench-cutting tank," capable of excavating an earthwork six feet deep and three feet wide at a rate of one mile an hour. Weighing 130 tons, standing eight feet tall, and stretching eighty feet long, it was to be used at night, penetrating the enemy's lines and taking him by surprise. The cabinet approved it; no one seems to have asked how surprise could be achieved by a device whose noise would be deafening. At the Admiralty, according to Godfrey, these schemes were regarded as outlets for the first lord's "demonic energy and extraordinary imagination," and generally tolerated, though some were considered "offensive." One pet project was an antiaircraft device which he called the Naval Wire Barrage (NWB). It looked like a large umbrella stand. In reality it was a multiple launcher into which were crammed fourteen three-inch projectiles, each carrying two thousand feet of wire with a small parachute at one end and a two-pound bomb at the other. Once the launcher had been rocketed aloft, the projectiles

would be ejected at four thousand feet downward, their descent slowed by the parachutes. If an aircraft struck a wire, the bomb would be drawn upward and explode when it hit the plane's wing. It was the Prof's idea. Churchill thought NWBs marvelous, and despite his Ordnance Department's advice he ordered forty of the ungainly contraptions mounted on forty RN ships. They proved worthless. Rear Admiral R. D. Nicholls puts it bluntly: "The NWB was considered by everyone except Winston as plain crazy." Then he takes the larger view: "It was just part of the price — and not a very high one — that had to be paid to keep Winston going. Without him Britain and the Free World were sunk."⁴³

In fact, as the war progressed, many of his ideas were to generate highly useful innovations: "Window" (strips of tinfoil dropped by bombers to confuse enemy radar), "Pluto" (a pipeline under the Channel), "Gee" (a device for guiding pilots), and "Mulberry" (the artificial harbors used in the D day invasion of Hitler's Europe).

What was needed now was a concept, a device, *something* that would make submarining so dangerous that Karl Dönitz would be walking the Kurfürstendamm looking for a job. Thus far, nothing had been found that surpassed the last war's answer to the U-boat, the destroyer. Unfortunately, the Royal Navy was incredibly short of destroyers — and the prospects for more were dim. "It is most disconcerting," Winston wrote Rear Admiral Fraser at the start of the war, "that we only get six destroyers in the present year, then no more for nine months, and only three more in the whole of 1940. Nine destroyers in sixteen months," he declared, "cannot possibly be accepted." Later, in his memoirs, he wrote: "Destroyers were our most urgent need, and also our worst feature."⁴⁴

Here was a void that wanted filling. He hadn't forgotten the Nazi peril in the sky, so he called for the design and mass production of an "anti-submarine and anti-air vessel," built with "the greatest simplicity of armament and equipment" to free the few destroyers in commission for duty elsewhere. The ships he had in mind, he wrote in an Admiralty memorandum, "will be deemed 'Cheap and Nasties' (cheap to us, nasty to the U-boat)." Because they would be "built for a particular but urgent job," they would be useless once their mission was accomplished. Not to worry; the important thing was to "get the job done." The Prof, now working full time at the Admiralty, told him modern warfare could certainly be nasty, but never inexpensive. The *Unterseeoffiziere* threat would continue to grow. The Admiralty would have to fight back with its very thin line of destroyers.⁴⁵

Most senior naval officers who worked with Winston allude to this quintessential Victorian trait — the late Victorians believed inventors could accomplish anything, and in the world of their limited imagination they were right. Yet these same officers had exaggerated claims for asdic before

Winston saw or heard it. And he and the Prof (whom the admirals had come to detest) *did* contribute to technological warfare. One early contribution was Britain's effective response to the magnetic mine. Here Churchill revealed the double standard found in all warriors; a weapon is admirable if his side has found it first, despicable if found first by the enemy. In a memorandum to Inskip a year earlier, he suggested that disabling the Kiel Canal would be a prime objective in any war with the Reich, and recommended that "*special fuses with magnetic actuation*" be considered. But while the British were still studying the problem, the Germans solved it. In the first weeks of the war their magnetic mines, dropped by parachute in shallow waters of channels and harbors and activated when a ship passed over them, became a nightmare for merchantmen.⁴⁶

Winston was outraged. The "Nahrzees" (he was working on that idiosyncratic delivery, and each time, he came closer to making "Nazi" sound like an unspeakably vulgar moist petard) had stolen his idea. Briefly he persuaded himself that the device itself was criminal. The new mines, he said, were "contrary to the accepted rules of sea warfare," and he told the House of Commons: "This is about the lowest form of warfare that can be imagined. It is the warfare of the I.R.A., leaving the bomb in the parcels' office at the railway station. The magnetic mine . . . may perhaps be Herr Hitler's much vaunted secret weapon. It is certainly a characteristic weapon, and one that will no doubt be for ever associated with his name." Lacking a specimen of the mine, no counter could be devised. Then, as Churchill wrote, "fortune . . . favoured us." The night of November 22 a Nazi plane was seen dropping a large object, attached to a parachute, into the mud of the Thames estuary off Shoeburyness. Before dawn two RN officers skilled in underwater weapons retrieved the device, which, as suspected, turned out to be a magnetic mine. Here the Prof intervened, devising a method of demagnetizing ships by girdling them with an electric coil — degaussing, as it is called. Before the winter was out, Winston had his own magnetic mines and had forwarded a plan to sow the Rhine with ten thousand fluvial mines, only to have it vetoed in the spring by the French, who feared Nazi reprisals.⁴⁷

Franklin Roosevelt later said: "Winston has fifty ideas a day, and three or four are good." He was no crank; when he hit the jackpot it was the mother lode. Although the Germans were the first to produce the magnetic mine, their very success demonstrated that his conception had been sound. Most of his schemes were politely discussed and then dropped. The difficulty was that his Admiralty staff was dealing with genius, with a man who thought in cosmic terms, and that the price for some of these excursions was beyond the grasp of career naval officers.

So it was with "Catherine," named after Catherine the Great, "because," he explained, "Russia lay in the background of my thought." Churchill introduced this proposed operation to his closest advisers in a five-page outline on September 12, Britain's tenth day at war. Unlike the rest of the Admiralty, Churchill had stopped speculating over where the Kriegsmarine would strike next and instead considered a Royal Navy counteroffensive. Thinking defensively, his admirals had assumed that if they could keep U-boat sinkings of Britain-bound merchantmen to a minimum and blockade enemy ports, they would have done their job, leaving it up to the soldiers to do theirs. But the first lord was taking a very different line. He was talking about a naval strategy which had never entered their minds, and as he talked, they wished it hadn't entered his. The command of the Baltic Sea, as he later pointed out in his memoirs, was "vital to the enemy. Scandinavian supplies, Swedish ore, and above all protection against Russian descents on the long undefended northern coastline of Germany — in one place little more than a hundred miles from Berlin — made it imperative for the German Navy to dominate the Baltic." Moreover, as he had noted earlier, an "attack upon the Kiel Canal" would render "that side-door from the Baltic useless, even if only at intervals."⁴⁸

Churchill was contemplating an imaginative — and perilous — action: the seizure of the entire Baltic, the Reich's only sea link with Norway, Finland, and especially Sweden, the Ruhr's chief source of iron ore. He knew it would be difficult, but no one could doubt that success would bring Hitler to his knees. His source of raw materials for tanks, artillery, mortars, and rifles would be cut off.

A critical challenge lay in the narrow waters joining the North Sea and the Baltic; navigation of them by a strong fleet would attract swarms of Luftwaffe bombers. Winston had already discussed possible solutions with the Admiralty's director of naval construction. "It would . . . be necessary," he noted in his September 12 memorandum, "to strengthen the armour deck so as to give exceptional protection against air attack." He planned to commit two British battleships ("but of course 3 would be better") with fifteen-inch guns; "their only possible antagonists" would be the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, "the sole resources of Germany" in the battleship class. Both would be destroyed by the heavier guns of the British battleships, which would outrange them and "would shatter them." Escorting them, and shielding them, would be a dozen vessels yet to be built, "mine bumpers," he called them, with "a heavy fore end to take the shock of any exploding mine." Confiding only in Pound, he set down the five-page précis of his plan, marked "Most Secret." He wrote: "I commend these ideas to your study, hoping that the intention will be to solve the difficulties." Distribution of Catherine was confined to eight copies, "of

which all except one," he wrote, "will be destroyed after the necessary examination has been made."⁴⁹

Pound commented: "There can be little doubt that if we could maintain control of the Baltic for a considerable period it would greatly enhance our prestige." But the first sea lord saw difficulties. If the Soviet Union became a Nazi ally, the operation was doomed. The "active cooperation of Sweden" in providing a base, repair facilities, and oil must be assured, and the British ships committed must be expendable, "such that we can with our Allies at that time win the war without [them], in spite of any probable combination against us." Winston scrawled, "I entirely agree." To him Catherine had become "the supreme naval offensive open to the Royal Navy." Others receiving Winston's presentation studied it seriously and thought it feasible if . . . And then they, too, saw problems. The decisive problem was air power. Even admirals who underrated it had to consider the Luftwaffe threat. Battleships could be taken into the Baltic, but RAF fighters could not accompany them; the ships would be under constant, heavy attack from land-based enemy aircraft. Churchill dismissed the Luftwaffe. He wrote Roosevelt: "We have not been at all impressed by the accuracy of the German air bombing of our warships. They seem to have no effective bomb sights." In any event, he held, the ship's anti-aircraft gunners could eliminate the air threat.⁵⁰

He convinced no one. The support for Catherine, never strong, faded away. Moreover, it seems not to have occurred to Winston that the Nazis could occupy Denmark, move heavy artillery to the shore, and lay mines in the Kogrund Channel. Catherine died a slow, quiet, expensive death. Apart from preempting the time of Britain's best naval minds, twelve million pounds was spent on special equipment for the battleships' escorts. Churchill was disappointed, but because the entire plan had been highly classified he faced no barrage of criticism. Indeed, his reputation at the Admiralty shone as brightly as ever. The general verdict among the sea lords and other senior officials was that Catherine had been brilliantly conceived, that it could have ended the war if successful, but that too much had been at stake — and the ice too thin for skating.

Slowly the Admiralty came to realize that while the first lord might be dissuaded from this or that, he never lost because he never quit; his mind had many tracks, and if one was blocked, he left it and turned to another, the very existence of which was unknown until he chose to reveal it. Admiral Fraser, the flag officer responsible for naval construction, later wrote how Winston stunned him by asking him point-blank: "Well, Admiral, what is the navy doing about RDF?" Fraser was tongue-tied. Radar was the most closely guarded secret in the British military establishment, roughly comparable to America's Manhattan Project three years

later. "A number of able officers were working on the problem," Fraser later wrote, "but to make any real progress a high degree of priority — especially in finance — was essential."⁵¹

Fully developed RDF had been a casualty of Chamberlain's cuts in military spending. England should have had a long lead with this extraordinary defensive weapon; Englishmen had discovered and perfected it, and Zossen didn't even know it existed. Yet not a single vessel in the Royal Navy had been equipped with it. After a long silence Churchill said, "Well, Admiral, it is very important," and later sent Fraser an instruction that all British warships, particularly "those engaged in the U-boat fighting," be provided "with this distinguishing apparatus." Fraser wondered how Churchill, a backbencher until the day England declared war on Germany, had heard about RDF. His bewilderment would have deepened had he known that Winston's knowledge of radar dated from July 25, 1935 — within twenty-four hours of Robert Watson-Watt's completion of experiments proving that the distance and direction of approaching aircraft could be pinpointed by using radio waves.⁵²

If all the views of Churchill's months at the Admiralty are pooled — Winston seen in the letters, diaries, memoirs, and recollections of those who worked under him then and were close enough to reach informed judgments — a striking portrait emerges. It is distorted as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is distorted, complex and defying proportion but recognizable as the powerful image of an emerging warlord. The approval or disapproval of the witnesses is essentially irrelevant. They see him differently because he is different to each, possessing a plural, kaleidoscopic personality. His guise depends upon the man confronting him, and what he wants that man to see.

The first sea lord outranks the others and is closest to him. His admiration for Churchill is almost unqualified. No one in the Royal Navy can launch a direct attack on the first lord because Sir Dudley Pound, a great sailor and a man of absolute integrity, will deflect the blow. Pound's loyalty is reinforced by the first lord's popularity in the fleet. Captain S. W. Roskill, the distinguished naval historian, challenges this popularity, noting that "There was not one Admiral in an important sea command . . . whom Churchill, sometimes with Pound's support, did not attempt to have relieved." But admirals are not the fleet. Below decks, support for the first lord is strong. The ratings admire a fighter; they have heard of his concern for their welfare, which is genuine, and see him as a stimulating, inspiring first lord. Winston's constituency, then, is solidly behind him.⁵³

He needs that support because a warlord, by definition, is a man with enemies. His natural aggression, curbed in peacetime, a stigma only a year

earlier, is now a virtue. He cannot compromise, nor should he. Leaders in battle are guided less by reason than by instinct. He has always distrusted Eamon de Valera, and now in the War Cabinet he proposes that England reclaim her former bases in Eire, by force if necessary. Even Pound knows that the navy has no use for the bases and can easily deny them to the Germans. Churchill is wrong. Nevertheless, Englishmen approve, remembering: *Churchill stood up to the IRA*. Sir Andrew Cunningham, the RN's Mediterranean commander in chief, protests the first lord's repeated interference in tactical issues, telling him not only what to do, but how to do it. Commanders in chief in other theaters have the same grievance but wisely remain silent. Cunningham wins little sympathy in England. *Churchill has shown him who's in charge*. Winston has issued an order — "Plan R" — for strengthening the defenses at Scapa Flow. Contracts are signed. Nothing happens. He issues a general order to the Admiralty, reminding all hands of the time lag since Plan R was approved, and asks: "What, in fact, has been done since? How many blockships sunk? How many nets made? How many men have been in work for how many days? What buildings have been erected? What gun sites have been concreted and prepared? What progress has been made with the run-ways of the aerodrome? I thought we settled two months ago to have a weekly report. . . . Up to the present I share the Commander-in-Chief's anxieties about the slow progress of this indispensable work."⁵⁴

That is on a Monday. On Tuesday Scapa is a hive of construction activity. R. D. Oliver, the officer responsible for Plan R, recalls: "With his backing it was amazing how bureaucratic obstruction melted." The impression: *Churchill gets things done*.⁵⁵

In the House of Commons he consistently overstates the number of Nazi U-boats destroyed. His old adversaries make much of that, but this is war; facts are its first casualties. Leaders exaggerate the enemy's losses and inflate their own triumphs. To do otherwise would be interpreted, in the eyes of his people and his foes, as a sign of weakness. Donald McLachan, who understands this, writes afterward: "The First Lord had a morale role to play. The Navy was the only Service which was fully engaged at the time; it must not be discouraged by too rigorous a method of assessing 'kills'; it was essential that the nation should have some sense of action and success and achievement; and the only material that was readily available at that time came from the U-boat war. It was essential to make the most of what was happening [though] in the process truth suffered." Significantly, in less than a year the RAF will play faster and looser with *its* kill figures, but its records will go virtually unchallenged. There is no Churchill at the Air Ministry to incite critics.⁵⁶

Nevertheless Churchill is disqualified, by temperament, from waging

an effective campaign against U-boats. He has known from the beginning that if Britain loses the duel with Nazi submarines she cannot survive. The high priority he gives to converting trawlers into antisub vessels and his emphasis on destroyer production will contribute to the Admiralty's eventual success. The difficulty is that all this is *defensive*, and he is comfortable only when carrying the war to the enemy. He overrates the asdic. Worse, he withdraws destroyers from convoys to form "hunting groups" or "attacking groups," directing them to seek and destroy U-boats. This is "aggressive," he argues; convoy duty, on the other hand, is "passive." He minutes to Pound — who agrees — that "Nothing can be more important in the anti-submarine war than to try to obtain an independent flotilla which could work like a cavalry division." He is dead wrong; weakening convoys to permit offensive sweeps fails on both counts — no U-boats are sunk, and their elusive commanders, seizing opportunities while the destroyers are looking for them elsewhere, penetrate convoys with alarming results. Yet Churchill will stick to his "hunt 'em down" strategy after he becomes prime minister. Not until 1942, when the effectiveness of the convoy strategy has been demonstrated beyond all doubt, does he accept it without reservation.⁵⁷

Meetings of the full cabinet, the War Cabinet, and the Land Forces Committee engage him in frequent and often lengthy colloquies with men against whom he has been waging parliamentary guerrilla warfare for the better part of a decade. He bears no grudges — "The only man I hate is Hitler," he says, "and that's professional" — but some of his adversaries are less generous. Although the year since Munich should have humbled them, humility is a rare virtue among men of this class, especially at this time. Sam Hoare was first lord in 1936 and 1937; he cannot evade some of the responsibility for the neglect of Scapa's defenses, without which Lieutenant Commander Prien's feat would have been impossible. Yet if Hoare has ever suffered a pang of guilt, no one has heard him acknowledge it. In the first days of the war he *was* heard describing Churchill as "an old man who easily gets tired," a judgment which would startle those at the Admiralty trying to match the old man's pace. According to John Reith, whom Chamberlain brings into the government as minister of information, the prime minister says Churchill's reputation is "inflated," largely "based on broadcasts." Reith, who would have prevented those broadcasts if Winston hadn't been a minister, agrees, and notes in his diary that there is "no doubt" about how the P.M. "feels about Churchill." Early in the war Hoare tells Beaverbrook that at meetings Winston is "very rhetorical, very emotional, and, most of all, very reminiscent." Actually, the Cabinet Papers show that Churchill, like everyone else at the time, is trying to understand what is happening in Poland.⁵⁸

blitz · krieg . . . [G, lit., lightning war, fr. *blitz* lightning + *krieg* war]. . . .

So the word appears in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, presented as a term borrowed from the German. The anonymous journalist who first used it in an English periodical clearly agreed. "In the opening stage of the war," he wrote in the October 7, 1939, issue of *War Illustrated*, "all eyes were turned on Poland, where the German military machine was engaged in *Blitz-Krieg* — lightning war — with a view to ending it as soon as possible." In fact, the term "lightning war," like the concept itself, was of British origin. The bloody stalemate of 1914–1918 had bred pacifism and isolationism among civilians. Professional soldiers — and one statesman, Churchill — agreed that a reprise of trench warfare, with its adumbrations of stalemate and lethal attrition, was unthinkable.

They doubted, however, that it could be abolished; like Plato they believed that only the dead have seen the end of war. Therefore, men like Major General J. F. C. Fuller and Captain Basil Liddell Hart, searching for an alternative, studied Great War engagements in which tanks had been used successfully. Working out the theoretical possibilities of a totally mechanized offensive, they evolved the doctrine of mobile warfare, combining tanks and tactical aircraft. Commenting on the Wehrmacht's Polish campaign Liddell Hart wrote: "When the theory had been originally developed, in Britain, its action had been depicted in terms of the play of 'lightning.' From now on, aptly but ironically, it came into worldwide currency under the title of 'Blitzkrieg' — the German rendering."⁵⁹

It might also have been christened *guerre d'éclairs*, for in Paris Colonel Charles de Gaulle, working independently, as always, had reached the same conclusion: "*la fluidité*" would be imperative on battlefields of the future and must be achieved, for "the sword is the axis of the world." But neither England nor France was interested in military innovation between the wars. Victors rarely are. Professional soldiers are wedded to tradition and resent change; politicians and the public flinch at the prospect of slaughter.⁶⁰

The Conseil Supérieur had dismissed de Gaulle as an eccentric; Fuller, who had a knack for rubbing people the wrong way, was forced into early retirement; Liddell Hart was regarded as an entertaining writer with beguiling but impractical ideas.

Colonel Heinz Guderian, an enthusiastic reader of Fuller and Liddell Hart, was luckier. In the years before the Republic of Germany became the Third Reich, Guderian's superiors, like their fellow generals in En-

gland and France, were skeptical of mobile warfare. But he was among the ablest officers in the Reichswehr, the Wehrmacht's precursor, and so they threw him a sop — command of an armored battalion. He had no tanks, only automobiles with canvas superstructures identified by cardboard signs, PANZER or PANZERWAGEN, and aircraft had to be imagined. Then came Hitler. Like Churchill, the new Reich chancellor was fascinated by technical innovation. He first visited army maneuvers in the spring of 1933, and while other spectators were amused by Guderian's performance, Hitler instantly grasped its possibilities. He cried: "That's what I need! That's what I want!"⁶¹

Later Goebbels tried — with considerable success — to convince the world that every German division invading Poland was armored. Actually only nine were; the other forty-seven comprised familiar, foot-slogging infantrymen, wearing the same coal-scuttle helmets, the same field gray uniforms, and equipped much as their fathers had been on the Somme, in Flanders, and in the Argonne. That does not slight them; the Führer's soldiers were the best fighting men in Europe, and their morale was now at fever pitch. But it was the panzers which were terrifying. Each of Guderian's divisions was self-contained, comprising two tank regiments, self-propelled guns, and supporting units — engineers, reconnaissance companies, anti-tank and antiaircraft batteries, signalmen, and a regiment of infantry — transported on trucks or armored half-tracks. The Poles prayed for rain; commentators talked about "General Mud," as though World War II might be called off because of bad weather. But God wasn't riding at the Poles' stirrups that golden month. In 1870 and 1914 men in spiked helmets had talked of *Kaiserwetter*. Now it was *Hitlerwetter*, and Guderian's men found the dry, rolling plains of Poland ideal for maneuver.

The Poles were confident; they were overconfident; they were eager for battle, buoyed by Radio Warsaw, which played the national anthem, Chopin, and martial music, over and over. By the standards of 1920, when Poles had last seen action — against the Bolsheviks — they possessed a fine army: two million men under arms, with another million hurrying to the front. Twelve splendid brigades of horse cavalry were the pride of Poland. But they had only one armored brigade. Its tanks were obsolete. So were the air force's warplanes. And the battle plan of Marshal Edward Rydz-Smigly was a bad Polish joke. Since the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia had left the Poles with an immensely long frontier, it would have been prudent — it would have been sane — to assemble farther back. Instead, Rydz-Smigly decided to fight on the frontier, with no reserves behind his men and no defensive preparations. Their defense, he told incredulous military attachés from the Allied embassies, would be the counterattack.

Indulging his national pride, which his troops shared, over a third of

his troops were concentrated in the Polish Corridor, exposed to Germans attacking from both east and west. Because of this stratagem, tracts more vital to Poland's defense were left thinly manned. Perhaps the mind-set of the Polish military on the eve of battle is best illustrated by Rydz-Smigly's high hopes for one unit, the crack Pomorska Cavalry Brigade. As the spearhead of Guderian's First Panzer Division appeared in the valley below, white-gloved officers signaled trumpeters, who sounded the charge. Down the slope rode the Pomorskas, sabers gleaming, pennons waving, moving at a steady gallop, their lances at the ready. And then, as they were preparing for the final irresistible surge, the Germans squeezed their triggers. The limbs, viscera, and skin — of men and horses, inextricably tangled — spewed gorily for over a mile. The few Polish survivors were taken prisoner. They were seen rapping hard on the tanks' armor. Somebody had told them German armor, like Guderian's mock panzers of 1933, was cardboard, and someone had been wrong.

Elsewhere Poles heard an ominous hum and looked up to see squadron after squadron of bombers — nearly four thousand of them — headed for Warsaw, where, by midafternoon, they annihilated the Polish air force, such as it was, on the ground. Poland's one million reservists never reached their units; the Luftwaffe blew up the railroad stations where they waited, or the trains they had already boarded. Then it bombed radio stations, bridges, factories, barracks, and public buildings. Before heading home to the Reich the bombers sowed incendiary and high-explosive bombs among the densest concentrations of civilians, including children's playgrounds. Farmers who had never held a weapon larger than a shotgun saw rapid-firing, self-propelled guns rolling down the rutted dirt roads at forty miles an hour. What they did not see, and would not have believed if they saw it, was the intricate communications net — telegraph, telephone, and radio — which coordinated the huge juggernaut.

The Polish soldiers on the frontier, each standing in front of a single hastily strung strand of barbed wire, each assuming that the high-level, Warsaw-bound bombers had been the entire Luftwaffe, were in for a shock. It was *half* the Luftwaffe. Now came the rest of it, meant for them, led by the Junkers 87 dive-bombers — the Stukas. The Stuka was more than a bomber; it was also an instrument of fear. Many had sirens attached to their undercarriages, and as the plane dove vertically, the ear-splitting siren convinced every Pole that it, and its bomb load, was headed straight for him. The Ju 87s left. It was time for the invading army to launch its ground attack. Guderian's panzers came in the first wave — motorcycles followed by armored cars, then tanks, then trucks bearing artillery and infantry. To the Poles' bewilderment, these Germans were not seeking a fight. They deliberately avoided pitting strength against strength, prefer-

ring to probe for soft spots. Eventually, given Rydz-Smigly's dispositions, they would find one, lunge through, and fan out, destroying communications, machine-gunning Poles who thought themselves safe behind the front, and — here tactics merged with strategy — splitting the Polish army into fragments, each out of touch with the others. When the marshal's headquarters tried to maneuver the troops, either the lines were dead or troop movement was impossible because panicky Polish civilians had choked the roads. This frenzy was encouraged by Nazis who, simulating Polish news programs with German commentators fluent in Polish, told the people to flee down the very roads Rydz-Smigly most needed. The Germans had enlarged the compass of military science. They had discovered how to exploit the very people defending armies are supposed to protect — the young, the aged, the women trembling at the prospect of rape — by encouraging them to ensnarl the defenders' rear.

By Sunday, September 3, when England and France finally declared war on Germany, the fighting in Poland was in its third day, and the situation of the defenders was critical. The Poles now had no air force. The country's railroad grid was in ruins. All bridges, except those which were useful to the Nazis, had been demolished. The Wehrmacht's troops, healthy and strong, were led by some of the greatest generals in German history — Gerd von Rundstedt, Heinz Guderian, Walter von Reichenau, Fedor von Bock, Paul von Kleist, Günther von Kluge, Georg von Küchler — all, indeed, except Erich von Manstein, who was planning the invasion of the Low Countries and France. Already the Polish frontier had been deeply penetrated by three great German drives, each advancing on Warsaw: eight divisions from East Prussia, twelve from Pomerania, and another seventeen — the main thrust, 886,000 men — heading straight for the capital from Silesia in the south. That Sunday, after the British declaration of hostilities but before France's, Kluge's 630,000 men had cut off the corridor and were advancing southeastward along both banks of the Vistula, toward the capital. All other commanders had reached their objectives and were engaged in complex envelopments, double envelopments, and encircling movements, incomprehensible to laymen in other countries, who nevertheless grasped their essence — that with the war less than seventy-two hours old, the defense of Poland was already disintegrating.

In London it was *hot*. Churchill could not recall a more pitiless heat wave. He wore a black alpaca jacket over a linen shirt and reflected that this was "indeed just the weather that Hitler wanted for his invasion of Poland. The great rivers on which the Poles had counted in their defensive plan were nearly everywhere fordable, and the ground was hard and firm for the movement of tanks and vehicles of all kinds." The War Cabinet, he wrote,

stood "around the Cabinet table," witnessing the beginnings of "the swift and almost mechanical destruction of a weaker state according to Hitler's method and long design."⁶²

It was hard to believe that the Poles actually had a quarter-million more men under arms than the invaders. "Each morning," Churchill later recalled, "the CIGS, General Ironside, standing before the map, gave long reports and appreciations which very soon left no doubt in our minds that the resistance of Poland would speedily be crushed. Each day I reported to the Cabinet the Admiralty tale, which usually consisted of a list of British merchant ships sunk by the U-boats." On Monday spearheads of Reichenau's panzers — which had jumped off from Jablunkov Pass in the Carpathian Mountains only three days earlier — reached and crossed the Pilica, fifty miles behind the Polish frontier. On Tuesday, the day Dönitz's submarines sank the *Royal Sceptre* and the *Bosnia*, Ironside told them that several panzer divisions had overrun the Poles' defenses at Czesochowa — a breakthrough "that might result in Germany capturing Poland's main industrial area" and the withdrawal of Rydz-Smigly's army to the line of the Vistula. Even now, however, no one in the Cabinet Room envisaged the disappearance of organized Polish resistance. They were remembering how the great German offensive of 1914 had been stopped in the Battle of the Marne and wondering when and where the Poles would roll back the field gray tide. But this was not 1914, and the Vistula was not the Marne.⁶³

London newspapers on September 4 reported another bombardment of Warsaw; civilian casualties were said to be heavy. Labour MPs, remembering Guernica, were calling for British action. So, within the government, was Churchill. That morning, at the second meeting of the War Cabinet, he pointed out that the "main German effort" was against the Poles and proposed that "every means possible should be employed to relieve the pressure," starting with an immediate attack on the Siegfried Line carried out by French infantry and the RAF. The rest of the War Cabinet agreed that such a move was "a vital necessity."⁶⁴

It was indeed. To do otherwise would be dishonorable; the world would conclude that pledges by His Majesty's Government and the Third Republic were as worthless as Hitler's. The first article of the Anglo-Polish treaty signed ten days earlier specified: "Should one of the contracting parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter . . . the other contracting party will at once give the contracting party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power," and the second paragraph stipulated that each country was committed to the use of force even in the absence of aggression, in the event of "any action . . . which clearly threatened, directly or indirectly, the independence of one of the contracting parties."⁶⁵

The rub was that Britain, an island, shared no border with Germany. It had the Royal Navy and the RAF, but the Poles had not been challenged at sea, and the limited range of aircraft then ruled out intervention by Britain-based warplanes in the skies over Poland. Poland needed an army, and England didn't have one. On land, writes Telford Taylor, Britain was "still almost in the position of a nineteenth-century Asiatic state challenging with the traditional arms of the past a European power armed with modern artillery and machine guns." In 1914 Churchill, as first lord, had ferried seven superbly trained British divisions across the Channel. He was preparing to repeat this feat, but it was impossible now; the men weren't there; Britain's standing army was so small as to be embarrassing. All the War Office could send now was four divisions. Winston noted that at best this could be called "a symbolic contribution." He had been appalled to find that although England had been "the cradle of the tank in all its variants," the "awful gap" in this symbolic contingent was "the absence of even one armoured division in the British Expeditionary Force."⁶⁶

The War Cabinet's Land Forces Committee met September 7, on what Winston called a "sweltering afternoon," at the Home Office with Hoare in the chair, and decided, after hearing the views of the army's high command, to "forthwith begin the creation of a fifty-five division army," hoping that "by the eighteenth month, two-thirds of this . . . would either already have been sent to France or be fit to take the field." The Air Ministry protested; it planned to build an enormous air force in two or three years, and "the full army programme could not be realized in the time limits of two years without serious interference with the air programme." That took a moment to sink in. The protester — a veteran civil servant who had been permanent under secretary to the Air Ministry when Winston was its minister between 1919 and 1920 — was objecting to army expansion before 1942. Now, in 1939, it was too late to save Poland, but a gesture should be made. To leave the French army standing alone was unthinkable. London was blacked out; Britain could not tell when her turn would come, but expected a massive Luftwaffe raid at any time, and here were the service bureaucracies talking of three-year plans, five-year plans, unaware that by 1942 all London might be reduced to an unrecognizable, uninhabited scene of desolation. In a meeting of the full War Cabinet, Kingsley Wood repeated the Air Ministry argument: the RAF insisted upon priority; the army would have to wait. Churchill vigorously replied to this position and set down his thoughts in a secret memorandum: "I cannot think that less than twenty divisions by March 1, 1940, would be fair to the French army. . . . We must take our place in the Line if we are to hold the Alliance together and win the war."⁶⁷

It was a sensible point, but Chamberlain's men had developed a habit

of attributing the lowest motives to him. In his diary Hoare noted that one man had whispered to him, "He is writing his new memoirs," and Oliver Stanley, president of the Board of Trade — in a reference to *The World Crisis*, Churchill's history of the last war — said biting, "Why did he not bring his *World War*?" Chamberlain hesitated; he finally endorsed the recommendations of the Land Forces Committee, but the committee's report contained some disquieting predictions. The French army, it said, would probably "require assistance" in equipping its men "after the first four months of the war." And yet, the report went on to say that perhaps France could help in remedying certain of *Britain's* deficiencies. Clementine Churchill, reading the War Office's shopping list later, commented: "It shows the interminable distance we had to travel before we could fight."⁶⁸

Before England could fight she needed, not only troops and arms but also a government of fighting ministers, men prepared — as soldiers must be — to sacrifice everything, including their lives, toward a great objective, the destruction of Nazi Germany. Churchill was such a man. Despite his membership in the cabinet, however, he was virtually alone. The rest of the government was schizoid. Their faith had failed; they were like simple folk who have been told yesterday that the world would end today and have found the prophecy a fraud. Nevertheless, they remained evangelists. The appeasers were still devout, still hopeful that the shopworn messiah at No. 10 would be vindicated. But now England was at war, a war she could lose — would certainly lose if their advice prevailed.

Friday morning, September 8, the war was five days old, and in his briefing Ironside told the War Cabinet that the Poles were "fighting well and had not been broken." Another War Office summary added that although the Poles were "not demoralized," their movements were "much impeded by the overwhelming German superiority in the air and in armoured vehicles." They wanted to know what their allies in the West were doing. The Air Ministry had already received a message from the Polish air attaché in London asking for the "immediate" bombardment of German industries and airports within reach of the RAF. He received no satisfactory reply. That same day Leo Amery approached Kingsley Wood and asked if the government was going to help Poland. Amery suggested dropping incendiary bombs on the Black Forest. "Oh, you can't do that," the air minister said, "that's private property. You'll be asking me to bomb the Ruhr next." Essen's Gusstahlfabrik, the flagship of the Krupp munitions works, should have been leveled already, Amery said, but Kingsley Wood told him that should he do so, "American opinion" would be alienated. In his memoirs Amery wrote that he "went away very angry."

