

## *Chapter Sixty-Six*

# ALONE

**O**STENSIBLY Britain had emerged from the First World War triumphant. Her navy remained the greatest in the world, enhanced by Germany's decision to scuttle hers rather than surrender it. The Empire was larger than ever, with new British protectorates in the Middle East such as Iraq and Palestine. Britain could return to her proud isolation as the island mother country of an Empire and Commonwealth that circled the globe. As far as the mainland of Europe was concerned the League of Nations could get on with sorting out the problems of what was now a redrawn map containing several new nation states such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. The Foreign Office concluded that there would be no war in Europe for at least a decade as its two major powers, France and Germany, had both suffered such devastation.

In one sense this was right. There was no war. In another, the government was incredibly short-sighted, refusing to recognise that it dwelt in a world of illusions. The financial centre of the world's gravity was no longer London but New York and it was henceforth to be the dollar and not the pound which called the tune. Soon even the American navy was to eclipse the British. In the Far East Japan was rapidly emerging not only as a major economic, but also as a military, power. That held implications for the Empire, many of whose countries, such as Canada, Australia and South Africa, were demanding more and more independence. In effect the Empire was beginning to break up. Although 1918 brought an extension of British influence, that influence had to be maintained with men and money, and people began to question the wisdom of such expense during a period of crippling recession.

Britain stood back from Europe. Relations with France swiftly deteriorated and, as in 1914, Britain seemed oblivious as to Germany's true situation. Germany may have lost the war but her economy eventually emerged from it as the strongest in Europe. And German markets had always been important for exports, which certainly coloured British attitudes. Within the British political establishment there was a current in favour of a more lenient treatment of the defeated enemy, a belief that what was extracted as compensation at Versailles had gone just too far.

The effect of such moves was to make the British government nervous. In Italy a Fascist dictator, Mussolini, was in power and attempts were made to court him away from any alliance with Hitler. Not that there was an indication as yet that Hitler intended to invade Britain. But it was known in 1937 that should he have decided to do so, the country had not the means whereby to resist him. Time was needed in order to build up the island's defences, above all its air force. With this in mind it was indicated in November that Britain had no objection to Germany settling her territorial disputes on her eastern frontier. One of these seemed reasonable, for in the post-war settlement after 1918, 3.2 million people of German origin in the Sudetenland area of Bohemia had been made part of Czechoslovakia.

In March 1938 Hitler marched in triumph into Vienna and Austria became part of a fast-emerging new German Empire. Chamberlain realised that still more time was needed for Britain to build up her strength. He still hoped that some kind of accommodation might yet be reached. Unfortunately Hitler was a stranger to reason. What on the British side was

Neville Chamberlain's return from his meeting with Hitler in Munich in 1938 with his message of 'Peace in our time' formed television's first outside broadcast.



diplomacy was read on the German as weakness. In September Chamberlain flew to meet Hitler, agreeing German annexation of the Sudetenland. He persuaded both the French and his own Cabinet to go along with it. Chamberlain then flew immediately to meet Hitler a second time in Munich, conveying this message but with the proviso that Czechoslovakia itself should not be touched. When he returned proclaiming 'Peace in our time', he was accorded a hero's welcome.

This was to prove a turning point for everything from now onwards went into a spectacular reverse. By the opening of 1939 it was clear that Britain was faced with war. The government decided to re-arm whatever the consequences. From the point of view of an imminent confrontation the monoplanes, which were superior to anything in the German Luftwaffe, were ready. All of this action was coloured by the fact that Hitler's intent to invade Belgium and the Netherlands became known. The control of that area