Hugh Dalton raised the same question; Kingsley Wood replied that such a mission would be a violation of the Hague Convention, that the RAF must concentrate on "military objectives."⁶⁹

It was still His Majesty's Government's policy to avoid offending Germany; although Great Britain and the Third Reich were at war, Reith's BBC was uncomfortable with criticism of the enemy regime. Reith, now minister of information, denied air time to eminent Englishmen on the ground that they were too critical of Germany. As a cabinet minister Hore-Belisha could not be denied BBC time, and in October he delivered a superb speech on British war aims. They were not fighting to reconstitute Czechoslovakia or Poland, he said: "We are concerned with the frontiers of the human spirit. . . . Only the defeat of Nazi Germany can lighten the darkness which now shrouds our cities, and lighten the horizon for all Europe and the world." Hore-Belisha's days were numbered. Next to Churchill he was the ablest member of the War Cabinet, advocating vigorous prosecution of the war; nevertheless, in January 1940 the prime minister asked for his resignation. Chamberlain wanted to offer him the Ministry of Information, but Halifax objected to the appointment; it would have a "bad effect among the neutrals," he said, "because HB [is] a Jew." Being a Jew was worse in Germany, of course, but under His Majesty's Government at the time it was no character reference.⁷⁰

On Wednesday, September 6, His Majesty's Government assured the House of Commons that the Luftwaffe was bombing "only Polish military objectives." Yet three days earlier the Warsaw government had informed HMG that twenty-seven towns had been bombed by Nazi planes and over a thousand civilians killed. Edward Spears decided to raise in the House "the question of the lack of support we are giving the Poles," but changed his mind when Kingsley Wood told him the reply would involve "questions of strategy" and to discuss them in public would be "most dangerous." On Saturday, Beck cabled Raczynski, instructing him to raise the issue in Whitehall. On Monday, the Polish ambassador told Cadogan: "This is very unfair to us. The least that we can ask is, what are you prepared to do?" Cadogan promised him an answer by the end of the day. But Raczynski never heard from Cadogan, then or later.⁷¹

Chamberlain saw the growing anger in the House. He believed he fathomed it. "The Amerys, Duff Coopers, and their lot," he wrote, "are consciously swayed by a sense of frustration because they can only look on." He added: "The personal dislike of Simon and Hoare has reached a pitch which I find difficult to understand." There was a great deal he did not understand; he was neither the first nor the last leader to lose his touch, his feeling for the temper of his people. Once war has been declared, the slate is wiped clean. A leader's peacetime policies are forgotten, even those

which led the country into a war it did not want, unless, of course, he is so unwise as to bring them up. Even after the fall of Poland, after Fleet Street had printed evidence of Nazi crimes in Poland — the random murders, then mass executions; the tortures and the seizure of Poles to work in German munitions factories — the prime minister seriously considered a negotiated peace with a Reich purged of the more extreme Nazis. He had a “hunch,” he wrote, that the war would end in the spring of 1940. “It won’t be by defeat in the field,” he wrote, “but by German realization that they *can’t* win and that it isn’t worth their while to go on getting thinner and poorer when they might have instant relief.” If negotiations were successful the Germans might “not have to give up anything they really care about.” One pictures Neville Chamberlain in hell, sitting at one end of a table with Satan at the other, each checking off items on his agenda, and a slow, awful expression of comprehension crossing the late P.M.’s face as he realizes that he has just traded his soul for a promise of future negotiations.⁷²

One issue which eluded him completely was that the plight of the Poles could not be relieved by Allied defensive warfare in the west. An offensive, or a series of offensives, should be launched, and launched *now*, while the Wehrmacht was committed in Poland. Blood had to be spilled in a drive against the Siegfried Line or in bombing the Reich. An infantry attack on the western front depended upon France. Although the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was growing in strength every week, the overwhelming majority of the troops there were French, and their decisions would determine the Allied strategy there. The RAF could bomb, but here again France, because of her proximity to the Reich, could cast the decisive vote.

France did. The vote was a veto. The French had ruled out bombing, Chamberlain explained to the War Cabinet, because the Nazis might retaliate by an air attack on one of the Seine bridges. Churchill was aroused, but “I could not move them,” he wrote. “When I pressed very hard, they used a method of refusal which I never met before or since. [On one occasion in Paris] M. Daladier told me with an air of exceptional formality that ‘The President of the Republic himself had intervened, and that no aggressive action must be taken which might only draw reprisals upon France.’” In his memoirs, Winston commented:

This idea of not irritating the enemy did not commend itself to me. Hitler had done his best to strangle our commerce by indiscriminate mining of our harbours. We had beaten him by defensive means alone. Good, decent civilised people, it appeared, must never strike themselves till after they have been struck dead. In these days the fearful German volcano and all its subterranean fires drew near to their explosion point. There were still

months of pretended war. On the one side endless discussions about trivial points, no decisions taken, or if taken, rescinded, and the rule “Don’t be unkind to the enemy, you will only make him angry.” On the other, doom preparing — a vast machine grinding forward ready to break upon us!⁷³

The prime minister, it developed, had decided to avenge the Poles killed in Luftwaffe raids on Warsaw, Cracow, and Katowice by punishing the Reich with “truth raids.” In truth raids, leaflets were to be substituted for bombs. This strategy assumed that once Germans read the leaflets describing Hitler’s atrocities, they would rise up and overthrow their Nazi leadership. After the first mission over Germany, Kingsley Wood revealed that this ingenious approach had been his inspiration, and that the Nazis in Berlin were deeply troubled by them. They were not without peril for the RAF; German anti-aircraft gunners could not distinguish between Blenheims dropping explosives and those distributing the pamphlets threatening the stability of the regime in Berlin; hence British planes were lost. Hoare paid tribute to the truth-raiders. They wrote, he said, “a chapter of heroic bravery, of forlorn hopes, of brilliant improvisation.”⁷⁴

Ironsides’ optimistic briefing of the War Cabinet had been inspired more by the Poles’ valor than their military prospects. Yet their élan *was* astonishing. That same Friday the Fourth Panzer Division, attacking Warsaw’s southeastern suburbs, was thrown back and Polish divisions around Kutno rallied, counterattacked across the Bzura, and drove the German Eighth Army back for three straight days. It would be a long time before any troops, under any flag, would do anything like that again. They were inspired not solely by determination to preserve their honor — though their gallantry still gleams across a half century — but because they believed they were going to win. They knew they couldn’t do it by themselves. That, they thought, was unnecessary. England and France were bound to them in ironclad military alliances. Both powers had declared war on Nazi Germany. The British, they assumed, had unleashed an all-out bombing of the Ruhr, and the French army, the world’s strongest, must have penetrated deep into western Germany. If they pinned down the Wehrmacht here, the Poles reasoned, their allies would soon force Hitler to sue for peace.

RAF bombers had been rendered impotent by French fear of Luftwaffe reprisals. Where was the French army? Here the Poles’ nemesis was the same officer who three and a half years earlier had, in effect, awarded Hitler the Rhineland by default. Gustave-Maurice Gamelin, a short, timid, rabbit man in his late sixties, was a former aide to Marshal Joseph-Césaire Joffre who had toiled his way upward through the maze of

military politics to become *généralissime* of the enormous French army, constable of France, and leader of the combined Anglo-French high command. His rise had been extraordinary, not because he was eccentric — in mufti he was just another nondescript *fonctionnaire* — but because under pressure he became everything a commander ought not to be: indecisive, given to issuing impulsive orders which he almost always countermanded, and timid to and beyond a fault. Illustrative of his unpredictability was his proposal, at the outbreak of war, to invade Germany by lunging across neutral Belgium and Holland, and then, when a shocked cabinet rejected the plan, declaring that any French offensive would be doomed, that the poilus in the Maginot and their comrades above it should sit out the war. There would be more of this sort of thing later. And more. And more.

His performance during the Rhineland crisis should have revealed his incompetence to his civilian superiors. They had asked him for action then, and he had given them excuses. After that he ought to have been relieved of all responsibility for the defense of French soil. But like the rest of the senior officers in their army he had his *patron*, who in his case was Premier Daladier. So he had remained at his high post, and now the price must be paid, not by him, not by Daladier, but by the Poles. The issue of Polish survival was a matter of days, if not hours. France possessed the only force strong enough to save Poland by attacking Germany now. Furthermore, the Franco-Polish Military Convention of May 19, 1939, was more precise than Britain's agreement with the Poles. Drafted by Gamelin and two Polish generals, the convention provided that "the French army shall launch a major offensive in the west [*lancerait une grande offensive à l'ouest*] if the Germans attack Poland." The Poles had asked how many poilus would be available for this drive. "Between thirty-five and thirty-eight divisions," Gamelin had replied. The Poles had also wanted to know what form the attack would take. It was spelled out in the convention: the French army would "progressively launch offensive operations . . . the third day after General Mobilization Day." Yet that deadline had passed without action in Paris.⁷⁵

On August 23, when the German invasion of Poland was imminent, the irresolute French commander in chief — without telling the Poles — had reappraised the military prospects of nations who offended the Führer. As a result, his faith in his army had been shaken, and his confidence in France's political leaders, and himself (this was justifiable), had shrunk. He hoped that by the spring of 1940, with British concurrence and the support of "*matériel américain*," France would be capable of fighting, if necessary, "*une bataille défensive*." Then — this from a man who had promised the Poles offensive operations on the third day after mobilization — "My opinion has always been that we could not take the

offensive before roughly 1941–1942." The French, in short, had unilaterally renounced the Franco-Polish Military Convention. Despite the fact that his signature was on the document, Gamelin concluded in his memoirs, "Our military protocol had no meaning and [did] not bind us." In his heart, therefore, he was "*satisfait*." Among other things, he had overlooked an earlier military treaty — still an absolute commitment by the French government — which Marshal Ferdinand Foch had negotiated with the Poles on February 19, 1921, pledging "*effectif et rapide*" support should Poland be confronted by German aggression.⁷⁶

Generals are seldom afflicted by nagging consciences, but then, they seldom betray an embattled ally. Perhaps a pang of guilt moved this commander in chief to point out that French mobilization in itself would bring some relief to Poland "by tying down a certain number of large German units on our frontier." Daladier asked him how long the Poles, abandoned by their allies, could hold out. The *généralissime* replied that he believed they would put up "*une résistance honorable*" which would prevent "*la masse des forces*" of the Reich from turning against France until the English were "*effectivement à nos côtés*" — standing beside them, shoulder to shoulder.⁷⁷

Between them the Poles and the French had 130 divisions against Germany's 98 — really 62, because 36, as Liddell Hart put it, were "virtually untrained and unorganized." Rydz-Smigly's army had but to hold up the Wehrmacht divisions on the eastern front; the French, meantime, could overwhelm the green, second-rate German divisions across the Rhine. The challenge should have daunted no one. Gamelin's forces in the west outnumbered the Germans by at least two to one — four to one, if one is to believe the Nuremberg testimony of OKW General Alfred Jodl, who told the International Military Tribunal that he had expected the Third Reich to collapse in 1939. He attributed its survival "to the fact that during the Polish campaign the approximately 110 French and British divisions in the West were held completely inactive against the 23 German divisions."⁷⁸

Most of the Zossen generals were appalled at Hitler's gamble. To blitz Poland he had stripped the Siegfried Line defenses of armor, artillery, warplanes, and reliable troops, leaving a skeleton force to face Germany's ancient foe in the west. It seemed inconceivable that the French would let so golden an opportunity pass, knowing that a quick Nazi conquest of Poland would free the German Generalstab of its greatest nightmare — a two-front war — and permit the Führer to concentrate the full might of the Wehrmacht in a massive attack, knifing through the Low Countries, into France. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the OKW, recalled that "We soldiers always expected an attack by France during the Polish

campaign, and were very surprised that nothing happened. . . . A French attack would have encountered only a German military screen, not a real defense."⁷⁹

General Franz Halder agreed — up to a point. He testified: "The success against Poland was only possible by completely baring our western border." If the French had attacked, he added, "they would have been able to cross the Rhine without our being able to prevent it" and taken the Ruhr area, "the most decisive factor" in the German conduct of the war. Yet Halder, who had greater respect for Hitler's military intuition than his fellow members of the officer corps, was unsurprised by the inertia on the western front; on August 14 his first entry in his war diary noted that he considered a French offensive "not very likely," that France would not attack across the Low Countries "against Belgian wishes," and that the French would probably "remain on the defensive."⁸⁰

At the time Halder was the only senior general in Zossen to endorse the Führer's prediction. On September 7, with the issue of whether to send Wehrmacht divisions to the west being discussed seriously, Halder's diary entry ended with a few lines summing up Hitler's views: "Operations in the West not yet clear. Some indication that there is no real intention of waging war." The Generalstab couldn't believe it. They remembered the indomitable poilus who had fought under Joffre and Gallieni in the early years of the last war, who had always counterattacked when attacked, whose line was never broken, whose "*Ils ne passeront pas*" denied Verdun to Germany's finest regiments through seven terrible months, and who paid an unprecedented price — four million casualties, one out of every four of them dead — for victory in 1918.⁸¹

But Joffre, Gallieni, Pétain, and Foch were gone, and in their place stood — though not particularly tall — Gamelin. As Halder recorded the Führer's thoughts, the French *généralissime* prepared to launch the only offensive of his career, a piece of opéra bouffe which mocked the memories of Verdun. "*L'offensive de la Sarre*," as he grandly called it, was in fact a pitiful sortie. Of his 85 heavily armed divisions he committed 9 to an advance on a fifteen-mile front southeast of Saarbrücken. Moving slowly, taking every precaution, the infantry occupied twenty deserted villages and gained five miles. Here and there were reports of skirmishes, but the German response was to give ground, withdraw — and pray that the *généralissime* did not commit another fifty divisions to a full-scale attack. Of the Germans' total strength, all but eleven divisions were untrained and the rest lacked adequate arms and ammunition. Nevertheless, on September 12 Gamelin commanded a halt. He congratulated his men on their victory and instructed them to make preparations for a retreat into the security of the Maginot Line if a German offensive came roaring down through

Belgium. The next day the Polish military attaché, on orders from an alarmed Rydz-Smigly, asked Gamelin whether French warplanes had attacked their mutual enemy, and whether he could accelerate his infantry advance. Later that same day the architect of the Saar "offensive" replied mendaciously, in writing: "More than half of our active divisions on the northeast front are engaged in combat." The Boche, he said, were responding with "*vigoureuse résistance*." Interrogation of enemy prisoners revealed that the Germans were "pouring in reinforcements" — all of this, every word, pure fiction — and French warplanes had been in action from the outset, tying down "*une part considérable*" of the Luftwaffe. He had gone "far beyond" his pledge, he concluded. "*Il m'a été impossible de faire plus*" ("It has been impossible for me to do more").⁸²

The ground gained in the Saar was lost when Gamelin, on September 30, ordered a retreat. The only achievement of his so-called Saar offensive was to reveal France's persistent confidence in outdated tactical ideas, notably the doctrine that any drive against a defended position must be preceded by a massive artillery bombardment, the "tin-opener," as it had been called in 1918. General André de Beaufre, then a captain, said that Gamelin's action, in character, had been a meaningless gesture ("*Voilà notre aide à la Pologne!*"), and Colonel de Gaulle dismissed "*l'offensive*" contemptuously as "*quelques démonstrations*."⁸³

By the tenth day of fighting, the Polish cause was lost, and Rydz-Smigly, who had read the heartbreaking dispatches from Beck's diplomats in Paris and London, knew it. He ordered a general withdrawal into southeastern Poland, planning to organize a defensive position on a narrow front to prolong resistance. But the Generalstab had thought of everything. Already over half of the marshal's remaining forces had been trapped before they could retreat across the Vistula. Cut off from their bases, running out of ammunition, this remnant was caught in a vise between two German armies. And before Rydz-Smigly could reach his redoubt in the southeast, he, too, was encircled.

On September 17 two Soviet army groups, in accordance with the secret clause in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, invaded Poland from the east. Ribbentrop and Molotov had fixed the demarcation line along the river Bug, but there are always soldiers who don't get the word; shots were exchanged between some Germans and Russians, and a few men were wounded. Then all was quiet along the Bug. Both foreign armies were in Poland, but the Poles were forgotten; the fate of their homeland had been decided in the first three days of the Nazi invasion — actually, given the fourth color Gamelin had added to the French tricolor, before the fighting had begun.

By all precedents the Poles, in extremis, should have yielded once they found that they faced both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. The Germans had them checked; now they were in checkmate. It was time to quit. They were victims of a squalid deal worked by two despots whose hands reeked of innocent blood, and they had been betrayed by two allies whose leaders had been regarded as honorable men. No indignity had been spared them. In London — where their cause found little sympathy — a cabinet minister had declared that after Nazi Germany had been crushed, “a Polish state would be reconstituted”; the Polish state to whose defense England had been committed was unmentioned. The Poles would gain nothing if they made a messy exit; they would merely forfeit the claims they had upon the world’s compassion. It was far more sensible to go along quietly.

But the Poles didn’t want pity, and while quietude may be good form among Anglo-Saxons in exigency, the Poles are traditionally noisy. Newspaper photographs showed German and Russian officers shaking hands, elated that the battle was over. Except that it wasn’t; there were no pictures of Poles shaking hands with anyone. Their government and high command had left Warsaw for Rumania, leaving orders to fight to the bitter end. The Poles did; fueled by patriotic fervor, they barricaded streets with streetcars, stopping Reichenau’s tanks; his infantry was forced into the ugliest and most dangerous close combat — house to house, room by room. By that mysterious process which telegraphs news throughout a country, even after its communications system has been destroyed, all Poland knew what was happening in Warsaw, and thousands of Poles followed its example. Guderian plunged deep through the Polish rear to Brest-Litovsk, but when he tried to storm the town’s ancient citadel, he found an obsolete Renault tank had been jammed, and then welded, into the doorway. Warsaw, starving, lacking water, pounded around the clock by Nazi planes and artillery, finally capitulated ten days after the Russian invasion. Pockets of resistance fought on, though the last major stronghold — 17,000 men in Kock, a village southeast of the capital — did not lay down their arms until October 7. Meanwhile, 100,000 Polish soldiers and pilots had escaped to Rumania and made their way to England, where they would fight in Free Polish battalions beside the British, French, and later, the Americans; Polish destroyers and submarines reached the Orkneys and joined the Royal Navy.

Stalin left central Poland to Hitler. In return he got the eastern provinces, a free hand in Lithuania, and the oil fields of southeast Poland, with the understanding that he would ship thirty thousand tons of crude to the Reich every year. Hitler annexed part of Poland and established the rest as a Nazi vassal state, the General Government of Poland, whose

governor-general was Hans Frank, a feisty, dapper young Nazi lawyer, the adoring father of five children, who began braiding his Nuremberg rope by announcing: “The Poles shall be the slaves of the Third Reich.” He also became expert in carrying out programs whose euphemistic names masked some of the vilest crimes in history. Polish intellectuals, professional men, and anyone possessing leadership qualities — men and women who might subvert Frank’s authority — were marked for slaughter. This operation, in which 3,500 persons were actually executed, persons who had committed no crime, who were singled out precisely because they had led distinguished careers, was encoded *Ausserordenliche Befriedigungsaktion* (Extraordinary Pacification Program). In another Frank campaign, all Jews were grouped together for his *Flurbereinigungs-Plan* (Housecleaning Plan). Later, after other code words had been tried, the Nazis settled on *Endlösung*, the Final Solution, to represent the destruction of the European Jews. Their time had come.⁸⁴

And so had Western civilization’s hour of maximum danger. Hitler was free now to turn the full fury of his might on England and France. Churchill had repeatedly spoken — mostly to empty seats — on the need to confront Nazi Germany with collective security. Above all, he had said, the Reich must be bracketed by strong nations, east and west, so that Hitler would know German aggression would mean a two-front war. When the Führer came to power the safeguards had seemed solid: France, England, and the Rhineland on the west, and Czechoslovakia and Poland to the east, with Russia, alienated by Nazi murders of German Communists and Hitler’s anti-Soviet polemics, frowning behind them. One by one Hitler had eliminated these threats. He could not have done it alone. He had needed help — and found it in London and Paris. The Polish army had been a disappointment. But France, whose army was vital to the security of free peoples, hadn’t even tried to exploit the period of grace — at least three weeks — when the German armies were tied down in the east. Now the democracies must face him alone — him and, in all probability, Italy, for the unprincipled Duce wanted to be on the winning side, and the Anglo-French alliance had been losing, losing, losing for nearly seven years. In England the iconoclastic General Fuller declared that France must be ruled by lunatics. There they had been in September, he wrote, with “the strongest army in the world, facing no more than twenty-six divisions, sitting still and sheltering behind steel and concrete while a quixotically valiant ally was being exterminated!” In Paris Léon Blum was recalling his conversation with a nonconformist French officer when they met in 1936. The Socialist leader had asked: “What would France do if Hitler should march on Vienna, Prague, or Warsaw?” Charles de Gaulle had replied: “According to circumstances, we shall have a limited call-up

or full mobilization. Then, peering through the battlements of our fortifications, we shall watch the enslavement of Europe." Vienna, Prague, and Warsaw had fallen. Now Blum was wondering whether those battlements and fortifications were strong enough to save France herself from bondage.⁸⁵



Hitler had not expected France and England to go to war over Poland. After they had yielded the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, he had assumed that appeasement would continue to be the keystone of their foreign policy. He still doubted that they intended to fight. The French failure to attack the Siegfried Line when it was at its weakest had, in his view, confirmed him. The first inkling that he might have misjudged the British had been Churchill's appointment to the War Cabinet. Told of it, Hermann Göring had dropped into a chair and said heavily: "Churchill in the Cabinet. That means war is really on. Now we shall have war with England."⁸⁶

The Nazi hierarchy had long been aware of Churchill. That included the Führer, which made Winston an exception. It is a remarkable fact that Hitler knew almost nothing of his enemies and even brushed aside information made available to him, preferring to rely on his instincts, which included contempt for all *Ausländer*. He did regard England as "our enemy Number One," however, and Churchill as the symbol of British militancy. After the fall of Poland he lost little time in singling him out. Making his ritualistic peace offering, the sequel to all Nazi conquests, he declared that Poland was dead; it would never rise again; therefore why fight about it? "I make this declaration," he said, "only because I very naturally desire to spare my people suffering. But should the views of Churchill and his following prevail, then this declaration will be my last. We should then fight. . . . Let those repulse my hand who regard war as the better solution."⁸⁷

As a cabinet minister, Churchill could now speak over the BBC whenever he chose, and on October 1, in his first wartime broadcast, he had told Britain: "Poland has again been overrun by two of the great powers which held her in bondage for a hundred and fifty years but were unable to quench the spirit of the Polish nation." The heroic defense of Warsaw had shown that "the soul of Poland is indestructible, and that she will rise again like a rock, which may for a spell be submerged by a tidal wave, but which remains a rock." He was more intrigued by "the assertion of the power of Russia." He would have preferred that the Russians "should be standing on their present line as the friends and allies of Poland

instead of invaders. But that the Russian armies should stand on this line was clearly necessary for the safety of Russia against the Nazi menace." Ribbentrop, he noted, had been summoned to Moscow last week to be told that "the Nazi designs upon the Baltic States . . . must come to a dead stop." He continued:

I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia.
It is a riddle
 wrapped in a mystery
 inside an enigma;
But perhaps there is a key.
 That key is Russian national interest.
It cannot be in accordance
 with the interest or safety of Russia
 that Germany should plant itself
 upon the shores of the Black Sea
Or that it should overrun the Baltic States
 and subjugate the Slavonic peoples
 of southeastern Europe.⁸⁸

He announced with pride — not pardonable, because he still distrusted the convoy policy — that "a week has passed since a British ship, alone or in convoy, has been sunk or even molested by a U-boat on the high seas," and he closed with one of those passages which men in public life later wish could be expunged from the record. "Rough times lie ahead," he said, "but how different is the scene from that of October 1914!" Then the French front "seemed to be about to break under the terrible impact of German Imperialism. . . . We faced those adverse conditions then; we have nothing worse to face tonight."⁸⁹

They faced something far worse, of course, but no one can hold a mirror up to the future, and the speech was well received in England. The prime minister's junior private secretary, Jock Colville, wrote in his diary that Churchill "certainly gives one confidence and will, I suspect, be Prime Minister before this war is over." Colville thought he might "lead us into the most dangerous paths. But he is the only man in the country who commands anything like universal respect, and perhaps with age he has become less inclined to undertake rash adventures." Hoare, another diarist, noted that Churchill seemed "very exhilarated" and that "the Press talked of him as Prime Minister." It was not just the press; Sir John Wheeler-Bennett was among those establishmentarians who, listening to

Winston, "first realized that Churchill was 'the pilot of the storm' who was needed to lead us through the crisis of the Second World War." That thought did not occur to Neville Chamberlain, but he was impressed; to his sister he wrote that he took "the same view as Winston, to whose excellent broadcast we have just been listening. I believe Russia will always act as she thinks her own interests demand, and I cannot believe she would think her interests served by . . . German domination in the Balkans."⁹⁰

In Berlin, William Shirer wrote: "The local enthusiasm for peace a little dampened today by Churchill's speech last night." Goebbels suppressed references to Winston's comments on Russia, but his allusion to the Admiralty's success in shielding merchantmen from Nazi submarines had touched a nerve. Led by *Der Stürmer*, *Völkischer Beobachter*, and *Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro*, the German press had made a great thing out of the U-boat campaign; U-boat captains were the toast of the Reich, and cartoonists had pictured Winston as a battered, cornered prizefighter and a drowning man surrounded by periscopes. His announcement that the subs had let a week pass without a victory enraged Hans Fritzsche, director of the Nazi broadcasting services. Fritzsche interrupted a program to deliver a thirteen-minute polemic denouncing Winston, quoting him and then raging: "So that is what the dirty gangster thinks! Who does that filthy liar think he is fooling? . . . So Mr. Churchill — that bloated swine [*aufgeblasenes Schwein*] — spouts through his dirty teeth that in the last week no English ship has been molested by German submarines? He does, indeed? . . . There you have the twisted and diseased mind of this infamous profiteer and specialist in stinking lying. Naturally those British ships have not been molested; they have been sunk."⁹¹

It is possible to be more overbearing in German than in any other tongue, but only if one has mastered it as Winston had mastered English. In any duel of denigration he was bound to leave Fritzsche far behind, and he did it in November, in his second wartime address over the BBC. Germany, he said, was more fragile than it seemed. He had

the sensation and also the conviction that that evil man over there and his cluster of confederates are not sure of themselves, as we are sure of ourselves; that they are harassed in their guilty souls by the thought and by the fear of an ever-approaching retribution for their crimes, and for the orgy of destruction in which they have plunged us all. As they look out tonight from their blatant, panoplied, clattering Nazi Germany, they cannot find one single friendly eye in the whole circumference of the globe. Not one!⁹²

Russia, he said, "returns them a flinty stare"; Italy "averts her gaze"; Japan "is puzzled and thinks herself betrayed"; Turkey, Islam, India, and

China "would regard with undisguised dread a Nazi triumph, well knowing what their fate would soon be"; and the "great English-speaking Republic across the Atlantic makes no secret of its sympathies." Thus "the whole world is against Hitler and Hitlerism. Men of every race and clime feel that this monstrous apparition stands between them and the forward move which is their due, and for which the age is ripe." The "seething mass of criminality and corruption constituted by the Nazi Party machine" was responsible for the power of its führer, "a haunted, morbid being, who, to their eternal shame, the German people in their bewilderment have worshipped as a god."⁹³

Jock Colville wrote that he had "listened to Winston Churchill's wireless speech, very boastful, over-confident and indiscreet (especially about Italy and the U.S.A.), but certainly most amusing." If Colville was condescending, Harold Nicolson sometimes turned his thumb down on a Churchill broadcast. After listening to one of the early radio addresses, Nicolson observed in his diary that Winston "is a little too rhetorical, and I do not think that his speech will really have gone down with the masses. He is too belligerent for this pacifist age, and although once anger comes to steel our sloppiness, his voice will be welcome to them, at the moment it reminds them of heroism which they do not really feel."⁹⁴

One hesitates to gainsay Harold Nicolson; he was one of the shrewdest observers of his time, and his lapses were rare. But this may have been one of them. Nicolson, with Amery and Spears, was a member of the Eden group and continued to attend their Carlton meetings well into 1940. More important, he — like Colville — belonged to the upper class, and carried all its paraphernalia with him. His credentials as an analyst of "the masses" are therefore thin; as he himself acknowledged, he misinterpreted the feelings of his own constituents. Now that the issue with Hitler was joined and English blood was flowing, Churchill had become the most overstated member of His Majesty's Government. Clearly that troubled Nicolson; men with his background prized understatement and recoiled from its opposite. Elsewhere on England's social spectrum, however, that was not true. Among the middle and lower classes, pacifism had begun to fade when Hitler entered Prague, and once war was declared it was replaced by patriotism. Before the war became dreary and stale, the signs of the nation's shift in mood had been unmistakable. The jubilant response to the naval victory off Montevideo had been one. Another had appeared when the people learned — from accounts of a Churchill speech in Parliament — that Luftwaffe pilots were machine-gunning the crews of unarmed fishing vessels and "describing on the radio what fun it was to see a little ship 'crackling in flames like a Christmas tree.'" Winston was swamped with mail from clerks and miners, waitresses and small busi-

nessmen, demanding reprisals. Of course, he refused; he was a gentleman. But *they weren't*, and they vastly outnumbered those who were.

There was talk — more out of Parliament than in it — of Churchill as prime minister. It was, and for thirty years had been, the only job which clearly suited him. That does not mean he was ineffectual elsewhere. He had always been able, and often brilliant, in other ministries, and even his Admiralty critics conceded that no other man in public life could match his performance in the private office. But given the broad reaches of his mind, his knowledge of the entire government, and his inability to hold his tongue in check, he often exasperated the cabinet by trespassing in departments which were the preserve of other men round the table. So it was in his BBC broadcasts. Although he began by confining himself to the war at sea, sooner or later he was bound to touch upon issues which could not be remotely construed as naval. If his touch had been light, the encroachment would have been ignored, but it was also characteristic of him that he was incapable of subtlety. His third major broadcast raised an issue which was clearly the special concern of the Foreign Office. He tore into Europe's neutral nations. By now none could doubt that the German führer had plans for their future, yet like Scarlett O'Hara they seemed to be promising themselves they would think about it tomorrow, while every tomorrow darkened their prospects. In a BBC broadcast on January 20, 1940, Churchill said:

All of them hope that the storm will pass
before their turn comes to be devoured.

But I fear — I fear greatly —
the storm will not pass.

It will rage and it will roar,
ever more loudly, ever more widely.
It will spread to the South;
it will spread to the North.

There is no chance of a speedy end
except through united action;

And if at any time, Britain and France,
wearying of the struggle,
were to make a shameful peace,

Nothing would remain for the smaller states of Europe,
with their shipping and their possessions,
but to be divided between the opposite, though similar,
barbarisms of Nazidom and Bolshevism.⁹⁵

Hoare commented in his diary: "Winston's broadcast to the neutrals. Bad effect." One consequence of the broadcast, unknown in London, was a *Führerordnung* to restudy possible operations in Scandinavia. Hitler guessed — correctly — that the first lord of the Admiralty had his eye on Norway. The Foreign Office was more concerned about the reaction in neutral capitals. In a pained note Halifax wrote Churchill: "I am afraid I think the effect of your broadcast in the countries which you no doubt had principally in mind has been very different from what you anticipated — though if I had seen your speech myself, I should have expected some such reactions." Among the newspapers which had bridled were *Het Handelsblad* in Holland, *Journal de Genève*, Denmark's *Politiken*, and Norway's *Morgenbladet*. Halifax complained that it "puts me in an impossible position if a member of the Gov. like yourself takes a line in public which differs from that taken by the PM or myself: and I think, as I have to be in daily touch with these tiresome neutrals, I ought to be able to predict how their minds will work." Churchill answered at once: "This is undoubtedly a disagreeable bouquet. I certainly thought I was expressing yr view & Neville's. . . . Do not however be quite sure that my line will prove so inconvenient as now appears. What the neutrals say is vy different from what they feel: or from what is going to happen." In fact Hitler had designs on most of them, and before spring ended the swastika would float over all their capitals but Switzerland's.⁹⁶

Halifax had passed over the one paragraph in the broadcast with momentous implications. It was a reference to the fighting going on in Finland, part of a complex issue which no one in England, including Churchill, understood. The Russo-German marriage of convenience had scarcely been consummated in Poland before divorce proceedings were quietly begun. Stalin, anxious to guard his Baltic flank from a future Nazi attack, signed pacts with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, permitting Moscow to garrison Red Army troops in each. He then turned to Finland. Among his objectives, all of which were defensive, was blocking the Gulf of Finland with artillery on both coasts, thus protecting the entrance to Leningrad. The Soviet Union offered Helsinki 2,134 square miles in exchange for the cession of 1,066 Finnish square miles. National sentiment — and fear of a German reprisal — barred an agreement. The Russians, desperate, offered to buy the territory. Helsinki still refused, and on November 30, 1939, the Red Army invaded Finland. To outsiders the invasion was an atrocity as black as the Nazi seizure of Poland. In retrospect, however, the difference is obvious. Russia's need to defend Leningrad is clear. The city came perilously close to conquest by the Germans later, and would certainly have fallen to the Nazis without the strip taken from the Finns.

The necessities of war modify principle; the hand of a country whose existence is threatened is not stayed by the rules of war. Churchill, at this very time, was telling the War Cabinet that "We must violate Norwegian territorial waters"; and Pétain, worried about the stretch of French frontier undefended by the Maginot Line, had told the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre that if France was to remain faithful to the principle which had saved her in the last war ("the defensive and continuous front"), she must face the fact that the one stretch of her frontier unprotected by the Maginot Line was the classic invasion route followed by Germans for nearly two thousand years. Consequently, he concluded: "*Nous devons entrer en Belgique!*" — "We must go into Belgium!" Winston agreed that Belgium could not possibly remain neutral, that it was essential to erect "a shield along the Belgian frontier to the sea against that terrible turning movement" which had "nearly encompassed our ruin in 1914."⁹⁷

To the astonishment of the world, tiny Finland threw the Russians back. Beginning with the Japanese conquest of Manchuria eight years earlier, the aggressor powers had repeatedly overwhelmed weak, poorly led defenders. Now a small country with one-fortieth the strength of the Soviet Union was humiliating a great power, sending the invaders reeling from the Mannerheim Line, named for their leader, Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil von Mannerheim. The Finn victories seemed miraculous, but there were several explanations. One was Mannerheim himself. Before the Russian Revolution, when Finland belonged to the czar, he had served as a lieutenant general; he had fought the Bolsheviks to a standstill then, and now, aged seventy-two, had come out of retirement to do it again. Stalin was holding his crack divisions in reserve should Hitler strike. He had sent the Red Army's poorest troops, ill-trained and sorely lacking in fighting spirit, against the Finns. Mannerheim led men fueled by the incentive of soldiers defending their homeland. He blinded the Russians with superior tactics, the use of superbly trained ski troops, a thorough knowledge of the lakes and forests constituting the terrain's natural obstacles, and a strategy peculiarly suitable to arctic warfare — cutting the enemy's line of retreat, waiting until the Russians were frozen and starved, and then counterattacking. The paralyzed invaders were not even properly clothed for the bitter Finnish winter. Churchill had spoken for tens of millions when, in his indictment of neutrals, he made an exception: "Only Finland — superb, nay, sublime — in the jaws of peril — Finland shows what free men can do. The service rendered by Finland to mankind is magnificent. They have exposed, for all the world to see, the military incapacity of the Red Army and of the Red Air Force. Many illusions about Soviet Russia have been dispelled in these few fierce weeks of fighting in the Arctic Circle."⁹⁸

The British and the French — seeing the opportunity for a pretext to cross northern Sweden, and, in passing, to seize the Swedish iron mines at Gällivare, vital to the Third Reich's war effort — were about to send "volunteers" to aid the Finns when the tide turned. After two months of frustration the Russians secured their communications from the Leningrad-Murmansk frontier, which they should have done before the invasion, and launched a major assault on the Mannerheim Line with fourteen divisions of sledge-borne infantry supported by heavy artillery, tanks, and warplanes. The Finns stood up to it for five ferocious weeks, counterattacking the tanks with what Churchill called "a new type of hand-grenade" — bottles filled with gasoline and topped by wick, lit at the moment of hurling — which they audaciously christened Molotov cocktails. They gave ground slowly, but they gave it. Vyborg, vital to the defense, was threatened by frontal assault and, from the rear, by troops crossing the icebound Gulf of Finland and the icebound island of Hogland. On March 6, 1940, the Finns sued for peace and the Allies disbanded their expeditionary force. The repercussions of this — for England, and particularly for Churchill — were almost immediate. Winston felt he now had an excellent precedent for intervention in Scandinavia. The greatest sequel, however, was taking shape in the minds of Hitler and the German General Staff in Zossen. Like Britain's first lord of the Admiralty, they underestimated Soviet military strength "with," as Liddell Hart writes, "momentous consequences the following year."⁹⁹

Churchill was not the first man in European public life to exploit the possibilities of radio. Hitler had been doing it for seven years. But Winston was the first British statesman to reach people in their homes and move them even more deeply than Roosevelt had in his fireside chats. Because the BBC had gone to great lengths to avoid controversy, its interwar programs were extraordinarily dull — "Arranging a Garden" and "Our Friends at the Zoo" were typical. So was Churchill's scheduled talk on the Mediterranean, which had brought Guy Burgess to Chartwell in 1938. Public issues had been discussed over the BBC, and earlier in the decade Winston had managed to get a word in now and then, but as the crises mounted on the Continent and tensions increased, Reith screened participants in debates, approving only those who presented bland views, offending no listeners, particularly those occupying the front bench in the House of Commons.

Until he entered the War Cabinet, Churchill's audiences had been largely confined to the House, lecture halls, and, during elections, party rallies. Suddenly that had changed. England was at war; the only action was at sea, and millions whose knowledge of Churchillian speeches had

been confined to published versions heard his rich voice, resonant with urgency, dramatically heightened by his tempo, pauses, and crashing consonants, which, one listener wrote, actually made his radio vibrate. Churchill had been a name in the newspapers, but even his own columns lacked the power of his delivery. He found precisely the right words for convictions his audiences shared but had been unable to express. He spoke of "thoughtless dilettanti or purblind worldlings who sometimes ask us: 'What is it that Britain and France are fighting for?' To this I answer: 'If we left off fighting you would soon find out.'" His elaborate metaphors, simplistic but effective, fortified his argument, and were often witty: "A baboon in a forest is a matter of legitimate speculation; a baboon in a Zoo is an object of public curiosity; but a baboon in your wife's bed is a cause of the gravest concern."¹⁰⁰

After the fall of Poland, when Hitler told the Western democracies to choose between a negotiated peace with him or "the views of Churchill and his following," Chamberlain gave him the official reply (which Churchill helped draft), but England heard Winston's, on the evening of November 12, 1939:

We tried again and again to prevent this war, and for the sake of peace we put up with a lot of things happening which ought not to have happened. But now we are at war, and we are going to make war, and persevere in making war, until the other side have had enough of it. . . . You may take it absolutely for certain that either all that Britain and France stand for in the modern world will go down, or that Hitler, the Nazi regime, and the recurring German or Prussian menace to Europe will be broken or destroyed. That is the way the matter lies and everybody had better make up his mind to that solid, somber fact.¹⁰¹

Like a thespian, Churchill began to receive critical notices. When he rose from the front bench to address the House of Commons, Beverley Baxter, an MP and a writer for the Beaverbrook press, compared him to "the old bandit who had been the terror of the mountain passes . . . the fire in him was burning low. His head was thrust forward characteristically, like a bull watching for the matador. He squared his shoulders a couple of times as if to make sure that his hands were free for the gestures that might come." When Winston told BBC listeners that "Now we have begun; now we are going on; now with the help of God, and the conviction that we are the defenders of civilisation and freedom, we are going on, and we are going on to the end." Virginia Cowles wrote that he was "giving the people of Britain the firm clear lead" they needed and "had not found elsewhere."¹⁰²

In December, the war's fourth month, a public opinion poll reported that barely half of the British people had expressed confidence in Chamberlain — one disillusioned Conservative described him as "hanging onto office like a dirty old piece of chewing gum on the leg of a chair" — and Churchill, right behind him, was gaining. In the House of Commons smoking room, and in the lobby, predictions that Winston would succeed Chamberlain, once shocking, were no longer whispered; they were legitimate speculation. The theme is an undercurrent in Nicolson's diaries, returning whenever disaster looms. The first cluster of references begins early, as on September 17, when he writes, "At 11 am. (a bad hour) Vita comes to tell me that Russia has invaded Poland and is striking toward Vilna. . . . It may be that within a few days we shall have Germany, Russia and Japan against us." At the end of the entry, clearly a frightened man, he writes: "Chamberlain must go. Churchill may be our Clemenceau or our Gambetta. To bed very miserable and alarmed." Nine days later, in the House, Nicolson watches as "The Prime Minister gets up to make his statement. He is dressed in deep mourning. . . . One feels the confidence and spirits of the House dropping inch by inch. When he sits down there is scarcely any applause. During the whole speech Winston Churchill had sat hunched beside him looking like the Chinese god of plenty suffering from acute indigestion." Then Churchill rises. Nicolson is euphoric: "The effect of Winston's speech was infinitely greater than could be derived from any reading of the text. . . . One could feel the spirits of the House rising with every word. . . . In those twenty minutes Churchill brought himself nearer the post of Prime Minister than he has ever been before. In the Lobbies afterwards even Chamberlainites were saying, 'We have now found our leader.'" And then, in early October — at a meeting of the Eden group — Nicolson hears the second Lord Astor tell members that he "feels it is essential that the Prime Minister should be removed and that Winston Churchill should take his place."¹⁰³

In Winston's place another ambitious politician hearing such praise — and it was coming to him from many sides — might have taken the pulse of the House, seeking to put together a coalition to topple the government and then form one of his own. Although members of this House of Commons, elected in 1935, were no longer reflective of the national mood, they too had built high hopes in the aftermath of Munich only to see them dashed; many felt betrayed; many others had heard from constituents who felt so. But plotting wasn't Churchill's style. He owed the Admiralty and his seat on the War Cabinet to the prime minister. Moreover, Chamberlain hadn't bullied him, called him on the carpet, or interfered in any way with his administration of the country's naval policy, though he may have been

tempted; Winston, being Winston, had critics among naval officers of flag rank.¹⁰⁴

Chamberlain did visit the upper war room frequently, but was always cordial and left expressing gratitude — if he knew that Sinclair and Beaverbrook were also shown the Admiralty maps (though neither was a member of the government), he kept it to himself. In the House Winston loyally supported the government's policies — was indeed their most forceful advocate — and praised the P.M. from time to time. In one of his broadcasts he said: "You know I have not always agreed with Mr. Chamberlain, though we have always been personal friends. But he is a man of very tough fiber, and I can tell you that he is going to fight as obstinately for victory as he did for peace." The war had, in fact, brought out an unexpected streak of belligerence in the prime minister. "Winston, for his part," Colville noted, "professes absolute loyalty to the P.M. (and indeed they get along admirably)," while Chamberlain wrote: "To me personally Winston is absolutely loyal, and I am continually hearing from others of the admiration he expressed for the P.M."¹⁰⁵

It was the same in Churchill's private life. Virginia Cowles, lunching at Admiralty House, was startled by Winston's reaction when one of the children attempted a mild jest at Chamberlain's expense. In the past, she remembered, jokes at the prime minister's expense had been featured at almost every meal, but this time she saw "a scowl appear on the father's face. With enormous solemnity he said: 'If you are going to make offensive remarks about my chief you will have to leave the table. We are united in a great and common cause and I am not prepared to tolerate such language about the Prime Minister.'" Similarly, when he received Lady Bonham Carter, née Violet Asquith — "Well, here we are back in the old premises after a short interval of twenty-five years," he said in greeting — her criticism of "the old appeasers" still in the government sparked a Churchillian rebuke. In a vehement defense of Chamberlain, he said: "No man is more inflexible, more single-minded. He has a will of steel."¹⁰⁶

On Friday the thirteenth of October, Churchill recorded, "my relations with Mr. Chamberlain had so far ripened that he and Mrs. Chamberlain came to dine with us at Admiralty House, where we had a comfortable flat in the attics. We were a party of four." During Stanley Baldwin's first prime ministry the two men had been colleagues for five years, yet they had never met socially. Churchill, "by happy chance" — one doubts that luck had anything to do with it — mentioned the Bahamas, knowing Chamberlain had spent several years there. Winston was "delighted to find my guest expand . . . to a degree I had not noticed before." Out came the long, sad story; Neville's father was convinced that the family fortune could be enriched, and an Empire industry

developed, if his younger son grew sisal on a barren island near Nassau. Neville spent six years trying. Buffeted by hurricanes, struggling with inadequate labor, "living nearly naked," as Churchill paraphrased him, he built a small harbor, wharf, and a short railroad. But those were ancillary; his objective was to produce sisal, and although he tried every known fertilizer he found it could not be done, or at any rate not by him. "I gathered," wrote Winston, in one of his wonderfully wry curtain lines, "that in the family the feeling was that although they loved him dearly they were sorry to have lost fifty thousand pounds." And then a thought flashed across his mind: "What a pity Hitler did not know when he met this sober English politician with his umbrella . . . that he was actually talking to a hard-bitten pioneer from the outer marches of the British Empire!"¹⁰⁷

But that was not the height of the evening. During dinner an officer came up from the war room immediately below them to report that a Nazi submarine had been sunk. He reappeared during dessert with news that a second U-boat had been sunk, and yet again, just before the ladies left the prime minister and first lord to their brandy, to announce, rather breathlessly, that a *third* sub had been sunk. Mrs. Chamberlain asked Winston: "Did you arrange all this on purpose?" Her host "assured her," as he put it, "that if she would come again we would produce a similar result."¹⁰⁸

As ruler of the King's navy, Winston was paid £5,000 a year and found; Admiralty House was an absolute defense against creditors. Clementine felt like a young woman again. She hadn't christened a ship in over twenty-six years, but she remembered the drill when invited to launch the aircraft carrier *Indomitable* at Barrow-in-Furness. Winston was there, and a photograph — taken at the instant she was gaily waving the ship away — became his favorite picture of her; years later, when he returned to his easel, he sketched an enchanting portrait from it. Lord Fraser, watching him during the launching, observed first "his cheers" as the long vessel slid free of the ways, "and then the grave salute," perhaps prompted by thoughts of the ordeals *Indomitable* "would have to face in the future."¹⁰⁹

Once the first lord and his lady had settled in topside at Admiralty House, Clementine's friends — and some acquaintances who weren't — came calling, wide-eyed ladies who could scarcely wait to see how she had done over the attics. Unwilling to offend them, she took them on tour, though she felt martyred; she had good taste, knew it, and didn't need confirmation. The only one qualified to judge was Diana Cooper, and she confined her criticisms to her diary. Even there she added that she was glad that the Churchills were in Admiralty House: "Winston's spirit, strength and confidence are . . . a chime that wakes the heart of the discouraged. His wife, more beautiful now than in early life, is equally fearless and

indefatigable. She makes us all knit jerseys, for which the minesweepers must bless her."¹¹⁰

Winston hadn't time to miss Chartwell, but something had to be done; it was impractical to keep the mansion open and prodigal to continue paying servants when only maintenance was necessary. In the early days of the war it seemed destined for a humanitarian purpose. In anticipation of heavy, continuous bombing of British cities, the evacuation of over 1,250,000 women and children, particularly those living near London's East Side docks, had begun in August. Members of the upper class, their attitudes formed in abstract discussion of "the underprivileged" and "depressed areas," flung open the doors of their great country homes and received the evacuees with a compassion and a hospitality that was frequently, and swiftly, regretted. Two cultures clashed; the young strangers had never seen or even heard of underwear; many would neither eat at tables nor sleep in beds; they were accustomed to doorways and alleys. Others brought lice which often spread to a horrified hostess and her own children. The unbridgeable gap was reflected in the remark of a Whitechapel mother to her six-year-old: "You dirty thing, messing the lady's carpet. Go and do it in the corner."¹¹¹

Chartwell had welcomed two East End mothers and their seven children. But like most other evacuees they drifted back to the docks, homesick and weary of the green country landscapes. Clemmie conferred with Winston. After two years' work he had nearly finished Orchard Cottage, to which they intended to retire while Randolph — who had joined his father's old regiment, the Fourth Hussars, and married the lovely Pamela Digby — moved into the big house. The cottage's three bedrooms were quite livable; if the first lord yearned for a weekend, they could stay there. Cousin Moppet agreed to serve as caretaker. She moved into what had been the chauffeur's cottage and was presently joined by Diana's two small children and their nannie. They had been evacuated but did not miss London, where their mother was serving as an officer in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). Duncan Sandys, Diana's husband, had been called up by his territorial unit and was stationed in London with an anti-aircraft battery. Sarah and Vic Oliver had taken a flat in Westminster Gardens. "Darling Papa," Sarah wrote Winston,

... wherever I go, people rush up to me and shake me by the hand, congratulate me, and smile on me — because of you, and I felt I must pass on some of their wishes and good will to you.

There was such a lovely picture of you on the Newsreel the other day, and the buzz and excitement that swept through the theatre, suddenly made me feel so inordinately proud that I was your daughter, and it suddenly

occurred to me that I had never really told you, through shyness and inarticulateness — *how much* I love you, and how much I will try to make this career that I have chosen — with some pain to the people I love, and not a little to myself — worthy of your name — one day —¹¹²

The note was signed, "Your loving Sarah." She was his favorite, and he needed her now. Security was so tight that every servant had to be investigated and cleared; even conversations with most friends and relatives were tense. Discussions of nearly everything now on Winston's mind was forbidden, so Clementine entertained less and less, grouping "outsiders," as the Churchills called them, together at dinner parties. Mary, seventeen and just out of school, lived with her parents, worked in a canteen and Red Cross workroom, and was enjoying her first taste of London society. Not everyone, she recalls, was barred from discussions of restricted information: "There was the small golden circle of trusted colleagues known to be 'padlock,' and to whom, of course, that trust was sacred." Nevertheless, the circle was very small. In wartime every cabinet member had to be careful in conversation, and this was especially true of the Admiralty's first lord. As Winston had said of Jellicoe in the first war, he was the only minister who could lose the war in an afternoon. Even the list of outsiders was short, excluding many with whom they had been close in the past.¹¹³

It certainly did not include Unity Mitford, who arrived back in England with a self-inflicted bullet wound in her neck. She had not cared to live through a war between her homeland and her beloved führer. The government did what it could to protect the privacy of her return, posting a guard with a fixed bayonet at the dock gate — "Nazi methods," fumed an *Express* reporter — but when her father protested that the whole family was being persecuted as Nazi sympathizers, Winston declined to intervene. Lord Redesdale and his talented daughters would have to muddle through on their own.¹¹⁴

The knitting bee into which Lady Diana had been drafted was only one of Clementine's projects. Life aboard the small boats which had been commandeered by the Admiralty and transformed into minesweepers was spartan and uncomfortable; therefore Clemmie made a successful public appeal for contributions to the Minesweepers and Coastal Craft Fund. She also served as a volunteer at the Fulmer Chase Maternity Home for officers' wives. By now she had become resigned, if not reconciled, to the company of Brendan Bracken and the Prof, and invited them to join other "padlock" friends, relatives, and "Chartwell regulars" in celebrating Christmas at Admiralty House. For Churchill it was a rare moment of relaxation; even so, he disappeared from time to time to check Pim's maps,

aware that on this most sacred of holidays there were Britons who could not observe it, whose duties kept them at peril on the sea.¹¹⁵



In the United States thirty years later, Americans protesting the Vietnam War displayed bumper stickers asking: "What if they gave a war and nobody came?" The answer is that the war would become inconvenient, depressing, vexing, and, most of all, a bore — which is what Britons called World War II's first eight months: the Bore War. To Chamberlain it was the Twilight War, to Churchill the Sinister Trance, to Frenchmen the *Drôle de Guerre*, to Germans the *Sitzkrieg*, and to U.S. Senator William Borah and his fellow Americans the Phony War. But for the average Englishman it remained a bloody bore.¹¹⁶

In that strange lull following the fall of Poland a state of war existed between the Third Reich and the Anglo-French forces confronting them, but after Gamelin's *offensive de la Sarre* the only Allied casualty on the Continent was a British corporal who suffered a flesh wound while cleaning his rifle. Britain had been psyched up in September, ready for sacrifice; two stock comments at the time were, "We can't let old Hitler get away with it again, can we?" and "It's got to come, so we might as well have it and have done with it." An Englishwoman wrote that "we seemed to me to be going to war as a duty," because "it was the only wise course to take. . . . I began to hope (feeling very glad nobody knew) that the air raid would begin at once and the worst happen quickly." After Chamberlain's broadcast declaring war on Germany, a young office girl in Sheffield stood with her parents as the national anthem was played; she had "a funny feeling inside. . . . I know we were all in the same mind, that we shall and must win." A middle-aged schoolmistress noted: "At 11:15 I went up, and we sat round listening to Chamberlain speaking. I held my chin high and kept back the tears at the thought of all that slaughter ahead. When 'God Save the King' was played we stood."¹¹⁷

The country had braced itself to withstand a shock, believing its cause just, and then — nothing happened. As one Englishman put it: "The sense of mission turned sour." Chamberlain, demanding that the wage claims of workers be withdrawn, insisted that the wealthy had already made voluntary sacrifices. Audiences, even in Birmingham, laughed at him. Admiralty control of merchantmen often determined what was imported and what was not, and the first lord's ruling that all ships must zigzag to evade U-boats — a carryover from the last war — doubled the length of voyages. As a result there were shortages of everything: food, coal, and —

though the government had encouraged householders to keep backyard hens — grain to feed poultry. Sugar, bacon, ham, and butter were rationed: by the fifth month of the war forty-eight million ration books had been issued in the United Kingdom. Mutton, smoked to look like bacon, became known as "macon"; native and imported butter were lumped together and officially designated "nation butter." In London Gracie Fields bellowed out a new hit:

*They can muck about
With your Brussels sprout,
But they can't ration love!*

There was even a shortage of noise. Under the Control of Noises (Defence) Order, ambulance sirens, factory whistles, and automobile horns were prohibited. Later, church bells were added. The thought behind this was that such sounds might alarm citizens or confuse those responsible for defending the city. It does not seem to have occurred to the authorities that Britons who had been hearing these noises all their lives might find *silence* alarming. In the territorials ammunition for rifles and Bren guns was rationed, and frequently officers, whose only personal weapons were their pistols, were unable to fire a single practice round. MPs like Sandys who were also reserve officers were accosted, at officers' mess, with complaints and questions. One question which they themselves would have liked to raise in the House irked property owners, which many of them were. In the first week of the war the government had requisitioned private property for wartime use. Tenants were evicted, warehouses emptied, livestock ousted from barns which were then locked. Winter deepened, spring approached, and the housing, warehouses, and barns stood empty. What had the government wanted them for? And where were the evacuees, now streaming back into London, going to live?¹¹⁸

Doubt, suspicion, and distrust of authority — the mood known as "bloody-mindedness" in the British army — appeared and spread. The lower classes were especially restive. As late as May 3, when all continued quiet on the western front, Jock Colville's Downing Street diary noted "a somewhat alarming report from the Conservative Central Office. . . . It seems that the war is not popular among the lowest sections of the community, that there is a suspicion it is being fought in the interests of the rich, and that there is much discontent about the rising cost of living." He added perceptively: "This is but a slight foretaste of what we shall have to face after the war." But the discontent was everywhere. A public opinion poll found that 46 percent of the British people were gloomy, 20 percent

saw "a dark future" which would eventually reveal "a silver lining," 22 percent were fatalistic, and only 12 percent were optimistic. Churchill belonged with those believing in a silver lining. At the end of the war's first week he wrote Ambassador Corbin that "if there is full comradeship I cannot doubt our victory"; and, in another letter, he reaffirmed his conviction that — quoting his Boer War captors, who had given him a lifelong maxim to live by — "all will come right if we all work together to the end."¹¹⁹

But Winston, whose home and office were in the same building, did not have to cope with the blackout, the most exasperating irritant of a war in which the enemy had yet to appear. On Christmas Day, King George VI, following precedent, addressed his people over the BBC. He had inherited his father's gift for tedium — "A new year is at hand," he said. "We cannot tell what it will bring" — and his closing remark was more appropriate than he knew. "Go out into darkness," he told them, "and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way." Englishmen knew bloody well they were going out into darkness, but they preferred the known way, believing it safer, and were convinced that after nightfall nothing was better than light.¹²⁰

In the beginning the impenetrable darkness had been rather exciting, like Guy Fawkes Day. But it could also be dangerous. In January a Gallup poll reported that since the outbreak of war about one Briton in five had been hurt in blackouts: bowled over by invisible runners, bruised by walking smack into an Air Raid Precautions post, stumbling over a curb, or being knocked down by a car without lights when they were on a street or road and didn't know it. Criminals appeared in the Square Mile, the heart of London, and even sortied into the West End. Just before Christmas some shopping centers tested what was known as "amenity lighting" — equivalent to the glow of a single candle seen seventy feet away. It was judged more depressing than utter darkness. Youth had fun with it, as youth always does. In the tube they merrily sang bawdy music hall ballads popular when Churchill was a handsome young cavalry officer — "Knees Up, Mother Brown" was a hit once more. Mass Observation reported a new fashion; a young couple would enjoy "intercourse in a shop doorway on the fringe of passing crowds, screened by another couple waiting to perform the same adventure. It has been done in a spirit of daring, but is described as being perfectly easy and rather thrilling."¹²¹

When war broke out, or was reported to have broken out, Air Raid Precautions wardens had been popular. Usually they were kindly, avuncular neighbors, looking a bit sheepish at first in their helmets as they went from door to door testing gas masks and explaining that no chink of light should escape a dwelling. But as time passed people grew tired of waiting for the

Luftwaffe. One man told an interviewer that he felt like a patient in a dentist's waiting room: "It's got to come and will probably be horrible while it lasts, but it won't last forever, and it's just possible these teeth won't have to come out after all." It was just possible that Nazi Heinkels or Junkers would never appear in the night skies over England, so Mum or Dad might carelessly leave a shade up an inch or two, or a door ajar. Then the fatherly wardens turned into monsters. Their shining hour would come, and soon; in the Bore War, however, many of them were stigmatized to a degree which is puzzling today. But it should be remembered that in those days an Englishman's home was considered his castle; a premium was placed on privacy. And many men in tin hats were seen as a threat to it.¹²²

In one remarkable instance a hundred-watt bulb had been left burning in an unoccupied house. The warden, a young, powerfully built man, found himself eyeball to eyeball with a double-locked mahogany door, framed in oak and set in concrete. He left, returned with a long iron bar, and, gathering his muscles for one heroic effort, burst into the room and turned off the lamp. The damage was fifteen pounds. An understanding magistrate reduced the usual two-pound fine to one pound. One outraged Londoner said he hated wardens more than Nazis and wanted to strangle them. If the German bombers had come it would have been different, but they hadn't. "What was the *point* of it?" asked Laurence Thompson, speaking for countless thousands. The English people, he wrote, were "a decent, puzzled, discontented people who had braced themselves to withstand Armageddon, and found themselves facing the petty miseries of burst water pipes, a shortage of coal, verminous evacuees, and the dim spiritual erosion of the blackout."¹²³

The burst pipes, amounting to an epidemic, derived from the coldest European winter in forty-five years, an act of God which did not strengthen confidence in the King's endorsement of His benevolence. The coal shortage contributed to it, of course, but even without the inconveniences of wartime, Britain and the Continent would have suffered. Trains were buried under thirty-foot drifts; snowplows dug them out, but even so they were over twenty-eight hours late in reaching their destinations. Among civilians communications were often impossible. You couldn't phone, you couldn't send a wire; hundreds of miles of telephone and telegraph wires were down. In Derbyshire the drifts towered over cottage roofs. The Thames was solid ice for eight miles — from Teddington to Surbury. And the Strait of Dover was frozen at Dungeness and Folkestone. Afterward, one editorial surmised: "It is probable that on January 29, when chaotic transport conditions prevailed over a large part of England, due to snow and ice, Berlin had little idea of the extent of our wintry weather."¹²⁴

It did not occur to that insular editor that the Continent might be sharing Britain's misery. Actually, the Continent was just as frigid. Even the Riviera was desolate, and Berlin, like London, was snowbound. The weather, which had not saved Poland, gave the Allies a reprieve. Seldom, if ever, have meteorological conditions so altered the course of a war, though the issue of who benefited most is debatable. Telford Taylor believes that because "the extremity of that bitter winter alone prevented Hitler from launching [an attack] against an ill-equipped and ill-prepared Anglo-French army . . . the weather saved the British army, which at that time had only half the strength it was to attain by spring." Certainly they felt blessed at the time. But afterward, when the OKW hierarchy was interrogated at Nuremberg, it became clear that during that arctic hiatus the Führer, in a brilliant stroke, completely changed his western strategy and thereby gained his margin of victory. How the Allies would have fared in the autumn of 1939 is moot. The fact that the French collapsed in the spring of 1940 is not, and the fewer troops the BEF had when France fell, the better, for in the ultimate crisis all of them had to be rescued.¹²⁵

Hitler's military genius in the war's early years — his gift for reviewing the choices presented by *die Herren Oberbefehlshaber* (the commanders in chief) and unerringly selecting the right one — can hardly be exaggerated. Later, after his victories persuaded him that he was invincible, he provided the same generals with evidence to support their contention that his strategy was a succession of blunders. It wasn't; he achieved his remarkable triumphs despite them, in part because he understood them, and, more important, their soldiers, better than they did. Most of the world outside the Reich assumed that the Wehrmacht would rest after overwhelming Poland while the Führer digested his new conquest. Ironside disagreed. On September 15 — twelve days before the surrender of Warsaw — the CIGS told the War Cabinet that the French believed the Wehrmacht "would stage a big attack on the Western Front" within a month, and he himself thought a German offensive possible before the end of October. It seemed improbable. Even Churchill wrote Chamberlain later that same Friday that in his view a German attack on the western front "at this late season" was "most unlikely." A turn eastward and southward through Hungary and Rumania made more sense to Winston. He doubted that the Führer would turn westward until "he has collected the easy spoils which await him in the East," thereby giving his people "the spectacle of repeated successes."¹²⁶

His vision was clouded there. However, no one outside the War Office and the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre, and very few in them, matched his analysis of the Polish campaign. In that same letter he wrote that he was "strongly of the opinion that we should make every preparation to defend

ourselves in the West." In particular, French territory on the border "behind Belgium should be fortified night and day by every conceivable resource," including "obstacles to tank attack, planting railway rails upright, digging deep ditches, erecting concrete dolls, land-mines in some parts and inundations all ready to let out in others, etc.," which "should be combined in a deep system of defence." The panzers which were overrunning Poland, he wrote, "can only be stopped by physical obstacles defended by resolute troops and a powerful artillery." If defenders lacked those, he warned, "the attack of armoured vehicles cannot be resisted."¹²⁷

Hitler shared Churchill's admiration for tanks, and for that very reason he wanted to invade the neutral Low Countries before such obstacles could be built. He also assumed — illustrating his ignorance of how democracies work — that the Allies would soon occupy Belgium and Holland. Two days after Ironside's presentation to the War Cabinet and Churchill's advice to the prime minister, the Führer told the OKW commanders in Zossen that immediately after the Polish surrender he wanted to move the entire Wehrmacht across Germany and strike at the Allied forces. The Generalstab was shocked. They had been counting on several months of positional warfare in the west while they retrained their men and planned the army's order of battle. He was adamant; a few weeks later, on October 10, he issued his Directive No. 6, ordering immediate preparations for an attack through Luxembourg, Belgium, and Holland "at as early a date as possible" with the objective of defeating the French and establishing "a base for conducting a promising air and sea war against England." To his staff he said he wanted the invasion under way by November 12.¹²⁸

Ten days after his directive, the generals submitted their plan for invasion in the west. In Hitler's view, and in history's, it was remarkable for its mediocrity and lack of imagination. They proposed a frontal assault driving head-on across the Low Countries to the Channel ports. Six days later the Führer suggested that the main thrust drive across southern Belgium and through the forested Ardennes toward Sedan. Their reply echoes Pétain's view; the hills and thick woods of the Ardennes were "*unmöglich*" ("impossible"). The Führer made no further comment then. He hadn't dismissed the idea, but had the fine weather held, the unimaginative attack would have proceeded. Although the Allied armies were not up to strength, that was the plan they expected, and they would have met it with everything they had. They did so seven months later, when they had much more. Unfortunately, the German plan of attack had changed; while they were rushing to bar the front door, the enemy slipped in the back.

The weather, responsible for the long delay, persuaded Hitler to postpone his assault nine times. Each time, he reconsidered lunging

through the Ardennes with a panzer corps. His aides were instructed to bring him aerial photographs and detailed topographic maps of the terrain. Studying them, he felt confirmed; much of it was good panzer country, fields and roads, the forested areas which discouraged generals could be used to advantage, camouflaging tanks from aerial surveillance. In fact, although this was unknown to him, in 1939 when the Conseil Supérieur had staged a seven-division German drive in the French Ardennes with armored support, the "enemy" had put the defenders to flight. Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, army commander in chief, was unconvinced, and protocol required the Führer to deal directly with him. However, a handful of his most gifted generals, Manstein, Rundstedt, and Guderian among them, believed that a massive panzer *Sichelschnitt* (scythes-cut) in the south, with a far stronger force than Hitler had proposed, could slice through the Ardennes, drive to the sea, and trap the Allied armies in the north, where the Germans were expected. On February 17, in a traditional ceremony, five generals promoted to corps commanders were invited to dine with the Führer. Manstein was among them. He gave his host a detailed account of the plan he, Rundstedt, and Guderian had developed. Hitler was ecstatic. At noon the next day he issued a new *Führerordnung*, incorporating all Manstein's points. By February 24, Hitler, Halder, and the OKW in Zossen, working round the clock, had completed the final orders for their Ardennes offensive. The blow would fall in May.

The British military presence in France, so slight before winter closed down Hitler's plan for a lightning stroke in the west, grew through the bitter winter, until Lord Gort, the BEF commander, had nearly 400,000 men dug in. Unlike their fathers in 1914, they were not eager to fight, but they were ready. Morale was high; the British spit-and-polish traditions were observed; so were training schedules; and officers organized games, the more vigorous the better, to keep the men fit. Gracie Fields's ration song was unheard here. The music halls had given the BEF a rollicking anthem which enjoyed tremendous popularity until events soured its lyrics.

*We're gonna hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line.
Have you any dirty washing, Mother dear?*

Soldiers given leave headed for Paris, where the season's hit shows were *Paris, Reste Paris*, at the Casino de Paris, starring Maurice Chevalier and Josephine Baker; Lucienne Boyer at her *boîte de nuit* in the rue Volney; and revivals of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Madame sans Gêne* at the Comédie Française. But on the whole Tommies found the City of Light

disappointing. The attitude of the French puzzled them. They seemed surly, hostile, smoldering with grievances. And so they were. Some of their anger was intramural; they held their leaders in contempt. After the Russians had picked up their winnings in Poland and declared themselves at peace, France's powerful Communist party took the position that the war was a "capitalist-imperialist project" in which workers had no stake. At the other end of the political spectrum, the extreme French right still yearned for an understanding with the Reich; with Poland gone, they argued, the need for an anti-Bolshevik bulwark was all the greater. To them, German National Socialism was preferable to French socialism; their rallying cry was "Better Hitler than Blum." Lucien Rebattet, a gifted writer for the Fascist weekly *Je Suis Partout*, wrote that the war had been launched "by the most hideous buffoons of the most hideous Jewish and demagogic regime. . . . We are supposed once more to save the Republic, and a Republic worse than the one in 1914. . . . No, I do not feel the least anger against Hitler, but much against all the French politicians who have led to his triumph."¹²⁹

However, the chief target of French discontent was Britain. Although the British were allies, they were treated with scorn. Until Tommies began manning sectors of the Maginot Line, a brigade at a time, most poilus were unaware that the British Expeditionary Force even existed. Certainly their newspapers didn't tell them. The Parisian press, reinforcing the public mood, was resentful not of Nazi aggression, the root cause of the war, but of *l'Albion perfide*. England, in the popular French view, had forced France into unnecessary hostilities, and there was widespread suspicion that the British had no intention of fighting — that when battle appeared imminent they would withdraw to their island, shielded by the Royal Navy, while poilus were slaughtered. Daladier told William Bullitt, the American ambassador, that he was convinced Britain intended to let the French do all the fighting. At the Quai d'Orsay, Alexis Léger spoke as though Britain were uncommitted, telling Bullitt: "*La partie est perdue. La France est seule.*" Holding his first staff meeting as supreme commander of Allied troops, Gamelin revealed his opinion of his ally by neglecting to bring an interpreter and speaking so rapidly that less than half of what he said was understood by the British officers.¹³⁰

*We're gonna hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line
'Cause the washing day is here.*

Churchill had been visiting France since childhood, and despite his atrocious accent, he spoke the language fluently. Hitler spoke only German. He had never been abroad. Yet Churchill's Francophilia was a

romantic illusion, while the German führer's evaluation of the people who had been Germany's foe for over two thousand years was penetrating. "Hitler," Churchill later wrote, "was sure that the French political system was rotten to the core, and that it had infected the French Army." Whatever the reason, the rot was there. And Joseph Goebbels knew how to make it fester. The Luftwaffe, like the RAF, staged truth raids. They were, however, far more clever than England's. Their contribution to what one French officer called "*une guerre de confettis*" was not leaflets but single slips of paper that fluttered down round the French lines. Resembling colored leaves, they bore on one side the message: "In the autumn the leaves fall. So fall the poilus, fighting for the English." The obverse read: "In the spring the leaves come again. Not so the poilus."¹³¹

The leaflets were followed by beguiling enticements from French-speaking Germans using bullhorns and large signs taunting poilus at the front, asking why they should die for Danzig, the Poles, or the British ("*Ne mourez pas pour Danzig, pour les Polonais, pour les Britanniques!*"). Nazi propagandistic statements quoted by Molotov, effective among French Communists, assigned to "*la France et la Grande-Bretagne la responsabilité de la poursuite des hostilités.*" On September 26, with Poland vanquished, the Germans opened a new propaganda campaign: "Why do France and Britain want to fight now? Nothing to fight about. Germany wants nothing in the West. [*L'Allemagne ne demande rien à l'ouest.*]" The most effective line was the assurance that if the French didn't open fire, German guns would remain silent. *Time* reported a version of this: "We have orders not to fire on you if you don't fire on us." Soon poilus and *Soldaten* were bathing in the Rhine together. *Time* readers unfamiliar with the fighting spirit essential in infantry combat — not only for victory but also for the survival of the individual infantryman — might have thought this harmless. But it served the Führer in two ways. In the first week of the war civility between men on both sides would permit his thin screen of troops on the Reich's western front to hold while the Wehrmacht finished off the Poles. And idle soldiers, especially those doubtful of their cause, deteriorate under such circumstances; their combat efficiency loses whatever edge it had, and when the balloon goes up, they find it almost impossible to kill the likable, fair-haired youths on the far shore, which means the youths on the far shore, no longer under orders to appear likable, are far likelier to kill them.¹³²

British soldiers appeared to be immune to the contagion. Their commanders were not defeatist, neither their great-grandfathers nor their fathers had been routed by German troops in 1870 and 1914 — and besides, whoever heard of Blighty losing a war?

*What though the weather be wet or fine,
We'll just travel on without a care.*

British officers, however, were worried. One of their strengths, and a source of impotent rage among those who lived under other flags and had to deal with them, was that Englishmen with their background could not be offended by pomposity because their own capacity for arrogance was infinite. In 1914 British officers had told their men, "The wogs" — a pejorative for subjects of the Empire — "begin at Calais." They were still saying it in 1939, distinctly pronouncing the final *s* in *Calais* while natives gnashed their teeth. Gamelin, reading French aloud at top speed, could never win playing this game with them. They had invented insolence and would leave his hauteur a thing of shreds and patches.

They were, however, concerned about the poilus' morale. If the Germans came — and despite enemy propaganda no one in authority doubted that they would — these French soldiers would be on the British right. Should they break, the BEF's flank would be left hanging on air, the ultimate horror of a generation of soldiers wedded to the doctrine of *le front continu*. Again and again they had been told that the French army was "matchless," a word, it now occurred to them, subject to two interpretations. Certainly few of them could recall seeing its equal in carelessness, untidiness, and lack of military courtesy. General Sir Alan Brooke, a future CIGS now commanding a BEF corps, attended a ceremony as the guest of General André-Georges Corap, commander of the French Ninth Army. In his memoirs he would recall taking the salute: "Seldom have I seen anything more slovenly and badly turned out. Men unshaven, horses ungroomed, clothes and saddlery that did not fit, vehicles dirty, and a complete lack of pride in themselves and their units. What shook me most . . . was the look in the men's faces, disgruntled and insubordinate looks, and although ordered to give 'Eyes left,' hardly a man bothered to do so." It would be a distortion, however, to indict the conscripted French soldier for his reluctance to defend the soil of France. The blight went all the way to the top. It was their *généralissime* who expressly forbade poilus from firing on German working parties across the river. "*Les Allemands,*" he said, "*répondront en tirant sur les nôtres*" ("The Germans would only respond by firing on us").¹³³

Sumner Welles, the American under secretary of state, accepted an invitation to inspect the Allied front. Welles was touring Europe as a special emissary of FDR, and in Washington he reported that French officers had privately complained to him that their men were undisciplined; unless the Germans attacked soon, they predicted, the poilus would spontaneously disband and go home. If an army's leaders take a foreigner aside

to criticize their own men, something is very wrong. Vigilant French leaders knew it. Not only was there no training; neither Gamelin nor General Georges, Churchill's friend, ordered exercises at divisional strength to make commanders familiar with the problems of handling large units in the field. General André-Charles-Victor Laffargue later wrote: "Our units vegetated in an existence without purpose, settling down to guard duty and killing time until the next leave or relief." Longer leaves were granted more frequently, recreation centers established, theatrical troupes summoned from Paris to entertain the troops.¹³⁴

Nothing worked. Morale continued to decline. General Edmond Ruby, commander of the First Army, was alarmed to find "a general apathy and ignorance among the ranks. No one dared give an order for fear of being criticized. Military exercises were considered a joke, and work unnecessary drudgery." The next step down was alcoholism. It appears to have descended upon the whole army overnight. "*L'ivrognerie*" — drunkenness — "had made an immediate appearance," General Ruby noted, "and in the larger railroad stations special rooms had to be set up to cope with it — euphemistically known as 'halls of de-alcoholizing.'" So many men were so drunk in public that commanders began to worry about *civilian* morale.¹³⁵

Although Churchill believed that the French army would never break, however strong the German assault, in January 1940 he crossed the Channel for a visit to the front. He did not return reassured. The French artillery, he was pleased to find, had been improved "so as to get extra range and even to out-range, the new German artillery." But he was deeply troubled by "the mood of the people," which "in a great national conscript force is closely reflected in its army, the more so when that army is quartered in the homeland and contacts are close." During the 1930s, he later wrote, "important elements, in reaction to growing Communism, had swung towards Fascism," and the long months of waiting which had followed the collapse of Poland had given "time and opportunity" for "the poisons" of communism and fascism "to be established." There could be "no doubt," he observed, that "the quality of the French army" was being "allowed to deteriorate during the winter." Sound morale in any army is achieved in many ways, "but one of the greatest is that men be fully employed at useful and interesting work. Idleness is a dangerous breeding-ground." He had observed "many tasks that needed doing: training demanded continuous attention; defences were far from satisfactory or complete, even the Maginot Line lacked many supplementary field works; physical fitness demands exercise." He had been struck by the "poor quality of the work in hand, by the lack of visible activity of any kind," and thought the "emptiness of the roads behind the line was in great contrast to

the continual coming and going which extended for miles behind the British sector."¹³⁶

Colonel de Gaulle also believed the troops needed training and exercise, and urged it in a vigorous report to his superiors. He thought programs should be both intensive and exhausting, partly because the men weren't fit but also to raise their spirits. Somewhere on its way up to high command his recommendation was lost, which was no surprise to those familiar with the system. In combat a leader's greatest need is information, and if he is competent he does everything possible to establish a communications system that will survive in the chaos of battle, and, if possible, at least one backup net, for what works well in peacetime maneuvers may disintegrate and vanish when great armies clash in the fog of war.

Gamelin seems not to have anticipated this obstacle. Indeed, it was almost as though he set out to frustrate his own chain of command and assure his isolation when he was most needed. Poring over documents in Vincennes, on the outskirts of Paris, he never established means of keeping in touch with field commanders. There was no radio at Vincennes. He could telephone Georges, the commander of all forces at the front, whose headquarters were at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, thirty-five miles away, but he preferred to drive, an hour each way on roads swarming with suburban Paris traffic. In the age of radio and the teletype, it took six hours for an order from Gamelin to reach an air force command — by which time the target would be gone — and *forty-eight hours* to issue a general order to all commands. One French officer described his remote headquarters as a "submarine without a periscope," and later de Gaulle wrote bitterly: "There he was, in a setting as quiet as a convent [*silencieux comme un couvent*], attended by a few officers, working and meditating without mixing in day-to-day duties. In his retreat at Vincennes, General Gamelin gave the impression of a savant testing the chemical reactions of his strategy in a laboratory."¹³⁷

Sir John Slessor of the Air Ministry, one of a series of visitors from London, described the supreme commander as a "nice old man not remotely equal to his enormous job." Why, then, didn't the British move to thwart the debacle that lay dead ahead? One reason was that the British troop commitment was much smaller than the French. Another was that in the last war it had taken four years to establish a unified command under Foch. Furthermore, Gamelin had served ably on Foch's staff. Most members of His Majesty's Government were Francophiles; they refused to credit the tales of Anglophobia across the water. All, Churchill included, retained their blind faith in the French army, which had taken the worst the Germans could throw at them between 1914 and 1918 and always came

back. The poilus of this war were the sons of those in the last. Surely they had inherited the same fighting qualities. But they hadn't. Unlike their fathers, they preferred to live.

There was also the Maginot Line. Those whose memories do not reach back to the 1930s cannot grasp its enormous reputation before its hour struck. *La Ligne* was considered one of the world's wonders, and the French never lost an opportunity to polish its image. The French high command celebrated the first Christmas of the war by announcing that they had completed a staggering "work of fortification." Their goal had been "to double the Maginot Line" and it was "virtually complete. . . . From the first of this month our new line of fortifications seems to have removed any hope the enemy may have entertained either of crossing or flanking the Maginot Line."¹³⁸

*We're gonna hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line.
Have you any dirty washing, Mother dear?*

An American foreign correspondent asked about the Ardennes. Every staff officer was aware that the forest was unfortified; Hitler knew; Manstein, Guderian, Halder, and Rundstedt knew; and Liddell Hart had known of it for over eleven years. But the American public, the British public, and the French public did not know. A majority were under the impression that the Maginot shielded France from every possible German thrust. At Vincennes an officer in a kepi and flawless uniform of sky blue quoted Pétain — "*Elle est impénétrable*" — with the proviso that "special dispositions" must be made there. The edges on the enemy side would be protected; some blockhouses would be installed. The war was nearly four months old, the Maginot Line had been doubled, but the dispositions were not complete. The American asked why. Because at this point the front would not have any depth, he was told, the enemy would not commit himself there. Finally: "*Ce secteur n'est pas dangereux.*"¹³⁹

We're gonna hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line

Walter Lippmann was received as though he were a head of state; a dozen colonels took him on a tour of the Maginot Line, then accompanied him to Vincennes. Lippmann commented that there was only one thing wrong with the line: it was in the wrong place. The *généralissime* did not understand. What would happen, the American publicist asked, if the enemy attacked in the north, where the line ended at the Belgian frontier? Gamelin was glad he had asked. He was *hoping* the Germans would try

that. "We've got to have an open side because we need a *champs de bataille*," he explained. "The Maginot Line will narrow the gap through which they can come, and thus enable us to destroy them more easily."¹⁴⁰

'Cause the washing day is here.

Colonel de Gaulle was a *peste*. He had been repeatedly referred to the army manual *Les instructions pour l'emploi des chars* — tanks — which clearly stated that "Combat tanks are machines to accompany the infantry. . . . In battle, tank units constitute an integral part of the infantry. . . . Tanks are only supplementary means. . . . The progress of the infantry and its seizing of objectives are alone decisive." The role of the tank was to accompany infantry "*et non pour combattre en formations indépendantes.*" Could anything be clearer? He was worse than the aviators, who at least had the decency to remain silent after General Gamelin had told them: "There is no such thing as the aerial battle. There is only the battle on the ground." Yet here was de Gaulle, turning up in Montry at general headquarters, where most of the General Staff and staff officers could be found, with another of his reports, this one on *les leçons* to be learned from the blitzkrieg in Poland. He wrote: "The gasoline engine discredits all our military doctrines, just as it will demolish our fortifications. We have excellent material. We must learn to use it as the Germans have."¹⁴¹

At present, de Gaulle pointed out, French tanks were dispersed for infantry support. It would be wiser, he submitted, to follow the example of the Germans, forming them in armored divisions as the Wehrmacht had done in its Polish campaign, and, indeed, before the Anschluss. His proposals were rejected by two generals — one of whom predicted that even if Nazi tanks penetrated French lines they would face "*la destruction presque complète.*" To this snub the high command added mortal injury to the France de Gaulle loved. Despite the vindication of Guderian's prewar book *Achtung, Panzer!* in Poland, the French high command decided to sell its tanks abroad. The R-35 was a better tank than any German model. Of the last 500 produced before May 10, 1940, nearly half — 235 — were sold to Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, with the result that when the Germans struck only 90 were on the French front. Moreover, while Nazi troops, Stukas, and armored divisions were massing in the Rhineland for their great lunge westward, the generals charged with the defense of French soil gathered representatives of countries not regarded as unfriendly to France and auctioned off 500 artillery pieces, complete with ammunition, and 830 antitank guns — at a time when the French army was desperately short of both weapons.¹⁴²

The French Ministry of War announced that 100,000 pigeons had

been mobilized and housed inside the Maginot Line to carry messages through artillery barrages.

*We're gonna hang our washing on the Siegfried Line —
If the Siegfried Line's still there!*



The brief struggle in Finland had drawn the world's attention to Scandinavia, a development deplored by the Scandinavians, who, like other neutrals, hoped they would be overlooked until the war was over. Norway's yearning for obscurity — which was inevitably shared by Denmark, as it was situated between the Norwegians and the Reich — was frustrated by the Royal Navy on Friday, February 16, in an action which thrilled all England, widened the war, increased Churchill's popularity, and, in its sequel, almost led to his ruin.

Probably Oslo's desperate attempts to remain a spectator were doomed. A country's neutrality cannot always be determined by its own government. If it is violated by one warring power, the country is like the ravished maiden in the Nibelungenlied legend who immediately becomes available to all others, and the Germans had been exploiting Norway's territorial waters since the outbreak of the war. Swedish iron ore from Gällivare was "vital for the German munitions industry," as Churchill had told the War Cabinet on September 19, and while in summer German ships could transport this ore across the Gulf of Bothnia, between Finland and Sweden, in winter it had to be moved westward to Narvik, a Norwegian port, and then down the length of the Norwegian coast through the Leads, a deep-water channel running parallel to the shore. Germany wasn't the only country with U-boats; British submarines could have littered the floor of the North Atlantic with the sunken hulks of enemy freighters.¹⁴³

It hadn't done so because their captains had remained within Norway's three-mile limit, and the government in Oslo, fearful of Nazi reprisals, had decided not to protest. If this use of Norwegian territorial waters could not be stopped "by pressure on the Norwegian government," said Churchill, it would be his duty to propose "the laying of mines" inside Norway's "territorial waters." There was precedent for this. The Admiralty had done it in 1917, and had successfully drawn the German ships out beyond the Leads. After the meeting broke up, he sent Pound a minute advising him that the War Cabinet, including Halifax, "appeared strongly

to favor this action." Therefore, he wrote, he wanted Admiralty staff to study the minelaying operation, adding: "Pray let me be continually informed of the progress of this plan, which is of the highest importance in crippling the enemy's war industry." A further decision of the War Cabinet would be made "when all is in readiness."¹⁴⁴

Pound had seen to it that all was soon in readiness, but other members of the cabinet had not really shared Churchill's sense of urgency, and when the project was mooted in Whitehall, the Foreign Office and the Dominions emitted sounds of alarm. After discussion a majority of the War Cabinet had decided that immediate action was unnecessary, and the matter had been set aside. This seemed to be the fate of every imaginative proposal Winston laid before them, and his sense of frustration is evident in a letter to a colleague. His "disquiet," he wrote, was mainly due to "the awful difficulty which our machinery of war conduct presents to positive action. I see such immense walls of prevention, all building and building, that I wonder whether any plan will have a chance of climbing over them."¹⁴⁵

The issue had remained on Churchill's mind, however, and had been one of his motives in drafting Operation Catherine. Now in February a flagrant Nazi trespass inside the three-mile limit called for an instant response by the Admiralty. Before *Graf Spee's* last battle, the captured crews of the British merchantmen she had sunk had been transferred to her supply ship, the *Altmark*. Over three hundred of these English seamen had been locked in *Altmark's* hold, and they were still there, because after *Graf Spee* went down the smaller *Altmark* had escaped from the battered British warships. For nine weeks she had been hiding in the vastness of the South Atlantic; now, running out of fuel and provisions, with no safe haven elsewhere, she was bringing the British crews home to the Reich for imprisonment. On the morning of February 16 Winston was told that an RAF pilot had sighted her, hugging the Norwegian coast and heading south. Immediately he decided to rescue the men in her hold. Ordering all British warships in the area to "sweep northwards during the day," he directed them "to arrest *Altmark* in territorial waters should she be found. This ship is violating neutrality in carrying British prisoners of war to Germany. Surely another cruiser or two should be sent to rummage the Skagerrak tonight? The *Altmark* must be regarded as an invaluable trophy."¹⁴⁶

That afternoon H.M.S. *Cossack*, Captain Philip Vian commanding, sighted the German vessel. She fled into Jösing Fjord. Vian blocked the mouth of the fjord and sent in a destroyer with a boarding party. Two Norwegian gunboats intercepted them, and the captain of one of them, the *Kjell*, arrived by barge on the *Cossack*. Vian wrote afterward that he told

the Norwegian that he "demanded the right to visit and search, asking him to come with me." The Norwegian officer replied that the *Altmark* had been searched three times since her entry into Norwegian waters and that "no prisoners had been found. His instructions were to resist entry by force: as I might see, his ships had their torpedo tubes trained on *Cossack*. Deadlock."¹⁴⁷

Vian signaled the Admiralty for instructions. Churchill had left word that any message concerning *Altmark* should be sent directly to him. The incident offers an excellent illustration of what General Sir Ian Jacob has called "the fury of his concentration." On such occasions, Jacob writes: "When his mind was occupied with a particular problem, however detailed, it focused upon it relentlessly. Nobody could turn him aside." Marder adds: "With a display of energy and his imagination, Churchill sometimes carried his offensive ideas too far. . . . The Baltic, and increasingly the Norwegian facet, became almost an obsession with him." There were those in the Foreign Office who thought his reply to Vian was too aggressive; they were the same people who, after his broadcast criticizing neutral countries, had issued a gratuitous statement declaring that the first lord had not represented HMG policy.¹⁴⁸

In fact his instructions to Vian were almost flawless — "almost," because he should have sent them through Admiral Sir Charles Forbes, Vian's superior. He *did* phone Halifax and told him what he proposed to do. The foreign secretary hurried over to the Admiralty, where Winston and Pound lectured him on the "Law of Hot Pursuit" at sea. Halifax suggested giving the Norwegian captain an option — taking *Altmark* to Bergen under joint escort, for an inquiry according to international law. His suggestion was adopted, and then the order was radioed to *Cossack*. If the Norwegians refused to convoy *Altmark* to Bergen, Vian was told, he was to "board *Altmark*, liberate the prisoners, and take possession of the ship." If a Norwegian vessel interfered she should be warned off, but "if she fires upon you, you should not reply unless the attack is serious, in which case you should defend yourself using no more force than is necessary, and ceasing fire when she desists."¹⁴⁹

That night, as the first lord and the first sea lord sat up in the war room — "in some anxiety," as Churchill wrote — Vian boarded *Kjell* and proposed the Halifax option. The Norwegian captain declined; he repeated that the German ship had been searched, that she was unarmed, and that she carried no British prisoners. These were all lies, but as Churchill pointed out, "Every allowance must be made" for the Norwegians, who were "quivering under the German terror and exploiting our forbearance." Already the Nazis "had sunk 218,000 tons of Scandinavian ships with a loss of 555 Scandinavian lives." Vian said he was going to board

Altmark. He invited the Norwegian officer to join him. The invitation was declined; henceforth he and his sister ship were passive spectators.¹⁵⁰

So the *Cossack* entered the fjord alone, searchlights blazing, knifing through the ice floes until Vian realized that *Altmark* was under way and attempting to ram him. Luckily the German at the helm was a poor seaman. He ran his vessel aground. Vian forced his way alongside; his crew grappled the two ships together, and the British boarding party sprang across. The Nazi vessel *was* armed, with two pom-poms and four machine guns. The tars seized those and turned on *Altmark's* crew; in a hand-to-hand fight four Germans were killed and five wounded; the others fled ashore or surrendered. No Norwegians had searched the ship. In battered-down storerooms and in empty oil tanks, 299 Britons awaited rescue. The boarding party was flinging open hatches; one of them called, "Are there any English down there?" There was a shouted chorus of "Yes!" and a boarder shouted back, "Well, the navy's here!" By midnight Vian was clear of the fjord, racing home to England.¹⁵¹

The news reached Admiralty House at 3:00 A.M., and Churchill and Pound were jubilant. Randolph's wife, Pamela, saw *Cossack* land the rescued prisoners at Leith, on the Firth of Forth, where doctors, ambulances, press, and photographers awaited them. She wrote her father-in-law: "You must have had a very thrilling & anxious night on Friday. It's comforting to know we can be ferocious." In his Downing Street diary, Jock Colville's Saturday entry began: "There was great excitement at No. 10 over the *Altmark* affair, news of which reached us early in the morning. It is a perfect conclusion to the victory over the *Graf von Spee*." The King sent a congratulatory note to his Admiralty's first lord, who replied at once: "It is a vy gt encouragement & gratification to me to receive Your Majesty's most gracious & kindly message. . . . By none is Your Majesty's compliment more treasured than by the vy old servant of Your Royal House and of your father & yr grandfather who now subscribes himself / Your Majesty's faithful & devoted subject / Winston S. Churchill."¹⁵²

Arthur Marder speaks for RN professionals when he writes of the *Altmark* incident: "It was a minor operation of no significance save for its considerable moral effects." The episode had repercussions, as we shall see, but the casual reference to its impact on the British public reflects the attitude of military professionals. In wartime they are condescending toward civilians, although public opinion, as France was already demonstrating, can determine what kind of war will be fought, and, to a considerable extent, whether it will be won or lost. Blackouts without bombers were merely exasperating; it was after the *Altmark* that people began to hate. Not all the people — the well-bred still recoiled from the chauvinism without which

great victories are impossible. As late as April 26, 1940, Jock Colville saw "a group of bespectacled intellectuals" in Leicester Square's Bierkeller "remain firmly seated while God Save the King was played. Everybody looked but nobody did anything, which shows that the war has not yet made us lose our sense of proportion or become noisily jingoistic." The lower classes were less tolerant, and the newspapers fed their wrath. Churchill had found the rescued men "in good health" and "hearty condition," but Fleet Street rechristened *Altmark* "The Hell-Ship"; those rescued were encouraged to exaggerate their ordeal, and their stories gained in the retelling. Public opinion was developing genuine hostility toward Nazi Germany. People *wanted* to believe in atrocities. Even after four of the men saved had appeared on a platform in the East End, looking well-fed and ruddy, a woman in the audience was quoted as saying: "If I saw a German drowning, I wouldn't save him. Not after that, I couldn't."¹⁵³

Churchill, no hater, used the brief clash in the fjord to build patriotism and confidence in men like Vian and his crew. The House of Commons liked that. On Tuesday, February 20, Harold Nicolson noted: "Winston, when he comes in, is loudly cheered." Admiral Keyes had been in the war room that night, Nicolson's diary entry continued, and had told him how "Winston rang up Halifax and said, 'I propose to violate Norwegian neutrality.' The message was sent and they waited anxiously in the Admiralty for the result. What a result! A fine show. Winston, when he walks out of the House, catches my eye. He gives one portentous wink."¹⁵⁴

Churchill wanted to squeeze every last drop out of it. The war hadn't been much of a war thus far. The Germans, he knew, were refitting for an offensive somewhere, and the Allies — who should have been giving them no rest — remained passive. He had no authority over the other services, but he could make the navy fight. The battle off Montevideo had given England its first real news to cheer about, and on February 15, just one day before the *Altmark* triumph, he had greeted *Exeter* as she arrived at Plymouth. Now, on February 23, he gathered the heroes of the River Plate in the great hall of the Guildhall, the focal point for the government of London for over a thousand years. There, beneath the Gothic facade, beneath the four fantastic pinnacles, the exuberant coat-of-arms, and the monuments to Chatham, Nelson, and Wellington, he reminded those present — and the nation beyond — that the brunt of the war thus far had been borne by sailors, nearly three thousand of whom had already been lost in the "hard, unrelenting struggle which goes on night and day." He said:

The spirit of all our forces serving on salt water has never been more strong and high than now. The warrior heroes of the past may look down, as Nelson's

monument looks down upon us now, without any feeling that the island race has lost its daring or that the examples they set in bygone centuries have faded as the generations have succeeded one another. It was not for nothing that Admiral Harwood, as he instantly at full speed attacked an enemy which might have sunk any one of his ships by a single salvo from its far heavier guns, flew Nelson's immortal signal.¹⁵⁵

He was gathering himself for the final flourish, shoulders hunched, brow lowered, swaying slightly, holding them all in his stern gaze. It wasn't a Bore War when Churchill spoke of it; it wasn't squalid or demeaning; it wasn't, in fact, like modern war at all. Destroying the Nazis and their führer became a noble mission, and by investing it with the aura of heroes like Nelson, men Englishmen had honored since childhood, he made the Union Jack ripple and St. George's sword gleam. To the action off the Plate, he said, there had recently been added an epilogue, the feat of "the *Cossack* and her flotilla," a gallant rescue, "under the nose of the enemy and amid the tangles of one-sided neutrality, of the British captives taken from the sunken German raider. . . . And to Nelson's signal of 135 years ago, 'England expects that every man will do his duty,' there may now be added last week's no less proud reply: '*The Navy is here!*'"¹⁵⁶

The Guildhall exploded in a roaring, standing ovation.

In his diary Hoare grumbled about "Winston overbidding the market in his speeches," but it was a popular speech. No one had fewer illusions about combat than Siegfried Sassoon, who had been court-martialed for publishing his powerful antiwar poems while serving as a junior officer in the first war. Now he wrote Eddie Marsh: "What an apotheosis Winston is enjoying! I suppose he is the most popular — as well as being the ablest — political figure in England. He must be glorying in the deeds of the Navy, who are indeed superb. And W himself has certainly put up a grand performance."¹⁵⁷

His last four words — "The Navy is here!" — wrote Laurence Thompson, "gripped the public mind. It was felt that, dull and unenterprising though the conduct of the war might be on land and sea, the navy was eternally there; and so it heroically was, bearing with the Merchant Navy the heaviest burden of the war." England had gone to war no more eagerly than the French, and as a people the British were less vulnerable to slogans and political melodrama. But as divisions deepened in Paris and the rest of France, Britons grew more united. If they had to fight they would. And though it seemed on that Friday that the Royal Navy had preempted the national consciousness, British soldiers were about to take the field against Nazi troops for the first time. It was to be an inauspicious opening.¹⁵⁸

* * *

For Hitler the Royal Navy's coup de main in Jösing Fjord was "unerträglich" — "intolerable." He was enraged that the German seamen on the *Altmark* had not fought harder. According to Jodl's diary he raved, "Kein Widerstand, Keine engl. Verluste!" ("No resistance, no British losses!"). This seems hard on the four Germans who had been killed in the firefight, but the Führer had his own yardstick of valor; he reserved his approval for men who had been worthy of *him*. Two days later, on February 19, Jodl's diary reveals, "The Führer pressed energetically" for the completion of *Weserübung* — the code name for plans to occupy Norway — issuing orders to "equip ships; put units in readiness." To lead this operation he summoned a corps commander from the western front, General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, who had fought in Finland at the end of the last war. Later, under interrogation in Nuremberg, Falkenhorst said he had the impression that it was the *Altmark* incident which led Hitler to "carry out the plan now."¹⁵⁹

The origins of *Weserübung* were more ambiguous than might appear to be the case. In his war memoirs Churchill wrote that "Hitler's decision to invade Norway had . . . been taken on December 14, and the staff work was proceeding under Keitel." The only relevant event on December 14 had been a meeting between Hitler and Major Vidkun Quisling, a former Norwegian minister of defense, who had fallen under the Nazi spell and whose present ambition was to betray his country to the Reich. Admiral Raeder had urged the Führer to exploit this man's twisted allegiance, and Hitler had scheduled the interview because he wanted "to form an impression of him." Afterward, the Führer had put him on the payroll "to combat British propaganda" and strengthen Norway's Nazi party, an organization which existed almost entirely in Quisling's imagination. But *Weserübung* had not been Hitler's idea. In fact it was the only unprovoked Nazi aggression which wasn't. It was drawn up by the Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine on orders from Raeder alone, which also made it unique; the Wehrmacht high command and its Generalstab were not consulted, and Göring wasn't even told until the execution of the plan was hours away.¹⁶⁰

Hitler was aware of it, of course; to embark on so ambitious a venture without keeping the chancellor fully informed would have been worth an officer's life. Hitler also knew how the kaiser's Imperial Fleet had been frustrated in the last war, bottled up in the Baltic by the British blockade, with no access to the high seas; and he knew his navy was determined to thwart the Royal Navy in any future conflict by establishing bases in Norway. In October, during a long report to the Führer on Kriegsmarine operations, Raeder had mentioned this objective, and according to Raeder's Nuremberg testimony, Hitler "saw at once the significance of the Norwegian operation." After the outbreak of the Russo-Finnish war several

weeks later, the Führer also became alert to the danger implicit in reports that the Allies were forming expeditions to support the Finns, a pretext which threatened the lifeblood of his munitions factories in the Ruhr valley, where the smokestack barons needed fifteen million tons of iron ore every year and counted on Sweden for eleven million tons of it. The existence of *Weserübung* could be misinterpreted by civilians as proof of planned aggression. It wasn't; professional soldiers in every nation know that during peacetime general staffs draw up plans contemplating hostilities with other powers, even though the likelihood that they will ever be needed is very small. The War Department in Washington, for example, had drafted detailed instructions for invasions of virtually every country on the Continent.¹⁶¹

The fact — established beyond doubt at Nuremberg and in captured documents — was that Hitler did not *want* to occupy Norway. During his interview with Quisling, which was recorded in shorthand and transcribed, he said that he "would prefer Norway, as well as the rest of Scandinavia, to remain completely neutral"; he was not interested in schemes which would "enlarge the theater of war." A neutral Norway meant the Reich could import Swedish ore without British interference. There is strong evidence that he impressed this on Raeder; on January 13, the official war diary of the Kriegsmarine mentioned Scandinavia in passing and noted that "the most favorable solution would be the maintenance of Norway's neutrality." But both the Führer and his naval staff established caveats. "If the enemy were preparing to spread the war" in Scandinavia, Hitler said, he would "take steps to guard against that threat." Similarly, the Kriegsmarine's war diary expressed anxiety that "England intends to occupy Norway with the tacit agreement of the Norwegian government." The dubious source for this was Quisling, who also told Hitler that the *Cossack's* boarding of the *Altmark* had been prearranged. The government in Oslo, he said, was England's willing accomplice; the Norwegian gunboats had been ordered to take no action, thereby hoodwinking the Third Reich and its führer. That was the kind of meat upon which this Caesar fed, but the records of his conferences with Raeder show that he was still hesitant, still convinced that "maintenance of Norway's neutrality is the best thing," and — this on March 9 — that so perilous an operation, pitting his small fleet against the legendary might of the Royal Navy, was "contrary to all the principles of naval warfare." Yet in that same conference he called the occupation of Norway "*dringend*" — "urgent." Ambivalence was not characteristic of the Reich's supreme *Kriegsherr*, but he seems to have been indecisive here.¹⁶²

On the last Thursday in March William L. Shirer observed in his diary: "Germany cannot stay in the war unless she continues to receive

Swedish iron, most of which is shipped from the Norwegian port of Narvik on German vessels which evade the blockade by feeling their way down the Norwegian coast. . . . Some of us have wondered why Churchill has never done anything about this. Now it begins to look as if he may." It was reported in Berlin that "a squadron of at least nine of HM's destroyers was concentrated off the Norwegian coast and that in several instances Nazi freighters carrying iron had received warning shots." The Wilhelmstrasse told Shirer they would "watch" Churchill, and a key source assured him that "if British destroyers go into Norwegian territorial waters Germany will act." Act how? he wondered. "The German navy is no match for the British."¹⁶³

Evidence that the Royal Navy was closing in had been accumulating since March 13, when a concentration of RN submarines had been reported off Norway. The next day the Germans had intercepted a message alerting all Allied transports to prepare to sail on two hours' notice; the day after that a party of French officers arrived in Bergen. Hitler did not reach his final decision, however, until Monday, April 1. Signals from Oslo, picked up by Germans monitoring all radio traffic in northern Europe, revealed that Norwegians manning coastal guns and anti-aircraft batteries were being instructed to open fire on any unidentified vessels without asking permission from their superiors. Obviously Norway was expecting action and preparing for it. If *Weserübung* was to achieve surprise — essential to success — the Führer would have to move fast; the invasion was ordered to begin April 9. He prepared his explanation to the international audience: "The government of the Reich has learned that the British intend to land in Norway."¹⁶⁴

The world outside the Reich, jaded by his *grosse Lügen*, would dismiss this new accusation as another absurd Nazi lie. But for once the Führer was telling the unvarnished truth.

Easter had arrived a week before Hitler's decision, and after the harsh winter England was celebrating an unseasonably warm four-day weekend. Traffic to Brighton was heavy. Over two hundred visitors were turned away from a hotel in Weston-super-Mare, and Blackpool landladies enjoyed one of their most profitable holidays in memory. Seaside resorts were unusually crowded; Britons hoped to hear warlike sounds over the water, the eruption of an exploding torpedo, perhaps, or the rattle of machine-gun fire. They heard none. Europe was at war but peaceful. The ominous news from Scandinavia attracted little attention. Hitler take Norway? With the Royal Navy barring the way? What a hope! And if he got it, what would he do with it? The British public, editors had learned, regarded Scandinavia as boring.

What they *did* want was summed up in a *Daily Express* story headed "COME ON HITLER! DARES IRONSIDE." The six-foot-four CIGS was in hiding, suffering the mortification of a man blindsided by a clever newspaperman. Reith's Ministry of Information had persuaded him to grant an interview to an American reporter, suggesting that he paint the rosiest possible picture. Tiny had thought he was talking off the record, and was staggered to learn that the *Express* owned British rights to whatever the American wrote. And so, to his horror, he found himself quoted as yearning for a clash with the Führer: "We would welcome a go at him. Frankly, we would welcome an attack. We are sure of ourselves. We have no fears." Actually, he spoke for millions of Englishmen weary of waiting for the monster to make his next move. At No. 10 Colville had wondered, a month after the fall of Poland, "whether all that has happened has been part of a gigantic bluff." Three months later he noted that a "number of people seem to be thinking that Hitler will not take the offensive, but may even be in a position to win a long war of inactivity — or at least to ruin us economically. . . . There is thus, for the first time, a feeling that we may have to start the fighting, and Winston even gave a hint to that effect in his speech on Saturday."¹⁶⁵

In the teeth of vehement Foreign Office opposition, led by Halifax, Churchill since late September 1939 had sought cabinet approval of his plan to mine the Leads "by every means and on all occasions," as he later put it. The farthest his colleagues would go was on February 19, when they authorized the Admiralty "to make all preparations" to lay a minefield in Norwegian territorial waters so that, should he be given actual approval, "there would be no delay in carrying out the operation." But ten days later, the authorization was rescinded. The tide turned for Winston on March 28, when the Allied Supreme War Council approved the plan, and on April 1 — the day Hitler, unknown to them, gave the green light to *Weserübung* — the War Cabinet set April 5 for the operation. Churchill decided that because it was "so small and innocent," the mining operation should be called "Wilfred" — the name of a comic strip character in the *Daily Mirror*. He pointed out that the minelaying "might lead the Germans to take forcible action against Norwegian territory, and so give us an opportunity for landing forces on Norwegian soil with the consent of the Norwegian government"; and he proposed that "we should continue in a state of readiness to despatch a light force to Narvik." The Supreme War Council went farther; on April 8 a British brigade and a contingent of French troops would be sent to Narvik to "clear the port and advance to the Swedish frontier." Other forces would land at Stavanger, Bergen, and Trondheim "to deny these bases to the enemy."¹⁶⁶

Had this schedule been followed, the Allies would almost certainly

have scored a resounding triumph. On April 3 Oliver Stanley, who had succeeded Hore-Belisha at the War Office, received "a somewhat garbled account" that the Germans had "a strong force of troops" at the Baltic port of Rostock. Halifax noted that this "tended to confirm" the latest report from Stockholm, that large German troop concentrations were boarding transports at Stettin and Swinemünde. An assistant military attaché at the Dutch legation in Berlin passed along the same information to the Danes and Norwegians. The Danish foreign minister concluded that the Germans were headed for Norway but would bypass the Danes. The Norwegians believed the Nazis had decided to seize Denmark.¹⁶⁷

On Saturday, April 6, Churchill later wrote, RAF reconnaissance pilots spotted "a German fleet consisting of a battle cruiser, two light cruisers, fourteen destroyers and another ship, probably a transport . . . moving towards the Naze across the mouth of the Skagerrak." Churchill wrote: "We found it hard at the Admiralty to believe that this force was going to Narvik. In spite of a report from Copenhagen that Hitler meant to seize that port, it was thought by the Naval Staff that the German ships would probably turn back into the Skagerrak."¹⁶⁸

Actually, the British were involved in making adjustments to their plans because of a serious disagreement with the French, which had stalled Wilfred at a critical juncture. Churchill said that whatever the French did, England should proceed with the minelaying in Norway, and Chamberlain agreed. "Matters have now gone too far," he said, "for us not to take action." One more attempt would be made to reconcile differences with the French. If they continued to be fractious, Britain would go it alone.¹⁶⁹

The row with France arose from French determination to avoid any move which might invite German retaliation. For over seven years they had been trying to wish Hitler away, and the habit was hard to break. Eventually they were bound to disagree with Churchill, who spent most of his waking moments trying to find new ways of making life miserable for the Nazis. One operation, whose potential exceeded Wilfred's, had been encoded "Royal Marine." During the winter he had studied mines. Among the various types, he had found, was a fluvial mine which floated just below the surface of water. The possibility of paralyzing all traffic on the Rhine — Germany's main artery of transport and communications — excited him. Among the river's many uses was sustaining the Reich's huge armies on the French frontier. Large numbers of fluvial mines which exploded on contact would be launched on that stretch of the river which lay just inside French territory, below Strasbourg. Among the targets would be tankers, barges, and floating bridges. Winston had conceived this scheme during his visit to the Rhine on the eve of war, but he had hesitated to lay it before the War Cabinet

because neutral shipping also used the river. His mind had been changed by the "indiscriminate warfare" of U-boats, magnetic mines, and machine-gunning of crews in lifeboats, all of which had victimized neutrals as well as Britons. Then and later he insisted that, as he wrote General Gamelin, "the moral and juridical justification" for Royal Marine "appears to be complete." The Germans had "assailed the ports of Great Britain and their approaches with every form of illegal mining," had attacked unarmed fishing boats, and "waged a ruthless U-boat war on both belligerents and neutrals." Against such an enemy, he submitted, "stern reprisals are required." On November 19, 1939, he had proposed that "a steady process of harassing this main waterway of the enemy should be set on foot. . . . Not a day should be lost."¹⁷⁰

Months, not days, were lost, for although the War Cabinet endorsed his recommendations "in principle" eight days later, the plan had to work its way through both the British and French bureaucracies. Meantime Royal Marine was expanding; by January the Admiralty had stockpiled ten thousand fluvial mines, the RAF had been brought into the picture as sowers of them, and not only the Rhine, but all major German rivers and canals were to be their targets. Churchill was captivated by his scheme; if padlock visitors called at the private office, one of his aides wrote, Winston would produce "a bucket full of water and insist that everyone should watch the model [of a fluvial mine] work." The War Cabinet finally approved Royal Marine on March 6, and detailed plans provided for floating the first two thousand mines; three hundred or four hundred would be loosed each night thereafter, and eventually the number would stabilize at two thousand a week. Admiral Jean Darlan, commander in chief of the French navy, declared himself "enthusiastically in favor" of the project and predicted that it would have "a decisive effect" on the war in less than a year. Only pro forma consent of the French government remained.¹⁷¹

It was not forthcoming. Daladier's government fell on March 20, several days after the Finnish surrender — he had been accused of tardy, inadequate aid to the Finns — and Paul Reynaud became premier. Though no longer premier, Daladier retained his post as minister of defense, and in that office he had the power, which he now exercised, of vetoing Royal Marine. According to gossip at No. 10, Daladier "does not want Reynaud to get the credit, or possibly . . . the French fear instant retaliation which they are not in a position to withstand." The second motive was the one given the British. The minister of defense, they were told, flinched from the possibility of reprisals in the form of Luftwaffe attacks on French air factories. The factories were especially vulnerable now. In two months they would be dispersed and the mines could be launched. On March 28, at the same meeting of the Supreme War Council at which Wilfred was ap-

proved, Chamberlain intervened, and his powerful promotion of Royal Marine persuaded the French to float the mines on April 4. Back in Paris they changed their minds and demanded a three-month postponement. Colville wrote, "Winston is going over to Paris to do a little personal persuasion. We are trying to blackmail the French by maintaining that we may not undertake the Norwegian territorial waters project unless we can combine it with the other."¹⁷²

Churchill once observed: "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them." Yet it is hard to think of any substantial blow struck for Allied victory by the Third Republic. They were, of course, very *courtois* when Winston arrived in Paris the evening of April 4; the premier and most of his cabinet dined with the first lord at the British embassy. Unfortunately, the *ministre de guerre*, "the stumbling-block," as Churchill called him, did not find it convenient to attend. Next day Winston sought him out and cornered him in the rue St. Dominique. He "commented," as he later wrote, on Daladier's "absence from our dinner the night before. He pleaded his previous engagement." That was the war minister's last opportunity to say anything else for quite some time, for Churchill unloosed a torrent of arguments in favor of his project: melting snow in the Alps made this the most favorable time of year for the mines; the Rhine traffic was heavy; if the Germans possessed retaliatory weapons they would have used them by now. Nothing worked. The German reaction would be violent, Daladier said when Winston had finished, and the blow would "fall on France." Churchill reluctantly phoned London and told his colleagues he had decided that to press the French harder would be "a very great mistake." In reality, a far greater mistake had already been made. Operation Wilfred, the mining of Norwegian ports, had been scheduled for Friday, April 5, with Anglo-French landings to follow. Because of Winston's trip to Paris, the dates had been set back three days, to begin Monday, April 8. It is startling to read his postwar apologia: "If a few days would enable us to bring the French into agreement upon the punctual execution of the two projects, I was agreeable to postponing 'Wilfred' for a few days." Yet neither project was dependent upon the other; French reluctance to endorse one should not have held the other back, and "punctual execution" was precisely what his trip to Paris lost Wilfred.¹⁷³

The delay proved fatal. Though each was only vaguely aware of the other, the British and the Germans were in a crucial race for Norway, and Falkenhorst and the Kriegsmarine won it in a photo finish. Hankey, then a member of the War Cabinet, later wrote that in their designs on Norway "both Great Britain and Germany were keeping more or less level in their plans and preparations. Britain actually started planning a little earlier. . . .

Both plans were executed almost simultaneously, Britain being twenty-four hours ahead in the so-called act of aggression, if the term is really applicable to either side." But Germany's final surge made the difference.¹⁷⁴

Unaware of Nazi intentions, Chamberlain delivered a major political address on Thursday, the day Wilfred was put on hold while Winston traveled to Paris, ending it with four words which were to haunt him and, ultimately, to serve as powerful ammunition in the Tory uprising which would drive him from office. Germany's preparations at the war's outbreak, he told a mass meeting of Conservatives, "were far ahead of our own," and His Majesty's Government had assumed that "the enemy would take advantage of his initial superiority" and "endeavour to overwhelm us and France" before they could catch up. "Is it not a very extraordinary thing that no such attempt was made? Whatever may be the reason — whether it was that Hitler thought he might get away with what he had got without fighting for it, or whether it was that after all the preparations were not sufficiently complete — however, one thing is certain: he missed the bus."¹⁷⁵

* * *

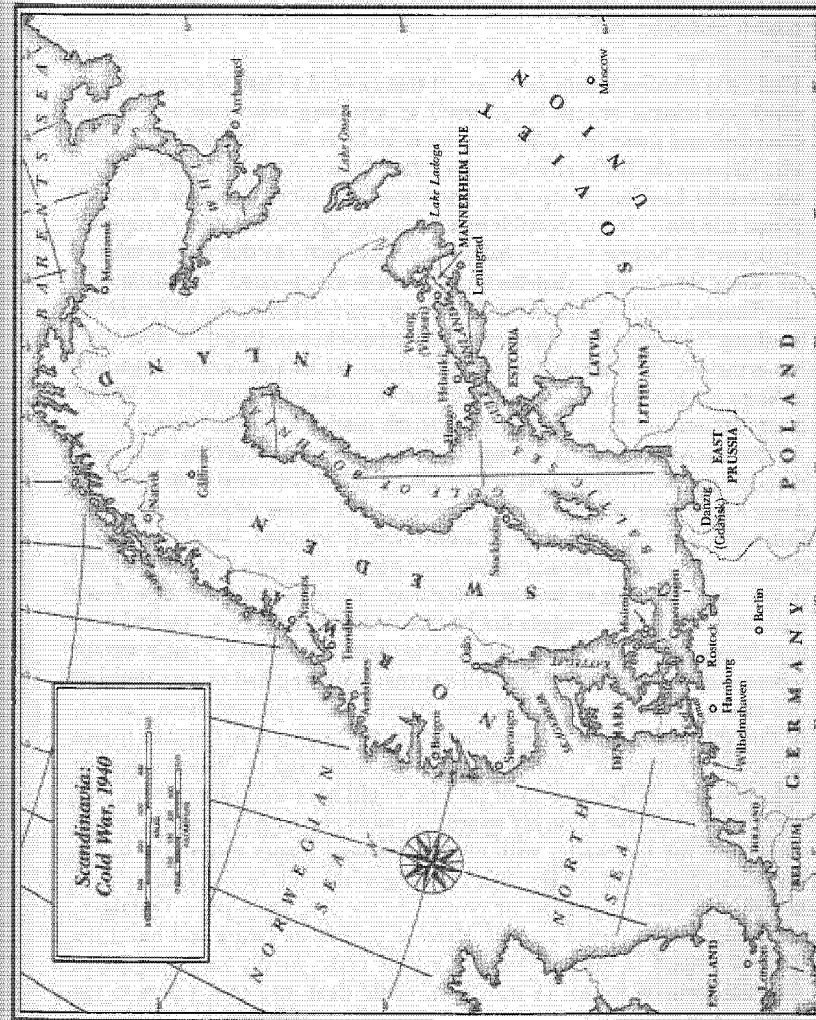
Hitler had already boarded another bus, which followed its timetable with Teutonic precision on Tuesday, April 9, and at 4:10 A.M. began dropping off its passengers — elements from three Wehrmacht divisions — at their destinations: Denmark and the chief ports of Norway from Oslo right up to Narvik, twelve hundred miles from the nearest Nazi naval base and well above the Arctic Circle. Denmark was overrun in twelve hours. The Norwegian government was busy lodging protests against the British minelaying, which had begun a day earlier — and which Ribbentrop had called "the most flagrant violation of a neutral country [since] the British bombardment of Copenhagen in 1801" — but German landings there were not unopposed. At Oslo alone, shore batteries — ancient 28-centimeter guns built, ironically, by Krupp before the turn of the century — sank the heavy cruiser *Blücher*, permanently damaged the cruiser *Emden*, and destroyed auxiliary ships.

In London the first reaction to German audacity had been confusion and disbelief. That afternoon in Parliament, Chamberlain confirmed newspaper accounts of enemy landings at Bergen and Trondheim and added: "There have been some reports about a similar landing at Narvik, but I am very doubtful whether they are correct." It seemed unbelievable that Hitler could have committed himself so far north, particularly when he knew the Royal Navy was present in strength. The Admiralty suggested

that "Narvik" must be a misspelling of Larvik, a community on Norway's south coast. But by evening they knew that forces of the Reich held all major Norwegian ports, including Narvik and Oslo, the country's capital. Two days later Churchill, his confidence in British sea power undiminished, told the House of Commons that it was his view, "shared by my skilled advisers," that "Herr Hitler has committed a grave strategic error," and that "we have greatly gained by what has occurred in Scandinavia." Having seized defenseless ports, the Führer "will now have to fight" against "Powers possessing vastly superior naval forces." Winston concluded: "I feel that we are greatly advantaged by . . . the strategic blunder into which our mortal enemy has been provoked."¹⁷⁶

Liddell Hart comments: "The dream-castles raised by Churchill" were doomed to "come tumbling down." To be sure, in almost every surface battle the Royal Navy crippled the fleet Hitler had put at risk. But victory at sea was no longer determined solely by surface engagements. Churchill thought it still was, and so did Admiral Sir Thomas Phillips, who would sacrifice his life for this precept twenty months later in the waters off Malaya. Rear Admiral J. H. Godfrey comments: "Both W.S.C. and Tom Phillips were obsessed with the idea that a fleet or a big ship could provide complete aerial protection with its own A.A. guns." A vice admiral believes that Pound "was quite as ignorant as we all were before the Second World War as to what aircraft could do to ships. This was quite clear from the Norwegian campaign, where we intended . . . to send a squadron into Trondheim with no reconnaissance, and with the certainty that they would be bombed."¹⁷⁷

Strategic thinking at the Admiralty had foundered on this reef — the conviction that in this war, as in the last, superior British sea power foreclosed a German invasion of the Norwegian coast. Admiral Forbes, commander in chief of the Home Fleet, discovered that "the scale of attack that would be developed against our military forces on shore and our naval forces off the Norwegian coast were grievously underestimated when the operations were undertaken." In the opinion of S. W. Roskill, the naval historian, those most blind in their conviction that Britannia's traditional sea power ruled the waves were the Chiefs of Staff, particularly Pound and Ironside. But the first lord of the Admiralty should be added to the list. Churchill, being Churchill, did not hesitate to assume command when he deemed it necessary. Godfrey refers to "Churchill's dictatorial behavior" and quotes a senior officer as saying that "Pound proved unable to prevent Winston from running wild during the Norwegian campaign." These, it should be noted, are the views of career officers, united in their loyalty to one another. Sir Eric Seal, who was Churchill's principal private secretary at the Admiralty, vehemently denies Admiral Godfrey's charges: "It is



perfectly true that he spent a good deal of time in the War Room, which had a tremendous fascination for him. To infer from this that he assumed control is, in the circumstances, almost malicious. It is certainly unwarranted, and false."¹⁷⁸

There was a bedrock issue here, and it transcended a clash of personalities, which can almost always be assumed in assessing relationships between Churchill and those who differed with him. War had changed. And those who had seen the Luftwaffe knew it in their bones. According to Gamelin, who was in London on April 26 for a meeting of the Supreme Council, Pound told him: "It is impossible to do anything against the enemy's superior air power." The first sea lord had told the *généralissime* that Polish tales of the Nazis' fearsome bomber fleet had not been exaggerated. The following day, Reynaud said, he found the Admiralty "terrorized by the effects of the bombing." In citing the Admiralty he cannot have included its first lord. Nevertheless, the Luftwaffe's performance had so impressed England's military establishment — less at sea than by its tactical support of Wehrmacht infantry — that they felt the French needed to prepare for it.¹⁷⁹

But something else is wrong here. What the admirals say and write about air power in the Norwegian campaign is not consistent with what was done. Ships were *not* sacrificed to aircraft in the name of sea power. The Luftwaffe had confirmed conclusions already reached. With very few exceptions, Churchill among them, flag officers had been alert to the peril in the sky long before war was declared. Perhaps the most significant military event in the struggle for Norway was the decision — made in the first hours of the German attack — to send no British vessels except submarines into the Skagerrak. All German shipping had to pass through this channel between the Baltic and North seas. If it had been barred, neither supplies nor reinforcements could have been sent to German troops already committed. It is only seventy miles wide, and in Nelson's day, or even Jellicoe's, Britain's ships of the line would have annihilated them. But now in 1940 the Nazis quickly seized all usable Norwegian airfields, which meant that the Luftwaffe, with over a thousand planes committed to the operation, dominated the sky over the Skagerrak, and the admirals refused to risk their battlewagons to air power. In the 135 years since Trafalgar, sea power had permitted a small island to control its future and build the greatest empire in history. Now tiny little craft, hardly more expensive than ammunition for an 18-inch gun, could deny strategic waters to the mightiest navy the world had ever known.¹⁸⁰

Weserübung, as conducted by Falkenhorst, was marked by meticulous planning, speed, and professionalism. German captains, entering Norwegian ports in the predawn darkness, answered gunners' challenges in

English. One parachute battalion floated down to take the airstrips at Oslo and Stavanger — the first use of paratroops in war, and it was very impressive. Narvik had been taken by what Colville called "a Trojan Horse manoeuvre"; freighters which usually bore iron ore carried Nazi soldiers in their holds. ("Very clever," said a cabinet minister, "and we were ninnies, we were ninnies!") Hitler's naval commitment had been large, but only 8,850 troops had been sent north in the first wave, and no landing was made by more than 2,000 men. Except for elements from a mountain division, none of Falkenhorst's soldiers came from elite units. Yet once dug in, they were almost impossible to dislodge. In Narvik 2,000 Austrian alpine troops, reinforced by another 2,000 German seamen, held off a British force — at one point 25,000 troops — week after week. In their lightning stroke the Nazis had not only occupied every major Norwegian airfield; they had also taken over the country's radio and telephone networks and seized all five major ports. The *Völkischer Beobachter* ran a banner headline in red ink and end-of-the-world type: "GERMANY SAVES SCANDINAVIA!" Churchill seemed stunned. He told Pound, "We have been completely outwitted." Thursday, April 11, he prepared an account of these tumultuous events for Parliament. The *Daily Mail* reported that "A thousand people packed the pavements outside the House of Commons. 'Where's Winnie?' they asked after other Ministers had arrived. 'Wonder if he'll be smiling. You can always tell what's in the air by Winnie's face.'" But when he appeared his expression was forbidding, and inside, as he arose, he faced what he later described as "a disturbed and indignant House of Commons." Nicolson, watching from his backbencher seat, wrote that the House

is packed. Winston comes in. He is not looking well and sits there hunched as usual with his papers in his hand. When he rises to speak it is obvious that he is very tired. . . . I have seldom seen him to less advantage. The majority of the House were expecting tales of victory and triumph, and when he tells them that the news of our reoccupation of Bergen, Trondheim, and Oslo is untrue, a cold wave of disappointment passes through the House. He hesitates, gets his notes in the wrong order, puts on the wrong pair of spectacles, fumbles for the right pair, keeps on saying "Sweden" when he means "Denmark", and one way and another makes a lamentable performance.¹⁸¹

Colville disagreed. Although Churchill was "less polished than usual," he wrote, he was "witty," causing "amusement by saying that Denmark had had most to fear from Germany of all the neutrals, because she had been

the most recent to negotiate a non-aggression pact with her. He wisely damped down the absurd over-optimism of this morning's newspapers, but made a good case for the navy's achievements during the past few days." The public preferred the jingoism of Fleet Street, however, and was slow to accept the emerging truth. All they knew, or wanted to know, was that the Nazi navy was at loose along the thousand-mile Scandinavian peninsula, stopping here and there to leave contingents of troops, and the Royal Navy, led by Admiral Forbes, was in hot pursuit. No true Englishman could doubt which force would emerge triumphant. Even Churchill, rallying, told the War Cabinet, "We have the Germans where we want them." Colville noted: "The First Lord (who at last sees a chance of action) is jubilant and maintains that our failure to destroy the German fleet up to the present is only due to the bad visibility and very rough weather in the North Sea, while if the German ships fly for home they will leave their garrisons exposed to our expeditionary forces." *The Listener* quoted an enraptured Hoare as having told the nation over the BBC: "Today our wings are spread over the Arctic. They are sheathed in ice. Tomorrow the sun of victory will touch them with its golden light, and the wings that flashed over the great waters of the North will bear us homewards once more to the 'peace with honour' of a free people and the victory of a noble race."¹⁸²

The Times was reminded of Napoleon's (Iberian) peninsula war. The *Express* wrote of the British storming of Narvik, which the British had not stormed, that it had "an Elizabethan ring to it. It ranks with Cadiz where we singed the King of Spain's beard." *The Daily Mirror* told its readers that despite the need for a speedy response to the German challenge, all cold-weather gear had been provided, including pack saddles for reindeer; and the *Daily Mail* reported: "The British Navy has embarked on a glorious enterprise. Hitler is shaken by the hammer blows of our sailors and airmen."¹⁸³

In his memoirs Gamelin writes that upon hearing that German ships were on the move, he urged Ironside to hurry the dispatch of troops to Norway — Gamelin approved of fighting Germans anywhere except in France — but the CIGS replied: "With us the Admiralty is all-powerful; it likes to organize everything methodically. It is convinced that it can prevent any German landing on the coast of Norway." Churchill confirmed him. On the second day after the German landings, Shirer noted in his diary: "The BBC quotes Churchill as having said in the House of Commons today that 'Hitler committed a grave strategical error' and that the British navy will now take the Norwegian coast and sink all the ships in the Skagerrak and the Kattegat. God, I hope he's right." He was wrong. No one doubted that Raeder's fleet paled beside the Royal Navy, but the

Norwegian coastline is 2,100 miles long, deeply incised by fjords, some several miles deep, fringed with thousands of islands, and throughout April a heavy mist lay over all of it. Except in contested ports the RN couldn't find all the German ships.¹⁸⁴

They found some, though, and the early days shone with tales of heroism. In the first confrontation between ships of the two navies, the Nazi heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* (13,000 tons) bore down on the British destroyer *Glowworm* (1,350 tons), all guns firing. In a magnificent beauty the destroyer, hopelessly trapped, turned as if to flee, threw out a smoke screen, and when the *Hipper* charged into it, rammed her at flank speed, tearing away 130 feet of her armor belt and her starboard tubes. As the gallant *Glowworm* went down, her crew could see the huge heavy cruiser beginning to list under 500 tons of ingested seawater. And the British failure to take Narvik wasn't the navy's fault. On Wednesday, April 10, the day after ten German destroyers had taken Narvik and landed two battalions commanded by General Eduard Dietl, five British destroyers entered the harbor, sank two of the enemy destroyers, damaged the other three, and sank all but one of the Nazi cargo vessels. As they were leaving the harbor, the RN ships sighted the other five German destroyers. This time the British were outgunned. One of their destroyers was sunk, a second beached, and one of the three surviving vessels was damaged.

Three days later the Royal Navy was back, this time with a battleship and a flotilla of destroyers. Every enemy vessel still afloat was sent to the bottom. The commander of the RN task force radioed that Dietl and his men, stunned and disorganized, had taken to the hills. Since Narvik was wide open, he suggested, it should be occupied at once "by the main landing force." The next day an advance party of three infantry battalions arrived. Unfortunately, they were led by Major General P. J. Mackesy, a windy officer cast in the same mold as those who had lost Gallipoli in the first war. Mackesy decided landing at Narvik was too perilous; instead he went ashore at Harstad. There were no Germans in Harstad, only friendly Norwegians. But it was thirty-five miles north of Narvik, his objective.

The *Daily Mail's* guess that Hitler had been badly shaken was not wide of the mark. Jodl's diary quivers with phrases describing Hitler's loss of self-control, his terror that he might lose his gamble, how he was always trembling on the verge of hysteria and sometimes plunged into it. "*Führer ist zunehmend beunruhigt über die englischen Landungen*" ("Führer is increasingly worried about the English landings") reads one of the milder entries. The Royal Navy's Narvik victory and the flight of Dietl, one of Hitler's old Bavarian cronies, led to "terrible excitement." Hitler demanded that Dietl and his men be "evacuated by air — an impossibility." Then: "Renewed crisis . . . an hysterical attack." "Chaos of leadership is again threatening."

"Each piece of bad news leads to the worst fears." Hitler never had been able to take the rough with the smooth, and as the war proceeded his violence increased. As campaigns go, *Weserübung* had entailed no great risks except to Raeder's surface vessels, which were considered expendable, and setbacks had been few. Between the lines of Jodl's diary one reads the anxious question: If the Führer carries on like this in what is almost a textbook victory, how might he behave in the face of defeat?¹⁸⁵

In overplaying local successes and ignoring Britain's strategic dilemma, Fleet Street was merely following the line taken by briefing officers at the Admiralty, War Office, and Air Ministry — a press policy usually adopted by military men who are losing a struggle and cannot understand why. Totalitarian regimes can suppress bad news to the end, until the civilian comes to find his home in flames and his wife raped by an enemy he thought was about to surrender. In democracies the lid cannot be kept on long. Editors and publishers are willing to play the game in wartime, but when they send trusted correspondents to the front they will print their dispatches. And soldiers write home. Censors may cut military information which the enemy would find useful, but excluding details of the men's day-to-day life is impossible, and it was precisely there that the British people began to grasp the unwelcome fact that those responsible for the Norwegian campaign were mismanaging it.

Nearly three weeks of action had passed before Englishmen became aware of a cold, cruel shaft of light they recognized as truth. It arrived when several British newspapers quoted the distinguished U.S. foreign correspondent Leland Stowe. Stowe was in Norway, and he had described the plight of an English battalion dumped into Norway, untrained, poorly armed, lacking artillery, antiaircraft weapons, or fighter cover. After four days' fighting, half of the men had been killed, wounded, or captured by the Germans; the rest had fallen back. An officer had told Stowe, "We've simply been massacred." The War Office dismissed the dispatch as "an obvious distortion of the facts." But the English newspapermen in Norway also were talking to soldiers, and they were confirming the American.

Some of the unpleasant news was inherent in the War Office's disposition of forces, and it had little choice there. The country's trained troops were all in France. Those sent to Norway were largely territorials who had been called up only eight months earlier — salesmen, bank tellers, farmers, truck drivers, haulage contractors: men who knew very little about infantry combat. Their grievances were harder to explain. Along the line that started with the CIGS and descended to the rifle company commander, mismanagement had been, at times, scandalous. The territorials were equipped to fight Germans who had been under fire in Poland and carried

complete equipment, including sealskin caps and uniforms lined with sheepskin. Pack saddles for reindeer may have been provided the Tommies (though they would have been useless, the reindeer having sensibly retreated inland) but no Tommy had been issued the one piece of gear essential in Norway: skis. Every Norwegian civilian, every enemy soldier had them. So did the French *Chasseurs Alpins*, trained for this sort of fighting, but once ashore they discovered that the navy had neglected to land their bindings, without which the skis were useless.

This kind of elementary error multiplied as time passed. Two territorial battalions were issued a dozen tourist maps of all Norway; their objective wasn't on them. Admiralty orders were often slow, hesitant, countermanded, reissued, and countermanded again. One cruiser squadron was about to depart Rosyth with an expeditionary force when the Admiralty learned Nazi battle cruisers had been spotted nearby; the squadron commander was ordered to put "the soldiers ashore, even without their equipment, and join the Fleet at sea." By the time the soldiers were reunited with their ships, their original objective was in enemy hands.

The worst blunders were committed in an operation Churchill had opposed, a stratagem designed by civilians sitting around the cabinet table fifteen hundred miles from the scene of action. The leadership in Whitehall had been weakened by divided counsel from the beginning, and basic disagreements surfaced over what Britain's chief military objective in Norway should be. Churchill argued that it had been, and should continue to be, Narvik. That was why the Germans were there; that was where the Allies wanted them out. But other members of the War Cabinet, and soon they were a majority, had favored throwing the Nazis out of Trondheim, Norway's ancient capital, nearly halfway between the peninsula's southern tip and Narvik. King Haakon VII and his government, fleeing from Oslo, begged the British to take Trondheim back, thereby giving them a rallying point to organize Norwegian resistance to the Nazi occupation. Halifax, as a peer, took royal requests very seriously. He buttressed his case: Trondheim would provide the Allies with a superb harbor, a base for the buildup of fifty thousand troops, a nearby airfield which would support several fighter squadrons, and direct railway contact with Sweden, which — a non sequitur he did not attempt to unravel — would "greatly improve the chances of Swedish intervention." The possibility of Sweden declaring war on the Reich was zero. Hitler had warned the Swedes of dire consequences if they abandoned strict neutrality and, Shirer wrote on Wednesday, April 10, "As far as I can learn the Swedes are scared stiff [and] will not come to the aid of their Norwegian brethren."¹⁸⁶

On Saturday, April 13, with troop transports crossing the North Sea toward Narvik, Halifax told the War Cabinet they should be diverted to

Trondheim because "The most important point is to seize Trondheim and the railways leading from that port across the peninsula." Ironside vigorously disagreed; Churchill also opposed the switch, protesting that Trondheim, unlike Narvik, was "a much more speculative affair." But only Secretary for War Stanley supported him. Simon joined Halifax and Chamberlain; otherwise, Simon said, the Norwegians and Swedes would believe they were "only interested in Narvik." When the War Cabinet had decided to mine Norwegian territorial waters — clear evidence that Britain's intent in Norway was confined to crippling the Reich's war effort — Simon had not raised this novel proposition that public relations should play a role in fixing military objectives. He and his colleagues now rejected Churchill's proposal that no further commitment be made.¹⁸⁷

The attack on Trondheim, it is now clear, derived from the lack of policy. At the outset, Britain's goal had been to stop the Swedish ore shipments. To reach their objective they needed Narvik. Implicit in the decision to take Trondheim was a decision to retake all Norway. The country's strategic value was small. And whether it could be conquered by anyone is doubtful; of its 119,240 square miles only 4 percent was inhabitable. Seizing its chief ports was one thing; keeping them, as Hitler was to discover, was another. That required the consent of the Norwegian people, and it was not forthcoming. The country had been taken by fewer than 10,000 German soldiers. Then the Norwegian underground began to organize, and it began its work by killing Nazi sentries. Despite the conquerors' policy of killing one hundred civilians for every murdered German, nearly 400,000 Nazi troops were tied down in Norway when Hitler's need for them elsewhere would be urgent.

"Although Narvik was my pet," Churchill wrote, he was serving "a respected chief and friendly Cabinet"; since they had decided to make the effort at Trondheim, he threw himself "into this daring adventure, and was willing that the Fleet should risk the weak batteries at the entrance to the fiord, the possible minefields, and, most serious, the air." The British ships' "very powerful antiaircraft armament" would be, he believed, equal to the Luftwaffe. But on April 18 the Chiefs of Staff, wary of the Luftwaffe, decided the risks of a frontal assault were too great. Therefore, Trondheim was to be enveloped by two forces already put ashore at ports still in Norwegian hands. One ("Sickleforce") was at Andalsnes, a hundred miles southwest of the city; the other ("Mauriceforce") at Namsos, far to the northeast. Originally they had been landed as diversions. Now, as Churchill wrote, they would "develop a pincer movement on Trondheim from north and south."¹⁸⁸

Neither Trondheim pincer had a chance. The British were relying on the Norwegians for their information, and the Norwegians either blun-

dered or were cleverly misled by the Germans, who were expecting an attack at this strategic harbor. Had the attackers known that Trondheim was now defended by 120,000 Nazi troops, outnumbering them six to one and reinforced with tanks and several Luftwaffe squadrons, they would have kept their distance. To do the job properly, six or seven divisions would have to have been withdrawn from France. Moreover, there were difficulties with the terrain. And the Germans were not likely to be deceived by the two-pronged attack; it was the textbook alternative to a frontal assault, and they knew where the British would be coming.

Reinforcing the small forces already ashore at Namsos and Andalsnes presented other problems. Namsos in particular looked forbidding. Later there would be questions in Parliament over why the troop transports did not carry the infantry all the way in to the Namsos docks; the implication was that the War Cabinet had overruled the navy. No one who had seen Namsos would have asked. Only one approach was possible: a fifteen-mile-long fjord, too narrow and winding for any ships but destroyers, to which the assault brigades were transferred. Furthermore, the transfer was an invitation to confusion, and confusion resulted. The transports departed with Mauriceforce's ammunition, rations, heavy weapons — and the brigade's commanding officer.

None of the planners seem to have given much thought to the weather at that latitude. Churchill did; Namsos, he found, was "under four feet of snow and offered no concealment from the air." Indeed, at each of their Norwegian objectives meteorologists forecast further "dense falls of snow" which could "paralyse all movement of our troops, unequipped and untrained for such conditions." They were waging war in a very cold climate. The men had mistakenly been left with only two days' supplies. The distance was long, movement was clogged by snowdrifts, and the reinforced German garrison, when told the British were ashore in force, landed parties to intercept them. Mauriceforce Tommies could only hope that Sickleforce's luck was better.¹⁸⁹

It wasn't. It was worse. Afterward, Hoare said that one reason for the Trondheim operation was to secure airfields; but the Germans had taken them all, and therefore the RAF could not challenge the Luftwaffe. "In that case," Lloyd George acidly observed in the House of Commons, "we ought to have had picked men, and not a kind of scratch team . . . because the Germans had picked men, as is generally accepted. We sent there, I think, a Territorial brigade, which had not had much training." The territorials were in fact only part of the force put ashore at Andalsnes — a small fishing port unsuitable for the debarkation of soldiers and equipment — but their experience was typical. They lacked mortar ammunition, radios, accurate maps, or fire-control equipment for their anti-

aircraft weapons. Their orders called for a northward march toward Trondheim, but the Norwegian commander who met them, and who had participated in planning the mission in London, persuaded their brigadier to reinforce exhausted Norwegian forces in Lillehammer, eighty miles to the southeast. An eighty-mile march with combat gear is grueling for veteran infantrymen in suitable terrain. The territorials, whom one Norwegian officer described as looking like "untrained steel workers from the Midlands" — which some of them were — reached Lillehammer wearier than the men they were reinforcing. And before they could be billeted the Germans pounced on them.¹⁹⁰

Quickly outflanked, they fell back. That night a panzer battalion seized Lillehammer. Once more they fell back, to the banks of a river, where the enemy tanks routed them. Once more the territorials retreated, forty-five miles this time, and along the way units became separated from the rest of the brigade. Their plight was pitiable. Now and then they would spot a lone Norwegian on a nearby crest, staring down, in amazement or contempt, at their lack of skis. Wading through the deep snow was like crossing a bog, and because they lacked compasses, they dared not leave roads, which sometimes took them in strange directions. In the early hours of April 20 two companies, staggering slowly through a dense snowstorm, reached a town which natives identified as Nykirke. The Norwegians produced a map. Studying it, the soldiers discovered that they were now two hundred miles from Trondheim, which they were supposed to capture, and were moving in the opposite direction.

Risking security, they phoned a hotel which the Norwegians told them was battalion headquarters. "Lucky you rang," said a cheerful English voice on the other end. "We were just wondering what was happening to you." Keeping in touch now, they set off with new instructions. Along the way they learned that the freighter carrying their transport and Bren carriers had been torpedoed and that the Royal Navy had been unable to prevent the Germans from landing tanks. They thought themselves lost again, but the panzers quickly tracked them down, whereupon they learned that their antitank gun, with its brutal kickback, did not penetrate enemy armor. They withdrew into a forest, but the enemy mortared them into the open, where the tanks machine-gunned them. Having achieved nothing, they had ceased to exist as a fighting force.

That was also true of the main body. Of the original force under his command, the brigadier could count only 300 soldiers and nine junior officers. He sent the survivors back to Andalsnes for evacuation. It was not that easy. The enemy followed the column, as vultures do; stragglers, moving in groups of two or three, roamed the hills, hoping to find sympathetic Norwegians, but most were found first by unsympathetic

Germans. A few reached Sweden and were interned. By now the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff were aware of the disaster. Mauriceforce and Sickleforce had been in Norway ten days; neither had gained a yard; between them they had lost 1,559 men. Those who had succeeded in eluding capture were in danger. Those in London who had sent them there had no choice; as many as possible had to be evacuated. Thanks to the Norwegians — who paid a terrible price when the Nazis tracked them down — 1,800 Sickleforce troops stumbled aboard blacked-out transports on the night of April 30. In the morning, under constant Luftwaffe attack, another 1,300 men were picked up, and, that night, 1,000 more. Mauriceforce, more fortunate, had lost only 157 troops. But the sacrifice there had been equally pointless.



Hitler scorned Britain's Trondheim adventure as "*ein Fall von leichtsinnigem Dilettantismus*" ("a case of frivolous dilettantism"). At the Supreme War Council on April 27, Reynaud had predicted that an Allied failure in central Norway "would come as a great shock to public opinion," and might be followed by an Allied capitulation to the Reich. However, the council had agreed that the Trondheim plan must be abandoned because of the enemy's air superiority. On May 1 Nicolson noted having "a talk with Buck De la Warr and Stephen King-Hall in former's room at the House of Lords. Buck seems to think that if Norway is lost, the P.M. will have to resign." The next day, when the evacuation from Andalsnes was announced, Amery telephoned Hoare and angrily told him: "The government must go."¹⁹¹

On the western front of the Third Reich lay the greatest army Germany had ever mobilized to lunge into Belgium, Holland, and France: 136 divisions, ten of them panzer divisions, with virtually every aircraft in the Luftwaffe ready to darken the sky as the tanks and the infantry advanced. On May 1 the Führer, with his penchant for weekend invasions, set Sunday, May 5, as the day for *Fall Gelb* — Case Yellow — the assault on the Low Countries and France.

In Berlin, Shirer, listening to a 6:00 P.M. BBC news broadcast on May 2, heard "the bad news" that "Chamberlain had just announced in the Commons the awful [Scandinavian] reverse." Two days later he wrote in anguish: "The British have pulled pell-mell out of Namsos to the north of Trondheim, thus completing the debacle of Allied aid to the Norwegians in central Norway. Where was the British navy which Churchill only a few

fortnights ago boasted would drive the Germans out of Norwegian waters?" And on May 4 Nicolson wrote that "there is grave suspicion of the Prime Minister. His speech about the Norwegian expedition has created disquiet. The House knows very well that it was a major defeat. But the P.M. said that 'the balance of advantage rested with us' and that 'Germany has not attained her objective.' . . . If Chamberlain believed it himself, then he was stupid. If he did not believe it, then he was trying to deceive. In either case he loses confidence."¹⁹²

On May 3, a Friday, the day the men of Mauriceforce swung down an English gangplank, carrying the equipment they had never had a chance to use, Colonel Hans Oster of OKW intelligence (Abwehr) dined in the secluded Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf, at the home of one of his closest friends, Colonel G. J. Sas, military attaché in Holland's Zitadelle embassy and an ardent anti-Nazi. Oster had provided his host with earlier Nazi plans to overrun The Hague, and ten days before Germany's seizure of Denmark and Norway had given him OKW's plans and the exact date for *Weserübung*. Now Sas listened intently as the Abwehr colonel told him that fifty Wehrmacht divisions were concentrated on the Reich's western borders and the long-expected German offensive there would begin in a week — May 10. Actually, the offensive had been scheduled to begin in two days, but on that Friday the Führer set *der Tag* back to May 6, partly because of bad weather but also because the Foreign Ministry advised him that his pretext for invading the neutral Low Countries wasn't good enough. The Dutch attaché sent Oster's information home in the next day's pouch. It reached The Hague within an hour of another coded warning from Holland's envoy at the Vatican. The Dutch immediately passed this warning along to the Belgians, but not to the British or the French. Even at this late hour the Low Countries believed neutrality was possible.

How much of this information was in Churchill's hands is unknown, but over a month earlier he had warned Britain: "More than a million German soldiers, including all their active divisions and armored divisions, are drawn up ready to attack, at a few hours' notice, along the frontiers of Luxembourg, of Belgium, and of Holland. At any moment these neutral countries may be subjected to an avalanche of steel and fire." Ten days later he had written Admiral Forbes: "It seems to me very likely that the great land battle in the West will soon begin."¹⁹³

On the French side of the Franco-Belgian border a brief argument enlivened the Sedan sector. General Charles Huntziger, responsible for it, was so convinced that the enemy would not strike there that he ordered the demolition of antitank obstacles which had been erected on the initiative of a major. Pierre Taittinger and another deputy, both members of the

Chamber of Deputies' Army Committee, inspected the position and were shocked at its vulnerability to enemy attack. In their report they wrote that the high command gave "*une importance exagérée*" to "the natural obstacles of the Ardennes forest and the Meuse river." They "trembled" they wrote, at the thought of what a German attack could do to this strategic position and recommended urgent measures to strengthen it. Huntziger replied: "I believe that there are no urgent measures to take for the reinforcement of the Sedan sector."¹⁹⁴

On May 4 Hitler postponed *Fall Gelb* to May 7 and Premier Reynaud took the first steps toward dismissing General Gamelin from all his commands. Gamelin, though supreme commander of all Allied troops, had been completely ineffectual in the Norwegian campaign. Asked by the British how many troops he could send for the assault on Trondheim, he had replied, "One division per month." Reynaud exploded. He said: "It would be a crime to leave this gutless man [*cet homme sans nerfs*] as head of the French army."¹⁹⁵

In parliamentary crises — one of which was shaping up in Westminster, though the prime minister didn't seem to realize it — precedents are worthless. A real political donnybrook bears less resemblance to *Robert's Rules of Order* than to a typhoon, in which water piles up behind a ship's keel, baffling the screws and forcing the helmsman to violate every principle of seamanship to avoid broaching to. Winston had never been a shrewd manipulator of votes. If he ever held a serious conversation with David Margesson, the chief Tory whip, one wonders what they could have discussed. At 11:00 P.M. on Saturday, April 27, he sent for Bill Deakin. Over the last several months he had done this often. Conscious of his contract with Cassell & Company and his obligation to finish his *History of the English-speaking Peoples* if possible, he had, according to Deakin, asked him "to spend an hour or so in the afternoon or in the early morning hours completing his chapters on the Norman Conquest and mediaeval England."¹⁹⁶

This, surely, was unique in the history of statesmanship. That Saturday evening the Admiralty was sending ships to rescue the survivors of the ill-starred Trondheim expedition — "ramshackle" was Winston's word for it — while reinforcing the British force besieging Narvik. His Majesty's cruiser *Glasgow* was headed for Molde to evacuate King Haakon, his government, and Norway's gold reserves. The U-boats had sunk 101 merchant ships, and new corvette escort vessels intended to cut the German score — Winston's "cheap and nasties," nasty if not cheap — were doing the job, though the first lord was pondering, and would soon approve, closing the Mediterranean to normal British shipping. In the private office, Deakin recalls,

Naval signals awaited attention, admirals tapped impatiently on the door of the First Lord's room, while on one occasion talk inside ranged round the spreading shadows of the Norman invasion and the figure of Edward the Confessor who, as Churchill wrote, "comes down to us faint, misty, frail." I can still see the map on the wall, with the dispositions of the British Fleet off Norway, and hear the voice of the First Lord as he grasped with his usual insight the strategic position in 1066. But this was no lack of attention to current business. It was the measure of the man with the supreme historical eye. The distant episodes were as close and real as the mighty events on hand.¹⁹⁷

Churchill knew the government was in trouble and might fall. His wisest course would have been to play the lonely role which had been his lot for so long, behaving correctly but keeping his distance from a prime minister who might be on his way out. He couldn't do it. Even when those in trouble were adversaries — for example, Hoare when his deal with Laval was exposed — Winston consoled them and, if it was in his power, helped them. He sensed that Chamberlain was in trouble. Plainly, the prime minister was overworked. When Chatfield resigned as minister for the coordination of defense his office was abolished; Churchill, at the prime minister's request, took up part of the burden, and since early April had presided over the War Cabinet's Military Coordination Committee. A *Daily Mail* headline on April 4 read: "MR CHURCHILL BECOMES SUPER WAR CHIEF," and a columnist wrote that Winston had become "in effect, Britain's Supreme Defence Minister." Berlin radio broadcast on April 3 that Winston had been "elevated from warmonger to grand warmonger." One of Churchill's oldest friends wrote him: "You have indeed great responsibility now, you are practically at the top of the tree." However, he went on: "What a terrible job you have Winston. Your helpmates do not strike me as being very good." Another friend, suspicious, wrote that he couldn't help "wondering whether it isn't deliberately calculated . . . so as to load you with work as to make things impossible."¹⁹⁸

Separate forces were rallying round the prime minister and round his first lord, and there was very little either could do short of renouncing the premiership, which would have been absurd, since each felt himself the better man. One side whispered, *Gallipoli*; the other, *Munich*. On May 1 Harold Nicolson noted: "The Tapers and Tadpoles" — Taper and Tadpole were party hacks in Disraeli's novel *Coningsby* — "are putting it around that the whole Norwegian episode is due to Winston. There is a theory going round that Lloyd George may head a Coalition Cabinet. What worries people is that everybody asks, 'But whom could you put in Chamberlain's place?' " Clearly it would require someone who would take

a sacred oath never to say that Hitler had "missed the bus." That slight remark rankled all England. Clementine called it "a monument to ignorance and obstinacy," and the rage it sparked seems to us now to be all out of proportion to the offense. The P.M. was simply a victim of very poor timing, over which he had no control.¹⁹⁹

But the anger was there; a Gallup poll early in May, after the defeat in Norway, shocked No. 10. Chamberlain's supporters were vanishing. Only 32 percent of those polled backed him; 58 percent were vehement in their opposition. Nicolson went "to Arlington Street for the Watching Committee" and found "a glum crowd," he wrote on April 30. "The general impression is that we may lose the war. The tanks position is appalling and we hear facts about that. We part in gloom. Black Week in the Boer War can hardly have been more depressing."²⁰⁰

Henry Channon, a Tory MP loyal to Chamberlain, noted in the April 30 entry in his diary that he had heard "more talk of a cabal against poor Neville." Then, turning caustic: "They' are saying that it is 1915 all over again, that Winston should be Prime Minister as he has more vigour and the country behind him." On May 3 Ironside wrote in his diary: "I hear there is a first-class row commencing in the House, and that there is a strong movement to get rid of the PM." He added a backhanded endorsement of Churchill: "Naturally the only man who can succeed is Winston and he is too unstable, though he has the genius to bring the war to an end." This much was certain: Churchill's steadfast stand against Hitler was all that kept his candidacy alive — in Clementine's words, "Had it not been for your years of exile & repeated warnings re. the German peril, Norway might well have ruined you." Typically, a Liberal peer wrote him May 2: "You, I believe, are the only person in the Cabinet who is not responsible for this War. You are not tarred with the Munich brush. Your advice to re-arm went unheeded. You did not let down the small nations or throw our friends to the wolves."²⁰¹

Later Winston wrote: "Failure at Trondheim! Stalemate at Narvik! Such in the first week of May were the only results we could show to the British nation, to our Allies, and to the neutral world, friendly or hostile. Considering the prominent part I played in these events . . . it was a marvel that I survived." Like Clemmie and others, he attributed his durability to "the fact that for six or seven years I had predicted with truth the course of events, and had given ceaseless warnings, then unheeded but now remembered."²⁰²

Churchill was trying desperately to salvage something from the wretched campaign in Norway, to depart with dignity and a small victory — something to justify the casualties, the anxieties, the expenses, and the hopes of England. He could not mourn Trondheim. He had been

against it from the start. All he had ever wanted was Narvik. But although Winston was farsighted, his vision did not extend into the Arctic Circle, where Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery was trying to reconcile his own aggressive instincts, Churchill's prods, the lethargic general commanding the Tommies, and the fact that some of the general's reasons for his immobility were quite sound. Major General Pierse Joseph Mackesy had drawn up a battle plan which he considered flawless. He would wait until the snow melted and then attack. According to his calculations, that would happen sometime in the summer. Cork didn't believe that at this latitude the earth was ever entirely free of snow, though certainly it was too deep now. And it was growing deeper; more snow fell almost every day. It was "exasperating," he wrote Winston, "not being able to get on, & I quite understand your wondering why we do not, but I assure you that it is not from want of desire to do so."²⁰³

Taking Narvik became a matter of face, though after the major German offensive erupted across the Channel on May 10, no one in His Majesty's Government seriously considered trying to hold the town. On May 24 the cabinet voted to abandon it as soon as it was in Allied hands. That happened four days later, when it fell to British, French, and Polish troops. On Tuesday, June 4, the evacuation began; by Saturday the last Allied soldier had left. England scarcely noticed. Interest in Norway had dropped sharply; attention was riveted upon the Low Countries and northern France. In 1914, Churchill had written, the cabinet had been preoccupied by the Irish question when "a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe." Now that light had reappeared.²⁰⁴

In Berlin it was impossible to forget that one was in the capital of a nation at war. Bands blared "*Heil Hitler Dir*," headlines preached rage, enormous banners displaying the hakenkreuz streamed down tall buildings from roofs to the street, and posters demanded "*Deutschland Erwache!*," "*Die Fahne Hoch!*," and "*Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz!*" ("The Common Interest before Self-interest!"). On Saturday, May 4 — the day Hitler again postponed *Fall Gelb* — Shirer noted in his diary: "The German papers are full of accusations that *Britain* now intends to 'spread the war' in the Mediterranean or Balkans or *somewhere else*, by which I take it they mean Holland." May 5 was a Sunday, "and as the week began to unfold," Shirer later recalled, "it became pretty clear to all of us in Berlin that the blow in the West would fall within a few days."²⁰⁵

That same Saturday His Majesty's Loyal Opposition asked for a debate on the war situation. It was scheduled for May 7. The prime minister wasn't concerned or even particularly interested; on Saturday, May 4, he

noted: "I don't think my enemies will get me this time." By "enemies" he meant his critics in the House of Commons, not Nazis, though a state of war had existed between Great Britain and the German Reich for eight months, and he himself had declared it. But in London it was easy to forget. Here there were no parading bands, no marching soldiers, no banners, and no posters. In the first weeks of the war people had talked of little else; now, except among those complaining about the blackout, it was scarcely mentioned.²⁰⁶

Winston in the cabinet was Winston gagged, so even politics was a bore. There was the usual maneuvering behind the scenes. The Watching Committee to which Nicolson had referred was led by Lord Salisbury, son of the turn-of-the-century prime minister. Now seventy-eight, the frock-coated marquess had been lord privy seal and the leader of the House under Baldwin. He was a man of convictions — his denunciation of Munich had been so savage that one of Chamberlain's supporters had physically assaulted him.

On May 5 the noble lord wrote: "The Sunday papers are excited, as I knew they would be, about Norway and the reconstruction of the Government. A good deal of this inspired by personal prejudice against the P.M. I fancy the movement for including Labour will grow, but whether they will serve under him [Chamberlain] or not remains to be seen." Actually, it was the other way round; the prime minister was not interested in leading a cabinet with Labour ministers. But Chamberlain's popularity had dropped so far and so fast that even Conservatives were speculating about his successor. Halifax was no speculator, not even in his diary, because his name was the one mentioned most often as the next prime minister. Geoffrey Dawson had been promoting him since March. And on Monday, May 6, the *Evening Standard* observed that "an all-party group of critics" wanted some ministers dropped and replaced by Liberals and Socialists. "If Mr Chamberlain refuses to make the changes," the *Standard* declared, "they say there should be a new Prime Minister. And the man they select is Lord Halifax." Halifax's only comment in his diary that evening was: "Considerable political clamour, but I doubt whether this, at present in all events, will amount to much."²⁰⁷

The following day was Tuesday, May 7, 1940.



The debate which opened that day was to be one of the most memorable in British history, but no one planned it so, or even expected it. Like a runaway grand jury, it was moved by forces deep within the House of

Commons, views vehemently held by individual MPs who had been unaware, till now, that so many fellow members shared them and felt just as strongly. They were to address the formal motion, "That this House do now adjourn," though in fact they would be debating the prosecution of the war. Chamberlain had chosen to open for the Conservatives; Churchill would close the following day. Labour had wanted Winston first — "We took the view that the First Lord was the Prime Minister's principal witness," Herbert Morrison said — but the prime minister knew Churchill was his most effective speaker and could draw all the government's arguments together as no other minister could.²⁰⁸

The government's most ineffective speaker was Chamberlain himself. "The House is crowded," Nicolson wrote, "and when Chamberlain comes in, he is greeted with shouts of 'Missed the bus!' He makes a very feeble speech and is only applauded by the Yes-men. He makes some reference to the complacency of the country, at which the whole House cheers vociferously and ironically, inducing him to make a little, rather feminine, gesture of irritation." As always Neville was coldly logical, but he seemed to lack his usual easy control of the House; his heart wasn't in it. Norway was no Gallipoli, he said — a comparison Winston may have wished he had found unnecessary, though the P.M. defended his first lord by dismissing as "unworthy and unfounded" the suggestion that one minister was more responsible than his colleagues for what had happened. Plainly, he was off his form. It may have been at this point that he realized for the first time that a shadow lay over his government.²⁰⁹

Attlee also made "a feeble speech" in Nicolson's opinion, but "Archie Sinclair a good one." Sinclair said the Norwegian operation had failed because "there had been no foresight in the political direction of the war and in the instructions given to the Staffs." He added: "In the first major effort of this war . . . we have had to creep back to our lairs, which is against the spirit of the men who are over the waters." Such damaging words were rarely heard in the Commons, but the pyrotechnics had only started. Another slashing speech followed, and yet another by the Labour MP Josiah Wedgwood, which was very odd. Nicolson wrote that he said "everything that he ought not to have said" and gave "the impression of being a little off his head. At one moment he suggests that the British Navy have gone to Alexandria since they are frightened of being bombed."²¹⁰

This led to the first sign that a real tempest loomed. As Wedgwood wound up, Roger Keyes entered the chamber. At Duff Cooper's suggestion Keyes was in full uniform, gold braid up to his elbows and six rows of ribbons, topped by the Grand Cross of the Order of Bath, glittering on his chest. Here was a genuine naval hero, the man who had led the gallant raid against the German U-boat pens at Zeebrugge and Ostend in 1918.

Nicolson handed him a note quoting Wedgwood's remark about the navy. The old admiral immediately rose, went straight to the Speaker's chair, was recognized at once, and began by calling the previous speaker's remark "a damned insult" — unparliamentary language, but the Speaker did not call him on it, and the House, noted Nicolson, "roars with laughter, especially Lloyd George who rocks backwards and forwards in boyish delight with his mouth wide open."²¹¹

But Keyes had not come to amuse Parliament. He had brought a speech. His appalling delivery was known to everyone in the chamber, so at Harold Macmillan's suggestion he had written everything out. It was a devastating attack on the naval conduct at Narvik; the chamber was completely silent when he declared that a naval assault at Trondheim would have succeeded but had been canceled because of lack of nerve at the Admiralty. This was a blow at Churchill, doubly so because he and the admiral were old friends. It was probably unjustified; nevertheless, when Keyes sat down Chamberlain knew he was in real trouble. Nicolson described the reaction: "There is a great gasp of astonishment. It is by far the most dramatic speech I have ever heard, and when Keyes sits down there is thunderous applause."²¹²

Now it was Leo Amery's turn. The Speaker called him during the dinner hour, and the House was no longer crowded, but Clement Davies, a Liberal MP and the unofficial whip of the dissenting factions, toured the dining room, lobbies, and smoking room, drumming up an audience for him. They found him worth it. Amery was a senior parliamentarian; he had been an admirer of old Joe Chamberlain's and a friend of both Joe's sons. With great skill he moved the target of the government's critics away from the navy — and by implication, Churchill — and toward Chamberlain and the conduct of the war. "Somehow or other," he said, "we must get into the Government men who can match our enemies in fighting spirit, in daring, in resolution and in thirst for victory." Approaching the end he said: "Some 300 years ago, when this House found that its troops were being beaten again and again by the dash and daring of the Cavaliers, by Prince Rupert's cavalry, Oliver Cromwell spoke to John Hampden. In one of his speeches he recounted what he had said. It was this: 'I said to him, 'Your troops are most of them old, decayed serving men and tapsters and such kind of fellows.' You must get men of a spirit that are likely to go as far as they will go, or you will be beaten still.'"

Amery paused. He said: "We are fighting today for our life, for our liberty, for our all. We cannot go on being led as we are." Again he paused, assessing the mood of the House. He had them rapt. In his research he had come upon another quotation. It was brutal; he might lose

his converts if he used it, but he was carried away, and looking toward the front bench he plunged ahead:

I have quoted certain words of Oliver Cromwell. I will quote certain other words. I do it with great reluctance, because I am speaking of those who are old friends and associates of mine, but they are words which, I think, are applicable to the present situation. This is what Cromwell said to the Long Parliament when he thought it was no longer fit to conduct the affairs of the nation:

*"You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go."*²¹³

In the opinion of some close to Chamberlain, Amery's pitiless attack shattered him. Churchill later wrote: "These were terrible words coming from a friend and colleague of many years, a fellow Birmingham Member, and a Privy Councillor of distinction and experience." In Nicolson's opinion the general impression left by the debate was that "we are unprepared to meet the appalling attack which we know is about to be delivered against us." The response was "something more than anxiety; it is one of actual fear, but it is a very resolute fear and not hysteria or cowardice in the least. In fact I have seldom admired the spirit of the House so much as I did today." He believed "there is no doubt that the Government is very rocky and anything may happen tomorrow." In his diary the loyal Henry Channon noted of the first day's debate: "The atmosphere was intense, and everywhere one heard whispers: 'What will Winston do?'"²¹⁴

There is a *jeu d'esprit* that Frenchmen tell — though only to one another — of how, when God created the earth, he wanted one perfect place, so he made France. Then, seeing what he had done, he decided he had gone too far, so he made Frenchmen. At times foreigners also repeat the story, and it was enjoying an exceptional vogue in early May 1940. Anyone who has studied the fighting which was about to begin as the Wehrmacht surged into France cannot doubt that Reynaud was justified in his determination to cashier the indecisive, almost inaccessible *Généralissime* Gamelin. However, the premier's timing was poor. It may be that having no commander in chief was preferable to the French Hamlet in Vincennes, but the problem was larger than that. It was political, because Gamelin's champion, the republic's minister of defense, was Daladier, who wanted to be premier again and was awaiting only an opportunity to strike. Cashiering the *généralissime* would provoke Daladier's resignation and, therefore, a cabinet crisis. France could survive without a government now, but not if she were invaded. But Reynaud's mind was made up. By May 8 the document of indictment was ready; the premier called a

cabinet meeting for the following day. The prospect, for everyone except Germans, was depressing. Marianne would face a powerful foe with her leaders quarreling among themselves. Once again poilus would reel backward shouting, "*Nous sommes trahis!*" and in a sense they would be right, though the betrayers would be *les députés* they had elected to office.

But Paris in the spring! In that second week in May the place God had made was a poem of beauty. The gardens of the Luxembourg and the Tuileries were in full blossom; so were the chestnut trees along the Seine; the overarching sky was unflawed by a single cloud, and on the boulevards and the Champs Élysées one could meditate or amuse oneself with friends in what Henri de Kerillis later remembered as "a bath of sun." The Duchess of Windsor worked at a canteen for poilus; Clare Boothe Luce, who had come to see her, thought the capital "insanely beautiful," with "unstartled birds singing in the gardens" and the flower market at the Madeleine "madly colorful." Theatres, cinemas, and nightclubs were packed; so were the stands at the Auteuil for spring racing; so were the halls of the Grand Palais, where the annual art exhibition was on display. In the rue de la Paix the windows of the great gem stores glittered with rubies, garnets, diamonds, jade, opal, sapphires, and emeralds, and business was brisk. On the Place Vendôme elegantly dressed women moved through the gilded corridors on their way to tea or lunch. Afterward de Kerillis would remember "how carefree and lighthearted" Parisians were.²¹⁵

London is less celebrated for its beauty, though there are those who prefer it because, among other reasons, it never occurred to Londoners — and certainly not to Churchill — that England's capital should be surrendered rather than be submitted to the ravages of battle. The British were prepared to sacrifice London house by house, to be destroyed rather than dishonored. The French loved honor, but loved Paris more, as they would demonstrate before summer arrived. On Wednesday, May 8, the second day of the Norway debate in the House of Commons, Hitler set the final date for *Fall Gelb*. It would begin at 5:35 A.M. on Friday. This would be confirmed Thursday when he flashed the irrevocable code word "Danzig" to his commanders. Meantime, the Führer boarded his special train for his headquarters, Felsenest (Aerie), near Müstereifel, twenty-five miles southwest of Bonn. That Wednesday, as the House of Commons gathered, with its leaders feeling they were on the verge of something tremendous, though none could identify it, Shirer was cabling New York from Berlin. As he later wrote, he advised his home office "to hold one of our correspondents in Amsterdam instead of shipping him off to Norway, where the war had ended anyway." That evening his military censors "allowed me to hint in my broadcast that there would soon be action in the West, including Holland and Belgium." Only later did he

learn why. The Nazis were deliberately focusing attention on the northern and western parts of the Low Countries, in the hope that no one would notice the German troop concentrations around the Ardennes.²¹⁶

Wednesday morning Labour's leaders were busy. Hugh Dalton breakfasted with Hugh Gaitskell, who told him that "high Foreign Office officials are leaking very freely." Halifax, he had learned, had threatened to resign unless Trondheim were attacked, and Lord Cork and Orrery had said that "in the first twenty-four hours" — before the Germans arrived — "I could have taken Trondheim with my bare hands." His request to do so had been denied, not by Churchill, but by Whitehall.²¹⁷

That morning's *Daily Herald*, the voice of Labour, reported that the party's Parliamentary Executive would meet before noon to determine its tactics in the concluding day of the debate. The *Herald's* political correspondent, Maurice Webb, predicted "sweeping reconstruction of the Government, involving the possible resignation of Mr. Chamberlain . . . in the near future." Webb doubted, however, that events would "take this drastic turn at once. Indeed, as I have previously stated, the Government will get through the present debate without immediate disaster." He noted suggestions "that the Labour Party should either put down a vote of censure or force a division on a motion for the adjournment, a motion which, if passed, would bring the Government down." To his subsequent regret, he called this "an unwise tactic. . . . The view taken by the most experienced critics of the Government is that the debate should be allowed to end without any direct challenge."²¹⁸

Herbert Morrison and Dalton had given Webb their assurance that there would be no call for a vote. However, he had not talked to Clement Attlee. Throughout Tuesday's session Attlee had kept a sharp eye on the benches opposite. He had observed the hostility toward their prime minister, and he meant to measure it. The leadership meeting, which he chaired, opened at 10:30 A.M., and he proposed that the Opposition force a division. Several of his colleagues were reluctant, arguing, as Dalton did, that "a vote at this stage" would "consolidate the Government majority," that it was precisely what Chamberlain and Halifax wanted. Nevertheless, Attlee's motion carried and was ratified at a later meeting of Labour backbenchers. Labour therefore prepared to make the first move when Parliament assembled. Morrison rose, as usual, to bait the front bench. At last, he observed, the prime minister had found a newspaper endorsement outside Britain and her commonwealth. It was the official organ of Franco's Spanish Falangists. He also read a few lines from Hoare's Norway speech from the BBC in *The Listener*. "Today our wings are spread over the Arctic. They are sheathed in ice. . . ." Hoare flushed crimson as the

House roared. Morrison said: "Hon. Members understandably laugh, but I am not quoting this for the purpose of arousing amusement, because it really is serious, for it is an indication of the delusions from which the Government are suffering." He then announced that "in view of the gravity of the events which we are debating . . . every Member has a responsibility to record his particular judgment upon them." Therefore, "we feel that we must divide the House at the end of our debate today." The Opposition was calling for a censure of the government.²¹⁹

Chamberlain was startled, then angry. The cockiness of Morrison's manner — he always seemed to be lecturing a particularly stupid child — was enough to get under anyone's skin. Moreover, the prime minister had not expected this. There was an understanding between whips that if either party planned to ask for a vote, the other would be told, although recently Sir Charles Edwards, Labour's chief whip, had warned Margesson, his Tory counterpart, that he couldn't always carry out his side of the bargain, explaining apologetically, "It's a very difficult party to manage, you know."²²⁰

Thus taken unaware, the prime minister miscalculated. He jumped up and sputtered: "The words which the right hon. gentleman has just uttered make it necessary for me to intervene for a moment or two at this stage." Dalton thought he showed "his teeth like a rat" as he cried, "It may well be that it is a duty to criticise the Government. I do not seek to evade criticism, but I say to my friends in the House, and I have friends in the House" — here, according to Nicolson, his expression became "a leer of triumph" — "[that] no Government can prosecute a war efficiently unless it has public and parliamentary support. I accept this challenge. I welcome it indeed. At least I shall see who is with us and who is against us, and I call on my friends to support us in the Lobby tonight."²²¹

Churchill described this as "an unfortunate passage"; his fellow Tories, he noted, "sat abashed and silenced." "Friends," in the context and idiom of the time and place, meant members of the P.M.'s party. Thus, in a partisan stroke, he had reduced the debate to the lowest level of politics, demanding that men belonging to the majority vote for him, regardless of how they felt about his prosecution of the war. It led to an unforgettable speech. Churchill called it "the last decisive intervention of Mr. Lloyd George in the House."²²²

He was now approaching eighty, and the awesome fire which had fueled the passion of the young Welsh crusader for justice had been reduced to embers. But Chamberlain, by cheapening the office Lloyd George had held in the last war, kindled them; in a final pyrotechnical display he evoked memories of the days when he was in his forties and Churchill in his thirties and the two radicals, the older as chancellor and

the younger as president of the Board of Trade, had forged an alliance to emasculate the House of Lords and bring England a maximum work day for miners, pensions for the aged, free meals and free medical attention for all British schoolchildren, and insurance for the jobless and the sick. Violet Bonham Carter, whose father was then the prime minister, had watched them both, and now in 1940, sitting in the Strangers' Gallery, she thought this, Lloyd George's last bow, "the most deadly speech I have ever heard from him — voice, gesture, everything was brought into play to drive home the attack."²²³

He tried to exculpate Churchill — "I do not think the First Lord was responsible for all the things that happened in Norway" — but Churchill immediately interrupted him: "I take full responsibility for everything that has been done by the Admiralty, and I take my full share of the burden." After warning Winston not to allow himself "to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues," Lloyd George turned on Chamberlain:

It is not a question of who are the Prime Minister's friends. It is a far bigger issue. He has appealed for sacrifice. The nation is prepared for every sacrifice so long as the Government show clearly what they are aiming at, and so long as the nation is confident that those who are leading it are doing their best. *I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there is nothing which can contribute more to victory in this war than that he should sacrifice the seals of office.*²²⁴

Now the outcome of the House vote was a source of speculation. Labour could not win. They held 166 seats to the Conservatives' 387. Many men could not switch; commitments had been made, papers signed, obligations incurred. To many others, casting a Conservative vote was a sacrament. And still others knew that if they broke with the party they would be pariahs in their own constituencies, even their own homes. But Chamberlain, smug only yesterday, began to feel uneasy. If the great Tory majority thinned perceptibly, his problems could become grave. Keyes, Amery, and Lloyd George had stirred the House. He was lucky Churchill was on the front bench and would anchor the government's position in the last speech of the evening.

As the debate continued into evening it became obvious that Winston would not be called before 10:00 P.M. He wandered into the smoking room, and was poking a hole in a new cigar when he glanced up and saw Harold Macmillan. Macmillan recalled long afterward: "He beckoned to me, and I moved to speak to him. I wished him luck, but added that I

hoped his speech would not be too convincing. "Why not?" he asked. "Because," I replied, "we must have a new Prime Minister, and it must be you." He answered gruffly that he had signed on for the voyage and would stick to the ship. But I don't think he was angry with me."²²⁵

Churchill was, however, worried. After Lloyd George's valediction he had been heard to say to Kingsley Wood, "This is all making it damned difficult for me tonight," and to Walter Elliott that the old man had been "absolutely devastating." Nevertheless, when the Speaker recognized him shortly after ten o'clock, he squared away like a prizefighter, assuming his most pugilistic stance. He had taken the queen's shilling, had signed on for the cruise, and intended to give the captain his best possible performance. In his diary Channon observed, "One saw at once that he was in a bellicose mood, alive and enjoying himself, relishing the ironical position in which he found himself: i.e. that of defending his enemies, and a cause in which he did not believe." Channon called the speech "slashing, vigorous . . . a magnificent piece of oratory. I was in the gallery behind him, with Rab" — R. A. Butler — "who was several times convulsed with laughter."²²⁶

Winston said he understood Keyes's "desire to lead a valiant attack" but regretted "that this natural impulse should have led him to cast aspersions upon his old shipmates and his old staff officers, Sir Dudley Pound and Vice-Admiral Phillips." Then he turned on those who had deplored the prime minister's appeal to his friends. He had shared their dismay, but he wasn't going to let that prevent him from having fun with them. "He *thought* he had some friends," he said, "and I *hope* he has some friends. He certainly had a good many when things were going well." At one point he said that Allied shipping losses had almost been redeemed by new shipbuilding and the capture of German ships. "Oh!" cried Emanuel Shinwell, an exasperated socialist and a favorite Churchill target. Winston rounded on him. "I daresay the hon. Member does not like that. He would like me to have a bad tale to tell. That is why he skulks in a corner." A Labour MP, "rather the worse for drink," according to Channon, had never heard the word "skulks"; he thought Winston had said "skunks" and protested, with the support of several colleagues who had it aright, that he had used unparliamentary language. The brief exchange in Hansard is hilarious:

[*Interruption*]

Mr. Churchill: What are we quarreling about? [HON. MEMBERS: "You should withdraw that."] I will not withdraw it.

Mr. Sloan (South Ayreshire): On a point of order — [*Interruption*]

Mr. Maclean: On a point of order. Is "skulk" a Parliamentary word? The right

hon. Gentleman used the word "skulk" and I am asking whether it is a Parliamentary word to use to another Member?

Mr. Speaker: It depends whether it applies accurately or not.

Mr. Maclean: Further to that point of order — [Interruption]

Mr. Churchill: Finally — [Interruption] — Hon. Members dare not listen to the argument.

Mr. Maclean: Are we to understand, Mr. Speaker, that a word becomes Parliamentary if it is accurate?

Mr. Churchill: All day long we have had abuse, and now hon. Members opposite will not even listen. . . .²²⁷

He had a knack for that — drawing them out and then playing the outraged injured party. "How much of the fire was real, how much ersatz, we shall never know," Channon wrote, "but he amused and dazzled everyone with his virtuosity." John Peck, a young civil servant who had recently joined Winston's staff, was fascinated — and troubled. Winston, he later wrote, "was constantly heckled by the Labour opposition, and he tore into them vehemently and often angrily. I had never heard him in action in the House of Commons and I was strangely uneasy." Somehow, he felt, "it did not ring entirely true." Actually, he reflected, it was impossible to offer "a completely sincere and heartfelt reply" to the attacks on the government. "Churchill knew that he was defending positions which were in many respects, indefensible. He knew that if the bitterest critics had their way, Chamberlain would resign. He knew that, in that case, he would probably become Prime Minister himself. But throughout the entire political crisis he never spoke or acted except in absolute loyalty to his Prime Minister." The fact was that the more eloquent his defense of Chamberlain, the more Chamberlain's chances shrank. After this no one would ask: "If not Chamberlain, who?"²²⁸

The House was blinded, and beguiled, by the skyrocketing and pinwheels, but in solemn moments Churchill, though entertaining, was never a mere entertainer. He knew serious men would pore over Hansard, looking for a chain of logic, and he provided them with it. He did not lie, he did not distort. But it was sophistry all the same. He omitted certain facts; since they reflected well upon him, it would have been difficult for anyone to argue that he had deliberately remained mute. Among his omissions was the fact that he had spent seven months trying to persuade the War Cabinet that they must move on Narvik (though he *did* say, "My eye has always been fixed on Narvik"), nor did he reveal his original doubts about Trondheim. Once the Nazi invasion had begun, he said, no one could "dispute that we were bound to go to the aid of the Norwegians and that Trondheim was the place." Not a voice in the chamber cried:

"Why?" Yet that was his one weak point; had he been challenged here, the whole structure of his presentation could have collapsed.

But he got by it and was home free. He conceded that Trondheim had been "a hazardous operation," but could have succeeded had the Norwegians not neglected to blow key bridges, destroy railroad junctions, hold the mountain passes, or block the Nazi advance north of Oslo. All these delaying tactics having failed, the British commanders were left with a Hobson's choice: either evacuate their troops "or leave them to be destroyed by overwhelming force." Could they have been strengthened? They could — by ignoring the military maxim "Never reinforce failure" and by withdrawing divisions from the BEF in France. Escalation in Norway would have led to "a forlorn operation on an ever-increasing scale." Perhaps he was thinking of Gallipoli. Here he added a warning; he had not abandoned his illusion that sea power was omnipotent, but he foresaw the danger of recklessly committing the RAF unless the need for it became absolute: "We must be careful not to exhaust our air force, in view of the much graver dangers which might come upon us at any time."²²⁹

The prime minister was pleased and grateful. Then the House voted, and he was shocked to discover that over a hundred of those he had counted among his friends weren't friendly anymore. Despite the Conservative whips, 41 Chamberlain supporters had defected to the Opposition and another 60 had abstained — 26 of them Tories whose constituencies included the territorials martyred at Andalsnes. A united party vote would have given the P.M. a majority of 213. Instead, the final tabulation was 281 for the government, 200 against it — a majority of 81. It was a stinging rebuke, wholly unforeseen. And for many the decision had been excruciating. Duff Cooper saw "a young officer in uniform, who had been for long a fervent admirer of Chamberlain, walking through the Opposition lobby" — voting against the government — "with tears streaming down his face." Churchill had always voted as he pleased, but he was an exception; others faced punishment from Margesson and the party machine. They knew that if they appeared at No. 11 Downing Street's patronage office now they would be turned away. To abandon their leader had required considerable courage, but they had done it, and now he was in the deepest trouble of his political career.²³⁰

His spirits cannot have been raised by Parliament's response to the announcement of the vote. "Up to the last moment," Nicolson wrote, "the House had behaved with moderation," but "during the last twenty minutes . . . passions rose." The figures "are greeted with a terrific demonstration," he continued, "during which Joss Wedgwood starts singing *Rule Britannia*, which is drowned in shouts of 'Go, go, go, go!'" Some were

waving handkerchiefs at the fleeing P.M. To counteract their jeers, Nicolson noted, "Margesson signals to his henchmen to rise and cheer the departing Prime Minister, and he walks out pale and angry." Hugh Dalton was asked: "What next?" He replied: "The Old Man must go to Buckingham Palace and hand them [the seals of office] in."²³¹

At 11:13 P.M., May 8, 1940, when the House of Commons adjourned, thousands of Dutch, Belgians, and Luxembourgers had less than forty-eight hours to live, though they were unaware of it; in those days civilized nations mobilized, exchanged hostile notes, and then formally declared war. Nevertheless, guards on the borders of each of these small countries were puzzled and troubled by the total silence on the German side of their frontiers. Hitler had signed nonaggression pacts with each and repeatedly and solemnly reaffirmed them, vowing that not a single hobnailed Wehrmacht boot would ever touch their soil. They had taken little comfort from that; he had told too many *grosse Lügen*; his credibility had vanished and been replaced by fear. The Third Reich, possessing the most powerful military juggernaut Europe had ever known, was recognized as a terrorist nation, the very essence of *Schrecklichkeit*, the stuff of nightmares.

Luxembourg was not going to win this war. Her army comprised four hundred infantrymen and twelve cavalrymen. But she had already taken the first step in a campaign which would cripple the Wehrmacht in every conquered country. Luxembourgers had erected barbed wire barricades on frontier roads, evacuated border towns, and closed bridges across the duchy's river border with the Reich. They called it "passive defense," but the world would adopt the French name: *La Résistance*.



As he rose to leave the chamber, the prime minister had motioned to Churchill, an invitation to join him in his private room. There Winston "saw at once," as he later recalled, "that he took the most serious view of the sentiment of the House toward himself. He felt he could not go on. There ought to be a National Government. One party alone could not carry the burden. Someone must form a Government in which all parties would serve, or we could not get through."²³²

Churchill's reply was the last response one would have expected. He could have relished the moment. He had every right. "If [a prime minister] trips," he later observed, "he must be sustained. If he makes mistakes, they must be covered. If he sleeps he must not be wantonly disturbed. If he is no good he must be pole-axed." If ever a man deserved

retribution, it was Neville Chamberlain. More than any man except Hitler — and Hitler could not have done it without him — he was responsible for the transformation of Germany into the most powerful military state in Europe, which had begun, with Teutonic efficiency, the destruction of all European Jews and had turned the Slavs in the vast lands it conquered into *Skavenarbeiter* — slave laborers. Young Colville, who scorned those who condemned all Germans per se, had nevertheless reflected in March: "I suppose there is a natural strain of brutality in the German character and as great an insensitivity to human suffering as there is a sensitivity to beauty." The Nazis had unleashed the brutality, but had Chamberlain not embraced their führer at Munich, their government would have fallen as his was now falling.²³³

It would have been almost instinctive in any other member of Parliament to ponder the implications of the House vote for his own career. Every speech denouncing the government over the past two days had been an echo of the speeches Churchill had been delivering for years — often to empty seats. The awakening of Parliament's conscience had vindicated the torch he had held aloft, alone, at great personal cost. It was savage irony that he now found himself among the crew of a ship being sunk by torpedoes he had designed. Since he first won election to Parliament forty years earlier, his objective had been to become prime minister. Here, writhing on the rack of humiliation, was the man who had been his chief adversary during the three crucial years before the outbreak of the war. Knowing Neville, he was sure he would not throw in his hand voluntarily, but now the choice might no longer be his. Had Winston connived for office, as was his right — some would have said, his duty — he would have suggested various lines of action, or at the very least have remained silent.

But Churchill was never a rational man. His conduct often seemed to run at cross-purposes with what was best for him and best for England. His magnanimity, so often extended to those who least deserved it, might have led him to console Chamberlain by making some wildly generous, completely ruinous gesture, volunteering to accept, for example, blame that was not his. Instead, he yielded to another Churchillian impulse — to stand with Chamberlain, as though he were Horatius, to defend the indefensible bridge. "Aroused by the antagonisms of the debate," as he later wrote, he urged the prime minister to "fight on. 'This has been a damaging debate, but you have a good majority. Do not take the matter grievously to heart. . . . Strengthen your Government from every quarter, and let us go on until our majority deserts us.'" At midnight he left the P.M. unconvinced, uncomfirmed. Winston wondered why the man would "persist in his resolve to sacrifice himself." The answer was that although Chamberlain had never backed away from a fight, logic told him

that if he were to survive this moral defeat, he would have to search for compromises. Churchill had never compromised. And in moments of crisis he sought guidance not by reasoning but by intuition.²³⁴

After baring his soul to Churchill, the prime minister reverted to type, trying to find a way out of the trap. Although it was midnight, the King readily agreed to see him. The audience was brief. Smiling, the prime minister said he had not come to resign; he hoped to restructure his government as a coalition, with Labour participation. Later a reliable source reported that George VI offered to intervene with Attlee. It seems implausible, a dubious move for Britain's constitutional monarch. In all events, the prime minister said that Attlee would have a better understanding of his party's attitude after its annual meeting, about to begin in Bournemouth. He had not yet grasped the nature of the crisis; he thought it would develop slowly, giving him time to negotiate.²³⁵

Chamberlain's critics have held that his sole object after the disastrous debate was to cling to office — "The Old Man is incorrigibly limpet," wrote Dalton, "always trying new tricks to keep himself firm upon the rock." It is unlikely that his motives were overtly selfish; able politicians always regard themselves as indispensable, and once Chamberlain realized that the country's fortunes were likely to improve under another leader, he devoted himself to an orderly transition. That light did not dawn on him until late Thursday morning, but he never sacrificed or bargained or wheedled to stay at No. 10, as Ramsay MacDonald had done ten years earlier.²³⁶

Churchill was shaving the following morning when Eden called at the Admiralty. Flourishing his safety razor, Winston predicted, as Eden wrote in his diary, that the P.M. would "not be able to bring in Labour and that a National Government must be formed." Eden returned early in the afternoon for lunch, and was startled to find that Kingsley Wood was also a guest. Just as Bracken was Churchill's satellite, so Wood was Chamberlain's. The prime minister trusted him and respected his advice; in turn, he had raised him from parliamentary secretary to cabinet rank, first as minister of health and now air minister. The RAF had doubled its strength during the past year, but that was not his doing; he was defeatist and had enthusiastically supported appeasement. Why was he at the Admiralty? He wanted to tell Churchill what Chamberlain had been doing. Eden was appalled. Churchill wasn't. With England in danger, personal loyalties went over the side. Winston may have assumed that his visitor was concerned about the nation's survival, not his cabinet seat, though later events demonstrated that his visitor's tale-bearing would not go unrewarded.²³⁷

The previous evening, it seemed, no member of the House had gone straight home. Factions and cabals had met in Westminster chambers,

Whitehall offices, and private apartments. The largest group, sixty rebel Conservatives, had elected Amery as their chairman and voted, unanimously, that none of them would join or support any government which did not include Labour and Liberals. Downing Street had been informed of this, of course, and at 8:00 A.M. Amery had been summoned to No. 10. Chamberlain had offered him the choice of any cabinet ministry — the Foreign Office and the Exchequer were expressly offered — if he would bring his rebels back into the fold. Amery had asked whether the rebuilt government would include members of the other two parliamentary parties. The prime minister had said bleakly: "I hope that will not be necessary." In that event, Amery had said, he could not accept the P.M.'s generous offer, and expressing his regrets he had departed.²³⁸

At 10:00 A.M., Kingsley Wood went on, Lord Halifax had appeared. There is something intriguing about the Halifax candidacy. The prime minister urged him to be his successor, implying that he would serve under him. Chamberlain's biographer leaves no doubt that the foreign secretary was his first choice. Back in his office Halifax dictated a note to Cadogan, commenting on the P.M.'s offer: "The evident drift of his mind left me with a bad stomach ache." Yet from the moment knowledgeable Englishmen had begun talking about a new prime minister, Halifax's name had led all the rest. On May 6, the day before the crucial two-day debate, he had quietly conferred with Morrison about the possibility of a Conservative-Labour coalition. His diary merely notes the appointment; neither his papers nor Morrison's mention what was said or decided. And the following day, before the debate began, the *Daily Mail* had published a letter from Sir Stafford Cripps, KC, which *The Times* had rejected. Signed "A British Politician," it had called for an all-party government, with a small cabinet — Churchill, Eden, Lloyd George, Morrison, and Attlee were mentioned — led by Halifax as prime minister.²³⁹

Dalton, like Morrison a member of the Labour hierarchy, was open in his support of Halifax. After Chamberlain's humiliation in the House, Dalton had told Rab Butler that "provided Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare disappeared" Labour might join a coalition, that if asked who should be the new P.M., "I thought, and a number of others shared this view, that there was much to be said for Halifax." Given the lopsided Tory majority in the House, the hard fact was that no one could form a government without the support of Tory backbenchers. Dalton told Attlee: "Given the strength of parties in the House, the P.M. *must* be a Conservative. He quite agreed. We thought it lay between Halifax and Churchill, and that either, if other conditions were right, would be a possible leader of a Coalition which we might join."²⁴⁰

Halifax had left the door ajar, or Chamberlain thought he had, and the

P.M., a man of heroic doggedness, refused to accept the noble lord's rejection. In any event, he himself would resign. In his diary Eden noted that at luncheon with Wood and Churchill, "They told me that Neville had decided to go. The future was discussed. Kingsley thought that W. should succeed, and urged that if asked he should make plain his willingness." But Wood warned Winston that the P.M. wanted Halifax and would ask Churchill to agree. "Don't agree," Wood said, "and don't say anything." In his memoirs Eden commented: "I was shocked that Wood should talk in this way, for he had been so much Chamberlain's man. But it was good counsel and I seconded it."²⁴¹

For a party holding only 27 percent of the seats in the House, Labour was courted with extraordinary ardor. During the debates, Harold Macmillan later remembered, there was apprehension on the part of Churchill's supporters over Winston's role as the last speaker — concern that by giving a fighting speech, he might alienate Opposition leaders who would then veto his bid to succeed Chamberlain. "We were determined to bring down the Government," Macmillan recalled, but "if the chief issue of the first day had been the overthrow of the Government, the chief anxiety of the second was the rescue of Churchill." In fact, he wrote, Chamberlain was convinced that Winston's spirited defense of his government meant "Labour hostility to Churchill in forming a National Government." But Bracken, anticipating this, had entertained Attlee at dinner Tuesday evening. Attlee thought Halifax would move into No. 10 with Winston as his minister of defense. His people, he said, "have never forgiven Churchill for Tonypandy."²⁴²

Bracken, on his own initiative, insisted that Churchill would never serve under Halifax, "incurring all the blame if things went wrong and with no real control of the situation." He then exacted a pledge from Attlee: if Churchill came to power, Attlee would not refuse to join the government. The irony here is that while Morrison and Dalton found Halifax acceptable — they barred only Chamberlain, Simon, and Hoare — the rest of the party leadership and virtually all the rank and file were less tolerant. On Thursday the ninth Clement Davies reported to Bob Boothby that "Attlee & Greenwood are unable to distinguish between the PM & Halifax & are *not* prepared to serve under the latter." That same evening Boothby — who had been in the House all day, drumming up support for Churchill — passed this information along to Churchill with the comment: "Opinion is hardening against Halifax as Prime Minister. I am doing my best to foster this, because I cannot feel he is, in any

* The location of a riot by striking Welsh miners in November 1910. Churchill, then home secretary, restored order and actually saved miners' lives. But "Tonypandy" had a memorable ring to it; union leaders made it pejorative and — like "Gallipoli" — it stuck.

circumstances, the right man." The Halifax boomlet was doomed; he could never have formed a coalition government — the only government that Parliament would accept.²⁴³

Kingsley Wood's visit was enormously useful to Winston. As Churchill put it, over lunch he "learned that Mr. Chamberlain was resolved upon the formation of a National Government and, if he could not be the head, he would give way to anyone commanding his confidence who could. Thus, by the afternoon, I became aware that I might well be called upon to take the lead. The prospect neither excited nor alarmed me. . . . I was content to let events unfold." He was back in his office, scanning staff reports, when the call came from No. 10. Arriving, he found Halifax with Chamberlain; very soon, the prime minister told him, Attlee and Greenwood, Labour's deputy leader, would arrive. The socialists arrived late, though they could scarcely reveal why. Stopping at the Reform Club, they had met with Clement Davies to review their position. A German attack on the Low Countries was believed imminent. Because of it, Attlee favored keeping Chamberlain in office until the crisis passed. The other two disagreed. Eventually they had brought him round, but it had taken them two hours. In the Cabinet Room he and Greenwood sat on one side, the three Tories on the other, Chamberlain in the middle.²⁴⁴

Chamberlain asked whether Labour would serve under him, or, if not, under another Conservative prime minister. Their formal response, they said, would depend upon the views of the party, now convening in Bournemouth, but they believed the reply to the first question would be "almost certainly, 'no'"; to the second "probably 'yes.'" Both Halifax and Churchill loyally urged support for Chamberlain, but just as Winston was beginning to work himself up toward a cadenza, Greenwood cut in: "We haven't come here to listen to you orating, Winston." Whatever their feelings, they said, they lacked the power to make decisions "because members of our party have got absolutely no confidence in the Prime Minister." Attlee was even more blunt: "I'm bound to tell you, Prime Minister, that in my view our party will not serve under you, nor does the country want you." Serving under another Conservative prime minister was another matter; they would lay it before the Labour Party Executive at Bournemouth tomorrow and Attlee would telephone yes or no. He and Greenwood then withdrew. Chamberlain, Halifax, and Churchill remained in the Cabinet Room; because this was a political matter, David Margesson joined them. If Kingsley Wood had been right, this was the time to be on the *qui vive*.²⁴⁵

Chamberlain told them he was now convinced that forming a national government was beyond his power. Attlee and Greenwood had tied the knot of that shroud. Margesson, asked for his opinion, agreed. Unity was

indispensable, he said, and as long as Chamberlain remained in power it would be beyond reach. He added that he was not prepared — at the moment — to comment on the political strengths of Churchill and Halifax among Conservative backbenchers, at which, Halifax noted in his diary, “my stomach ache continued.” Chamberlain’s task now was to tell the King who should be sent for after he had surrendered the seals of office. He seemed calm, cool, almost detached. But he looked across the table at both of them.²⁴⁶

At this point we must choose between Churchill’s recollection and Halifax’s. Winston’s account, the more engaging, has been almost universally accepted and presented in various stage, television, and film dramas. In this version he remembered Kingsley Wood’s admonition to say nothing — advice far more difficult for Winston to follow than most men — and sat immobile while “a very long pause ensued. It certainly seemed longer than the two minutes which one observes in the commemorations of Armistice Day.” Then, he tells us, Halifax said he couldn’t possibly lead a government because, being a peer, he sat in the House of Lords.²⁴⁷

But Winston’s tale, as it appears in *The Gathering Storm*, the first volume of his World War II history, does not bear close scrutiny. The meeting in the Cabinet Room occurred on May 9. He puts it on May 10. The difference between the two is huge; on May 9 the borders of France and the Low Countries were inviolate. The great surge of the Wehrmacht came on May 10, and Churchill tells us that upon returning to the Admiralty from the Cabinet Room, he found that “the Dutch Ministers were in my room. Haggard and worn, with horror in their eyes, they had just flown over. . . . Their country had been attacked without the slightest pretext or warning.” The day before, when Chamberlain actually faced Halifax and Winston, Holland had been peaceful. Churchill got it wrong. And no wonder. He was dictating it six years after the event — six of the most crowded years any man had endured. To acquire some inkling of what that pressure did to his memory, one need only reflect upon what the first year did to it. Millions remember, and can recite, lines from his great speeches of 1940: “Their finest hour,” “We shall fight on the beaches,” and his tribute to the RAF after the Battle of Britain. Yet twelve months later, in 1941, Winston himself couldn’t remember any of them.²⁴⁸

The more plausible account, and unquestionably the correct one, lies in these notes which Halifax scribbled upon returning to his office on the other side of Downing Street, and then turned over to Cadogan:

PM said I was the man mentioned as the most acceptable. I said it would be hopeless position. If I was not in charge of the war (operations) and if I didn’t lead

the House, I should be a cypher. I thought Winston was a better choice. Winston did *not* demur. Was very kind and polite but showed that he thought this right solution.

The PM, Winston, David Margesson and I sat down to it. The PM recapitulated the situation, and said he had made up his mind that he must go, and that it must be either Winston or me. He would serve under either. . . . I then said that I thought for the reasons given the PM must probably go, but that I had no doubt at all in my own mind that for me to take it would create a quite impossible position. . . . Winston, with suitable positions of regard and humility, said he could not but feel the force of what I had said, and the PM reluctantly, and Winston evidently with much less reluctance, finished by accepting my view.²⁴⁹

Margesson had been unwilling to comment on the popularity of the two among Tories until the decision had been made; now he could, and he observed that they had been “veering towards” Winston. Halifax had noted the same trend and remarked upon it to Cadogan, adding that if Chamberlain were to remain in the government, “as he is ready to do,” his advice and judgment “would steady Winston.” The prime minister had left them, explaining that he had to see someone else. The man who felt himself dispensable and the man who knew he was indispensable were left alone. They decided to have tea. “It was a bright, sunny afternoon,” Churchill wrote, “and Lord Halifax and I sat for a while . . . in the garden of Number 10 and talked about nothing in particular.” They then parted, each to his office. Winston knew Chamberlain could not move until Attlee called, and in the Cabinet Room he had said that he would “have no communication with either of the Opposition Parties until I had the King’s commission to form a Government. . . . I then went back to the Admiralty.”²⁵⁰

At “about 8 o’clock,” Channon’s diary entry read, he called at No. 10 and left with the impression that “Neville still reigns, but only just.” A half-hour later, on the other side of the Horse Guards Parade, Churchill sat down to dinner in Admiralty House with four guests: the Prof, Bracken, Anthony Eden, and Archie Sinclair. He told them, Eden wrote, that he thought it “plain” that Chamberlain would advise the King to send for him, because Halifax, his only rival, “did not wish to succeed.” As the evening lengthened, Winston slowly absorbed the massive fact of his position. During the evening Randolph called from his battalion, billeted in Northamptonshire, some seventy miles northwest of London. He asked if there was any news. His father replied: “I think I shall be Prime Minister tomorrow.”²⁵¹

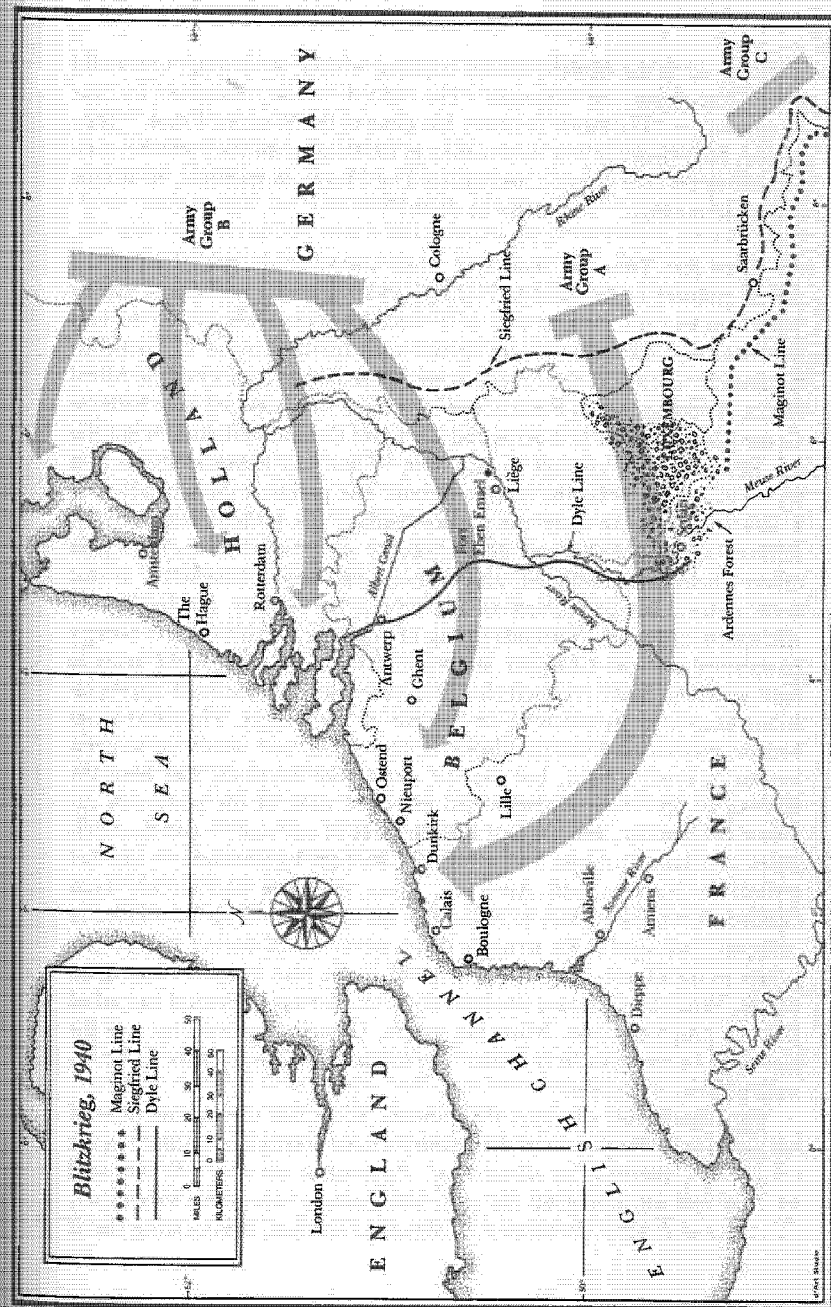
On the evening of May 9, as Churchill entertained his friends at dinner, Labour's leaders in the palm courts of Bournemouth pondered whether to serve under him in an all-party government, and the *London News Chronicle* went to press with a banner story reporting that "Mr Chamberlain's early resignation is now certain" — the Bore War, in short, continued to bore. But developments across the Channel continued to foreshadow England's approaching peril.

On Germany's side of the Rhine, the Führer had assembled 136 divisions and their reserves — two million men, including a contingent wearing uniforms of the Netherlands army and fluent in the Dutch language. The Low Countries would be overwhelmed by vast surging waves of infantry and armor "unprecedented for size, concentration, mobility," Shirer wrote, which "stretched in three columns back for a hundred miles beyond the Rhine."²⁵²

The Führer's bold strategy deployed three great formations, one of which was meant to persuade the Allies that the Germans were following the Schlieffen Plan of 1914. In the north, the thirty divisions of Army Group B would strike into Holland and Belgium in a four-pronged assault. To meet what they were meant to think was the main threat, the best British and French troops would rush into Belgium, taking a stand along the Dyle River. In the south, Army Group C's nineteen divisions would feint toward the Maginot Line, keeping the poilus there tied up. The real Nazi blow would be delivered in the center, by Army Group A — forty-five divisions, including most of the Wehrmacht's panzers. Plunging through Luxembourg and the Ardennes, these motorized units would pour through the gap between the Maginot Line and the line of the Dyle, race westward to the Channel, and then pivot northward, joining Army Group B in the encirclement and destruction of the French and British troops.

Thus, the main body of the German army, cutting across the Allied rear, and using the panzers as it had in Poland, would exploit the new concept in warfare — deep penetration into enemy territory by mobile armored forces — a concept as revolutionary, Liddell Hart has pointed out, as "the use of the horse, the long spear, the phalanx, the flexible legion, the 'oblique order,' the horse-archer, the longbow, the musket, the [artillery] gun."²⁵³

On May 9, in the Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf, Colonel Oster of the Abwehr dined for the last time with his friend Colonel Sas, the Dutch military attaché. Oster once more confirmed that *Fall Gelb* would be unleashed at daybreak. To double-check, he drove them to OKW's Berlin headquarters in the Bendlerstrasse after their coffee and brandy. Sas waited



in the car while the Abwehr colonel inquired within. Returning, Oster said there had been no changes. He added: "*Das Schwein ist zur Westfront*" — "The swine [Hitler] has gone to the Western Front." They parted. Sas passed the new information to the Belgian military attaché, then crossed to his own legation and called The Hague to transmit, in simple code, the message: "Tomorrow at dawn!"²⁵⁴

At 10:20 that Thursday morning, when Chamberlain was offering the prime ministry of England to Halifax, Paul Reynaud announced that he would present the premiership of France to anyone who could form a government, unless his cabinet agreed with his indictment of Gamelin, commander in chief of the French army; supreme commander of the Allied forces, British as well as French; and the officer who presided over both the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre and the Haut Comité Militaire. This was not Reynaud's first attempt to sack him — nor was Reynaud the first to try — but it was by far the most vigorous. The premier, though suffering a sore throat, spent over two hours reading his presentment. French military appointments were determined to a remarkable degree by an officer's politics and religion, and Gamelin had been a beneficiary of that *drôle* system, having served as France's senior soldier for five years. Afterward, after the calamitous spring of 1940, he and his officers bitterly complained that the Chamber of Deputies never gave them the arms to fight with. An audit revealed that each year Gamelin returned appropriations unspent — as much as 60 percent of his budget. He hated allies because they entailed the possibility of bloodshed, and would go to great lengths to avoid a fight, but the last straw, for Reynaud, had been the Norwegian operation. Gamelin had exercised none of his powers as supreme commander, and the first French force of any size — two demibrigades of *Chasseurs Alpins* and a third of foreign legionnaires — had not arrived in Norway until April 27, when the issue had already been decided. It is extraordinary to reflect that his name was never mentioned in newspaper accounts of the struggle there, never raised during the two-day debate in the House. He had participated in the plan to mine Norwegian waters. When the Germans swooped down on Norway, Reynaud had asked what he proposed to do. Mine the waters, Gamelin replied; that was the plan, and he meant to carry it out. The sudden appearance of the Germans was, to him, irrelevant.

Paul Baudouin, who kept the minutes, noted that throughout most of the premier's arraignment of the country's most prestigious military figure the cabinet observed "*un silence total. Personne ne dit mot.*" As Reynaud went on and on, piling up his case, one minister whispered to another, "*C'est une exécution.*" At 12:30 P.M. Reynaud finished, commenting that if

France continued with such a supreme commander, she was sure to lose the war. The minister of finance was convinced, he said, of "*l'impossibilité de laisser le général Gamelin à la tête des armées françaises.*"²⁵⁵

Everyone turned to Daladier. He was minister of defense; he had defended Gamelin in the past. This was not the Daladier who had once been ready to fight for Czechoslovakia. He was defeatist now, infected with the spiritual corruption which had infected the government, the army, and virtually the entire infrastructure of French society. Replying to the premier, he blamed the British for the failure in Norway. Gamelin, he said, bore no share of the responsibility. He believed Gamelin was "*un grand chef militaire,*" a soldier with tremendous prestige and a fine military record. Everyone acknowledged his superior intelligence. True, he was seventy, but he was more active than many men his age. Daladier opposed "the desire of the premier to replace the generalissimo."²⁵⁶

Reynaud appealed to other ministers to speak up. Surely they had formed opinions; duty required that they voice them. But these were frightened little men. If one took a position, one might offend a powerful figure; by remaining silent, one lost nothing. Reynaud, however, wasn't going to let them off that easily. Their failure to speak, he said, meant they opposed him; since the government could not survive such a loss of confidence, therefore, "I consider the government as having resigned." They were dismayed. None had thought he would actually dissolve the government. Now they were all ex-ministers, as he was an ex-premier.²⁵⁷

During the afternoon Gamelin, glooming around in his Vincennes dungeon, learned of the bill of particulars Reynaud had drawn up against him. Indignant, he resigned.

At 1:00 A.M. he was awakened. A French agent behind the German lines had sent an urgent signal: "*Colonnes en marche vers l'ouest*" — "Columns marching westward."

Hitler was on his way.

France had no government. The French army had no commander.



The telephones began ringing in Whitehall as the first olive moments of daybreak revealed the majestic buildings towering against a darkling, still starry sky — vast cathedrals of an empire whose celebrants had been dwindling year by year since what had been called, and was now known to be, the Armistice.

Shortly after 5:30 A.M. Churchill was wakened and told the first, fragmentary reports. Before the mists of legend envelop him, before he

comes to power and assumes leadership of the struggle to crush the monster in central Europe — while he is still, so to speak, Drake bowling when informed that the Armada has been sighted — it is useful to glimpse the entirely mortal Winston. The vision is less than inspiring; unlike some earlier heroes, Winston is engaged in no mundane but memorable act when the news arrives. Instead, wearing his blue dressing gown and carpet slippers, he stumbles down to the upper war room and is told that thus far the attack is “on Holland alone.” Assuming, like everyone else in His Majesty’s Government, that the main Nazi thrust will come here, he phones Charles Corbin, the French ambassador. He asks: Will the Allied armies move into Belgium on the strength of the little now known?

At 6:20 Corbin called back. German troops were now across the Belgian border, he said, and Brussels had “asked for help.” Therefore, Gamelin had been told to invoke Plan D — the advance of the French Seventh Army and the British Expeditionary Force to the line of the Dyle River, there to join the Belgian and Dutch forces. Randolph Churchill, breakfasting in his camp, had heard a radio bulletin. He phoned his father, asking: “What’s happening?” Winston replied: “Well, the German hordes are pouring into the Low Countries.” He told him of the Allied counter-move, adding, “In a day or two there will be a head-on collision.” His son asked him about his reference the previous evening to “you becoming Prime Minister today.” Churchill said, “Oh, I don’t know about that. Nothing matters now except beating the enemy.”²⁵⁸

In this crisis Sam Hoare and Oliver Stanley, the other two service ministers, appeared with their chief advisers at Admiralty House. Later Hoare would remember, “We had had little or no sleep, and the news could not be worse, yet there he was, smoking his large cigar and eating fried eggs and bacon, as if he had just returned from an early morning ride.” He was surrounded by yesterday’s newspapers. The *Times* leader that morning rebuked Labour for dividing the House, since it had been obvious that Chamberlain intended to rebuild his cabinet when “the Labour Party ran up its flag,” throwing the prime minister’s plans “into confusion.” The *News Chronicle* — which had championed Lloyd George — more accurately reported that since neither Liberal nor Labour leaders were willing to serve under Chamberlain, “a new Premier will thus have to be found. He is more likely to be found in Mr Winston Churchill than anyone else.” Winston swept the papers to the floor with one vigorous arm, rose, and suggested they meet in the war room downstairs. There, with him in the chair, they agreed that two RAF squadrons should be sent to France “in accordance with the prearranged plan.” Then orders to execute Royal Marine, his plan to mine the waters of the Rhine, were issued at long last.²⁵⁹

The first casualty of the Nazi offensive was the feud between Reynaud and Gamelin. The premier sent Vincennes a message: “The battle has begun. Only one thing counts: to win it.” Gamelin agreed, replying: “*Seule la France compte*” — “Only France counts.” His Majesty’s Government, preoccupied with its own political crisis, had known nothing of the impasse in Paris. It had little meaning now anyway; what mattered was news of the enemy’s penetration. Minute by minute information was accumulating. German paratroopers had landed in Belgium, the Luftwaffe was bombing airfields in France and the Low Countries, and the British and French were marching into Belgium — the last thing, we now know, that they should have done. The Führer’s Army Group B had their undivided attention. Nothing much was happening to Army Group C, holding the frontier opposite the Maginot Line, and nothing was known of Rundstedt’s Army Group A. Allied intelligence wasn’t even aware that it was by far the largest, dwarfing the other two.²⁶⁰

During the night the first of Rundstedt’s tanks had negotiated the minefields near the German-Belgian border, and at daybreak three panzer corps were driving hard, intent upon maneuvering through the wooded ravines of the Ardennes and crossing the Meuse near Sedan in forty-eight hours. Even the few French officers who doubted that the Ardennes were *impénétrable* believed the enemy could not possibly reach the river in less than ten days, by which time reinforcements could be brought up to dig in along the Meuse, swift and narrow, running between steep banks and therefore easy to defend. Yet already Rundstedt’s armor had easily thrown aside the defense behind the mines — a thin screen of French cavalry, backed by light motorized forces. Thus, while the Allied right wing remained idle in the bowels of the troglodytic Maginot Line, and the left advanced toward what was expected to be the decisive encounter, the center was already gravely threatened. In the confusion of their rout the officers there neglected to send the bad news winging to Vincennes, La Ferté, or Montry. The fox was among the chickens, but the farmer, out in the pasture, didn’t even know he had a problem.

At No. 10 the first of the War Cabinet’s three meetings that day began with the Chiefs of Staff present. They were dazed, in the state of confusion which was the first reaction to blitzkriegs. Reports were accumulating faster than they could be skimmed. H.M.S. *Kelly* had been torpedoed off the Belgian coast. The Wehrmacht was in Luxembourg. Nazi paratroops had been dropped at three strategic locations, in the area between The Hague and Leiden, and near Rotterdam; Nancy had been bombed; the Luftwaffe was dropping magnetic mines in the Scheldt to disrupt Dutch and Belgian shipping. Churchill, the ministers were relieved to hear, had already sent sweeping gear to clear it.²⁶¹

According to Reith's diary, Chamberlain "did not refer to Amery or any of the other Conservatives who had attacked him. He was in good form; the news from the Low Countries had stimulated him"; the German invasions had found him "ready for action if encouraged and authorized to act." He was a new man; he told his sister many of those who had voted against him had written to say "they had nothing against me except that I had the wrong people in my team." He had, indeed, convinced himself that in this crisis the country would be much better off if he remained as prime minister. Halifax noted in his diary: "The P.M. told the Cabinet . . . that he thought all would have to wait until the war situation was calmer." Privately he told his foreign secretary that "he had a feeling that Winston did not approve of the delay, and left me guessing as to what he meant to do."²⁶²

Reith's diary, which is confirmed by Eden's, notes that the prime minister had seen Attlee and Greenwood and understood that they were prepared to defer the political crisis, though the final decision would have to be made in Bournemouth. Hoare later wrote: "Chamberlain's first inclination was to withhold his resignation until the French battle was finished." Nicolson and his friends were among the outsiders who learned of this, and they were aghast. One of them phoned Salisbury, who replied, wrote Nicolson, "that we must maintain our point of view, namely that Winston should be made Prime Minister during the course of the day."²⁶³

Churchill's feelings about Chamberlain's switch of mood can only be imagined, but anxiety must have been among them. He was somewhat reassured by Kingsley Wood. At about 10:00 A.M. Wood once more crossed the Horse Guards Parade to report, as Winston later wrote, that the prime minister "was inclined to feel that the great battle which had broken upon us made it necessary for him to remain at his post." Hoare had encouraged him in this, but Wood's emphatic comment—which Horace Wilson, embittered, later damned as an act of "betrayal"—was that "on the contrary, the new crisis made it all the more necessary to have a National Government, which alone could confront it." Wood, wrote Churchill, had told him that Chamberlain had "accepted this view." But that was not the end of it. Shortly before the second meeting of the War Cabinet, at 11:00 A.M., Simon approached Eden and Hankey. He told them, Eden wrote, that he had heard that "despite the attacks in Flanders, Churchill was pressing for early changes in the Government." Simon was "indignant," but Hankey commented "quietly and firmly: 'Personally, I think that if there are to be changes, the sooner they are made the better.'²⁶⁴

At this second meeting Winston pointed out that Roger Keyes was a close personal friend of the Belgian king; the admiral was eager to serve his

country and might be useful in Brussels. The War Cabinet approved. The ministers were also pleased to learn that Churchill had given instructions "for the removal of the gold still left in Holland." They were less enthusiastic when Winston, explaining, "It won't take a minute," insisted that the war wait while they watch the Prof, who was sitting at a side table, demonstrate an anti-aircraft homing fuse. According to Reith, "Ironsides, very snotty," whispered to him, "Do you think this is the time for showing off toys?" This shirtiness sounds more like Reith than Ironsides, who, noting the incident in his diary the following day, wrote of Churchill: "I have seldom met anybody with stranger gaps of knowledge or whose mind worked in greater jerks. Will it be possible to make it work in orderly fashion? On this much depends."²⁶⁵

During this second meeting of the War Cabinet, Chamberlain had continued to be very much the prime minister. Despite his assurance to Kingsley Wood he made no reference to surrendering his seals. Actually, the crucial decision could not be made by any member of His Majesty's Government. It rested with the men in Bournemouth; Chamberlain had agreed to abide by their finding. Labour's national executive, meeting in a basement room of the Highcliff Hotel, resolved that the party was "prepared to take our share of the responsibility, as a full partner, in a new Government, which, under a new Prime Minister, commands the confidence of the nation." Dalton was responsible for inserting "under a new Prime Minister." Some of the others doubted its necessity. He told them: "If you don't make it absolutely plain, the Old Man will still hang on." Attlee and Greenwood were about to drive to London with the signed document when the prime minister's private secretary phoned from Downing Street to ask whether Labour had reached a decision. Attlee read the resolution over the telephone.²⁶⁶

It was now 5:00 P.M. The War Cabinet's third meeting of the day had begun a half-hour earlier. The private secretary entered the Cabinet Room and handed the typewritten transcript of Labour's verdict to Horace Wilson, who read it and wordlessly slipped it in front of the prime minister. Chamberlain glanced at it and continued with his agenda. The Germans had bombed a dozen objectives and had dropped incendiaries in Kent; the Rotterdam airfield was in the hands of the Nazis, who were landing troop-carrying aircraft there; six Blenheims had been sent to intercept the troop carriers and five of them had been lost; the BEF had reached the line of the Dyle. After a lengthy discussion the ministers decided not to bomb the Ruhr. More paratroopers had landed in Belgium and the ministers decided to warn British troops in the United Kingdom "against parachutists attempting to land in this country." Then Chamberlain came to the last item on his agenda: the political situation.²⁶⁷

He read the Labour resolution aloud and said that "in the light of this answer" he had decided that he should "at once" tender his resignation to the King. It would be "convenient," he suggested, for the new prime minister to assume that "all members of the War Cabinet" were placing their resignations at his disposal, though there was no need "for this to be confirmed in writing." The minutes of the meeting ended: "The War Cabinet agreed to the course suggested." He had not told them whom he preferred as his successor, nor had he mentioned his meeting with Halifax and Churchill the day before. He proposed "to see the King this evening" — that was all.²⁶⁸

Actually, the prime minister, in his last act as prime minister, was on his way to the palace in less than half an hour. In his diary George VI recorded how he saw Chamberlain "after tea. I accepted his resignation, & told him how grossly unfairly I thought he had been treated, & that I was terribly sorry." They then talked informally about his successor. "I, of course, suggested Halifax," His Majesty wrote, "but he told me that H was not enthusiastic, as being in the Lords he could only act as a shadow or a ghost in the Commons, where all the real work took place." His royal host was "disappointed . . . as I thought H was the obvious man." Before the former prime minister could mention another name, George "knew that there was only one other person whom I could send for to form a Government . . . & that was Winston." He said so; Chamberlain confirmed his judgment. The King "thanked him for all his help to me, and repeated that I would greatly regret my loss at not having him as my P.M. I sent for Winston & asked him to form a Government."²⁶⁹

They didn't get to it straightaway. The monarch enjoyed a bit of regal byplay first. "His Majesty received me most graciously," wrote Churchill, "and bade me sit down. He looked at me searchingly and quizzically for some moments, and then said: 'I suppose you don't know why I have sent for you?' Adopting his mood, I replied: 'Sir, I simply couldn't imagine why.' He laughed and said: 'I want you to form a Government.' I said I would certainly do so." Since the King had made no stipulation about the government being national in character — apparently Chamberlain had not mentioned this, an unaccountable lapse — Winston felt his commission "was in no formal way dependent upon this point. But in view of all that had happened, and the conditions which had led to Mr. Chamberlain's resignation, a Government of national character was obviously inherent in the situation." However, if he failed to come to terms with the Liberal and Labour parties, he believed, "I should not have been constitutionally debarred from trying to form the strongest Government possible of all who would stand by the country in the hour of peril, provided that such a

Government could command a majority in the House of Commons."²⁷⁰

He told the King that he would "immediately send for the leaders of the Labour and Liberal Parties, that I proposed to form a War Cabinet of five or six Ministers, and that I hoped to let him have at least five or six names before midnight." On this he took his leave. His sole companion was his bodyguard, W. H. Thompson. As Thompson later recalled, their ride back to Admiralty House was made "in complete silence," but as the new prime minister was leaving the car he asked: "You know why I have been to Buckingham Palace, Thompson?" The former Scotland Yard inspector said he did and congratulated him, adding, "I only wish the position had come your way in better times, for you have an enormous task." Churchill's eyes filled. He said: "God alone knows how great it is. I hope that it is not too late. I am very much afraid that it is. We can only do our best."²⁷¹

While Churchill had been with the King, Randolph found a message in the adjutant's office asking him to phone the Admiralty. He did, and asked why he was wanted. The private secretary in the private office replied: "Only just to say that your father has gone to the Palace and when he comes back he will be Prime Minister."²⁷²

Early in the evening Attlee, accompanied by Greenwood, called on Churchill. They talked easily; during the eleven years before the war's outbreak, Winston had crossed swords with the Conservative and national governments far more often than with Labour. He proposed that Labour should have "rather more than a third of the places, having two seats on the War Cabinet of five, or it might be six." He asked Attlee for a list of names — they could then discuss "particular offices" — and mentioned Labour MPs he admired: Morrison, Dalton, Ernest Bevin, and A. V. Alexander.²⁷³

As they conferred, Harold Nicolson was on his way to King's Bench Walk, passing posters saying "BRUSSELS BOMBED," "PARIS BOMBED," "LYONS BOMBED," "SWISS RAILWAYS BOMBED." That evening he joined his wife at Sissinghurst, their home forty miles southeast of London. They dined together and "just before nine, we turn on the wireless and it begins to buzz as the juice comes through and then we hear the bells" — the BBC identification signal. "Then the pips sound 9.0 and the announcer begins: 'This is the Home Service. Here is the Right Honourable Neville Chamberlain M.P., who will make a statement.' I am puzzled by this for a moment, and then realise that he has resigned." Addressing the nation, the fallen prime minister told the people that the events of the past few days had shown that a coalition government was necessary, and since the only obstacle to such a coalition was himself he had resigned. The King had "asked my friend and colleague, Mr. Winston Churchill, to form a truly National Government." For the moment, acting ministers "will carry on." He himself had agreed

to serve under Churchill. Nicolson noted: "He ends with a fierce denunciation of the Germans for invading Holland and Belgium. It is a magnificent statement, and all the hatred I have felt for Chamberlain subsides as if a piece of bread were dropped into a glass of champagne."²⁷⁴

"Thus," wrote Winston, "at the outset of this mighty battle, I acquired the chief power in the State. . . . As I went to bed at about 3 A.M., I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene." He felt, he said,

as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial. Eleven years in the political wilderness had freed me from ordinary party antagonisms. My warnings over the last six years had been so numerous, so detailed, and were now so terribly vindicated, that no one could gainsay me. I could not be reproached either for making the war or with want of preparation for it. . . . Therefore, although impatient for the morning, I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams.²⁷⁵



Labour endorsed the decision of its leaders to support Churchill by a lopsided vote: 2,450,000 to 170,000 — a 93 percent victory — and when a pacifist MP demanded a division of the House on the question of whether Churchill should be prime minister, the vote was 380 to 0, the pacifist presumably abstaining. Winston possessed one great advantage which no other eminent parliamentarian could claim; as the historian Cyril Falls puts it, "His record was completely clean and satisfactory in those years when the Government had been hiding its head in the sand . . . simultaneously voting against every attempt to arm the British forces." But his mood had not yet been synchronized with that of the powerful, including his sovereign. In his diary entry the following day — Saturday, May 11 — the King noted: "I cannot yet think of Winston as P.M. . . . I met Halifax in the garden" — the noble lord had been granted permission to walk through the palace garden en route from his Belgravia flat to the Foreign Office — "and told him I was sorry not to have him as P.M." George still felt uncomfortable with Winston. There was a generational gap between them. When they had first met in 1912 Winston was first lord of the Admiralty and the future monarch a young naval cadet. By normal reckoning Winston's political career ought to have ended ten years earlier. He had turned sixty-five the previous November; five months before he became prime

minister he had been eligible to draw an old-age pension. Indeed, he was to be the senior statesman of the war — four years older than Stalin, eight years older than Roosevelt, nine years older than Mussolini, fifteen years older than Hitler. The King also liked Tories to be orthodox, conventional, loyal party men, and Churchill was none of those.²⁷⁶

That same Saturday, Margot Asquith, writing a letter to Geoffrey Dawson at *The Times*, told how, on impulse, she had taken a taxi to No. 10 the previous evening; she had looked at Chamberlain's "spare figure and keen eye and could not help comparing it with Winston's self-indulgent rotundity." R. A. Butler called Churchill "a half-breed American." And that evening young Colville, at No. 10, wrote in his diary: "There seems to be some inclination in Whitehall to believe that Winston will be a complete failure and that Neville will return." Long afterward Colville observed: "Seldom can a Prime Minister have taken office with the Establishment . . . so dubious of the choice and so prepared to have its doubts justified." Only a month earlier Eden's followers in Parliament had outnumbered Churchill's, and some of Winston's closest friends preferred Lloyd George as an alternative to Chamberlain.²⁷⁷

Among the general public it was different. Even so, the *Neville Chronicle* had reported that according to an opinion poll, his principal support was among "those in the lower income groups, those between 21 and 30, and among men." A prime minister should enjoy broader approval, particularly among the sophisticated, and a Conservative prime minister, in the House of Commons, ought to receive more cheers from Tory benches than from Labour. In his May 13 diary entry Nicolson noted: "When Chamberlain enters the House, he gets a terrific reception, and when Churchill comes in the applause is less. Winston sits there between Chamberlain and Attlee" — Attlee was now lord privy seal and, in effect, deputy prime minister — "[and then] makes a very short statement, but to the point." The only tribute to the new prime minister came from Lloyd George, who spoke of his "glittering intellectual gifts, his dauntless courage, his profound study of war, and his experience in its operation and direction." Winston wept.²⁷⁸

What Nicolson called Churchill's "very short statement" and Geoffrey Dawson described patronizingly as "quite a good little warlike speech from Winston" included five words now known to millions who were unborn at the time, who have never seen England, and do not even speak English.

I would say to the House,

as I have said to those who have joined this Government:

"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." . . .

You ask, what is our policy?

I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air,

with all our might and with all the strength God can give us. . . .
That is our policy.

You ask, what is our aim?

I can answer in one word: It is victory,
victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror,
victory however long and hard the road may be;
for without victory, there is no survival.²⁷⁹

The mighty Belgian fortress of Eben Emael, with its garrison of 1,200, fell on Saturday, May 11, the second day of the great Nazi offensive, captured by only 78 parachute-engineers led by a lieutenant. Landing in gliders on the unguarded roof, they blew up the armored cupolas and casemates of the fort's guns with a new, highly intensive explosive kept secret until now. Belgian frontier guards were prepared to blow up the bridges of the King Albert Canal, blocking the Nazi advance, but another small Nazi detachment, dropping silently out of the night sky, massacred them. In Holland the French Seventh Army engaged the Germans and was flung back. Liège fell to blond young Nazis shouting "*Heil Hitler!*" as they threw their bodies on the muzzles of Belgian machine guns, sacrificing themselves to maintain the blitzkrieg's momentum. On Tuesday, Rotterdam was the target of a massive Luftwaffe terror attack; thousands of 2,200-pound delayed-action bombs gutted the center of the city, destroyed 25,000 houses, and left 78,000 civilians homeless and a thousand dead. Rotterdam capitulated. The Dutch commander in chief surrendered his entire army. Queen Wilhelmina and the Dutch government fled to London.

That was the small shock. The great shock came in barely coherent dispatches from the Meuse. Guderian, leading mechanized spearheads of Rundstedt's army group, had been racing through Luxembourg and Belgium's Luxembourg Province. After rocking and tilting and pivoting their way through a seven-mile stretch of the Ardennes — they had been elaborately rehearsed in the Black Forest — these forces had entered France Sunday, right on schedule. Before Churchill had completed the formation of his cabinet, the Germans had seven tank divisions on the Meuse near Sedan. The heights on the far side of the Meuse were forbidding. The French had rushed heavy artillery there, and after firing a few rounds at the panzers, the artillery officer predicted that the Nazis would try to cross elsewhere. But the Germans had rehearsed this, too, and Rundstedt was a master at integrating his commands, including the use of tactical air. At first light on Monday, Stukas and low-level bombers began pounding the French batteries; by 4:00 P.M. every field piece, every enemy howitzer on the heights, had been destroyed. Nazi rubber boats reached the far shore

unmolested; beachheads were established; pontoon bridges spanned the river, then heavy bridges — and finally, lumbering and growling, German tanks.

French tanks appeared to challenge them. They were superior to the Germans' in design and armament, and history's first great tank battle seemed imminent. But the outcome, to use a word that was on everyone's lips that week, was *une débâcle*. The French tank commanders weren't to blame. Their high command, having ruled that armor was to be used only in support of infantry, had gone to extraordinary lengths to discourage attacks by armored formations. The installation of radios in turrets had been forbidden. The French drivers, assembled from different units and unable to communicate with one another, could not coordinate a counterattack. In two hours Guderian's panzers had blown up fifty of them. The rest fled. Among the frustrated Frenchmen was Colonel de Gaulle. To his astonishment, dismay, and *affroi*, he saw shuffling mobs of poilus without weapons. The Germans had no time to take prisoners; they had disarmed the men and left them to blunder about. Meantime, the panzers had made a second crossing of the Meuse at Dinant. German armor was now pouring across the river. In Vincennes, however, concerned French officials calling upon Généralissime Gamelin found him still confident. He did ask if they had any news of the fighting. Apparently all the dispatches sent to him had gone astray.

Guderian's tanks had reached Montcornet, less than fifteen miles from Laon; they were plunging down the valley of the Somme toward Abbeville on the English Channel. Aghast, the Allied forces in Belgium, including the BEF, realized that the great German scythe slicing across France was slicing behind them. Already they were cut off from the main French armies in the south. On the nineteenth Reynaud dismissed Gamelin from all commands; his predecessor, seventy-three-year-old Maxime Weygand, was brought out of retirement to take over, but Weygand was helpless; events were beyond his control; the Nazis seemed to be everywhere, and everywhere victorious. Thus, only a few days after their advance into Belgium, the French and British divisions in the north disengaged and retreated behind the line of the Scheldt. Lord Gort was poring over a map, studying routes to the Channel ports, where the Germans planned to turn the last key in the last lock.

On May 19, Churchill addressed the nation over the BBC:

I speak to you for the first time as Prime Minister
in a solemn hour for the life of our country,
of our Empire, of our Allies,
and above all of the cause of freedom.

A tremendous battle is raging in France and Flanders.
The Germans, by a remarkable combination
of air bombing and heavily armoured tanks,
have broken through the French defences
north of the Maginot Line,

And strong columns of their armoured vehicles
are ravaging the open country,
which for the first day or two
was without defenders.

They have penetrated deeply
and spread alarm and confusion in their track.

Behind them there are now appearing
infantry in lorries,
and behind them, again,
the large masses are moving forward.

He had received, he said, "the most sacred pledges" from the leaders
of the French Republic, "and in particular from its indomitable Prime
Minister, M. Reynaud . . . that whatever happens they will fight to the
end, be it bitter or glorious." Then, a typical Churchill touch: "Nay, if we
fight to the end, it can only be glorious."

Since receiving the King's commission, he told the country, he had
formed a government "of men and women . . . of almost every point of
view.

We have differed and quarreled in the past,
but now one bond unites us all —
to wage war until victory is won,
and never to surrender ourselves to servitude and shame,
whatever the cost and agony may be.

If this is one of the most awe-striking periods
in the long history of France and Britain,
it is also, beyond doubt, the most sublime.

Side by side . . . the British and French peoples have advanced
to rescue not only Europe but mankind
from the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny
which has ever darkened and stained the pages of history.

Behind them, behind us —
behind the armies of Britain and France —
gather a group of shattered states and bludgeoned races:
the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians,
the Danes, the Dutch, the Belgians —

Upon all of whom a long night of barbarism will descend
unbroken even by a star of hope,
unless we conquer, as conquer we must;
as conquer we shall.²⁸⁰

Despite the "most sacred pledges" from Paris, the possibility loomed that
France might not fight "to the end." The leaders of a nation verging on
collapse cannot commit their countrymen if the army can no longer defend
them. In capitals around the world leaders and newspapers wondered
whether, if France fell, England would also quit. The prime minister
again went on the air, on June 18, the day after Pétain sued for peace, to
discount such speculation — to vow that England would continue the battle
alone:

Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation.
Upon it depends our own British life,
and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. . . .

Hitler knows that he will have to break us on this island
or lose the war.

If we can stand up to him all Europe may be free
and the life of the world may move forward
into broad, sunlit uplands.

But if we fail, then the whole world,
including the United States,
including all we have known and cared for,

Will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age
made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted,
by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties,
and so bear ourselves
that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth
last for a thousand years,

Men will still say:
"This was their finest hour."²⁸¹

He had come to power because he had seen through Hitler from the very beginning — but not, ironically, because his inner light, the source of that insight, was understood by Englishmen. Churchill's star was invisible to the public and even to most of his peers. But a few saw it. One of them wrote afterward that although Winston knew the world was complex and in constant flux, to him "the great things, races, and peoples, and morality were eternal." Isaiah Berlin, the Oxford philosopher, later observed that the Churchill of 1940 was neither "a sensitive lens, which absorbs and concentrates and reflects . . . the sentiments of others," nor a politician who played "on public opinion like an instrument." Instead Berlin saw him as a leader who imposed his "imagination and his will upon his countrymen," idealizing them "with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal and began to see themselves as he saw them." In doing so he "transformed cowards into brave men, and so fulfilled the purpose of shining armour."²⁸²

Churchill's mood seemed to confirm this. He possessed an inner radiance that year and felt it. In his memoirs he wrote that "by the confidence, indulgence, and loyalty by which I was upborne, I was soon able to give an integral direction to almost every aspect of the war. This was really necessary because times were so very bad. The method was accepted because everyone realised how near were death and ruin. Not only individual death, which is the universal experience, stood near, but, incomparably more commanding, the life of Britain, her message, and her glory."²⁸³

To him, Britain, "her message, and her glory," were very real. At times he would address his country as though she were a personage. After he had comprehended the revolution wrought at Kitty Hawk he said (to the astonishment of his companion, who had thought they were alone), "You came into big things as an accident of naval power when you were an island. The world had confidence in you. You became the workshop of the world. You populated the island beyond its capacity. Through an accident of airpower you will probably cease to exist." It sounded quaint, and it was. Churchill was not a public figure like, say, Roosevelt, who thought and spoke in the idiom of his own time. He was instead the last of England's great Victorian statesmen, with views formed when the British lion's roar could silence the world; he was the champion of the Old Queen's realm and the defender and protector of the values Englishmen of her reign had cherished, the principles they held inviolate, the vision which had illumined their world, which had steadied them in time of travail, and which he had embraced as a youth.²⁸⁴

He was ever the impassioned Manichaeon, seeing life and history in primary colors, like Vittore Carpaccio's paintings of St. George; a believer in absolute virtue and absolute malevolence, in blinding light and impenetrable darkness, in righteousness and wickedness — or rather in the forces of good *against* the forces of evil, for the two would always be in conflict and be therefore forever embattled. He had been accused of inconsistency and capricious judgment. Actually, it was MacDonald and Baldwin and Chamberlain who tailored their views to fit the moment. Churchill's binnacle remained true. "Death and sorrow will be the companions of our journey," he told the House of Commons; "hardship our garment, constancy and valour our only shield."²⁸⁵

And, he might have added, grief as their reward. He was sure Britons could take it. Despite his high birth he had an almost mystical faith in the power of the ordinary Englishman to survive, to endure, and, in the end, to prevail. "Tell the truth to the British people," he had begged the shifty prime ministers of the 1930s; "they are a tough people, a robust people. . . . If you have told them exactly what is going on you have ensured yourself against complaints and reproaches which are not very pleasant when they come home on the morrow of some disillusion."²⁸⁶

But in those shabby years His Majesty's Governments believed that there were some things the country ought not to know, and that their policy of duplicity — which at times amounted to conspiracy — would be vindicated in the end. Chamberlain would be the scapegoat of appeasement, and before the year was out sackcloth would be his shroud, but he was only one of many. Baldwin, for example, bore a greater responsibility for weakening Britain's defenses while Hitler built his military juggernaut. The appeasers had been powerful; they had controlled *The Times* and the BBC; they had been largely drawn from the upper classes, and their betrayal of England's greatness would be neither forgotten nor forgiven by those who, gulled by the mystique of England's class system, had believed as Englishmen had believed for generations that public school boys governed best. The appeasers destroyed oligarchic rule which, though levelers may protest, had long governed well. If ever men betrayed their class, these were they.

Because their possessions were great, the appeasers had much to lose should the Red flag fly over Westminster. That was why they had felt threatened by the hunger riots of 1932. It was also the driving force behind their exorbitant fear and distrust of the new Russia. They had seen a strong Germany as a buffer against bolshevism, had thought their security would be strengthened if they sidled up to the fierce, virile Third Reich. Nazi coarseness, anti-Semitism, the Reich's darker underside, were rationalized; time, they assured one another, would blur the jagged edges of Nazi

Germany. So, with their eyes open, they sought accommodation with a criminal regime, turned a blind eye to its iniquities, ignored its frequent resort to murder and torture, submitted to extortion, humiliation, and abuse until, having sold out all who had sought to stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain and keep the bridge against the new barbarism, they led England herself into the cold damp shadow of the gallows, friendless save for the demoralized republic across the Channel. Their end came when the House of Commons, in a revolt of conscience, wrenched power from them and summoned to the colors the one man who had foretold all that had passed, who had tried, year after year, alone and mocked, to prevent the war by urging the only policy which would have done the job. And now, in the desperate spring of 1940, with the reins of power at last firm in his grasp, he resolved to lead Britain and her fading empire in one last great struggle worthy of all they had been and meant, to arm the nation, not only with weapons but also with the mace of honor, creating in every English breast a soul beneath the ribs of death.

illumination of character . . . that he can claim the considerable achievement of having assembled enough powerful evidence to support Isaiah Berlin's judgment of Churchill as 'the largest human being of our time.'"

—*The New Yorker*

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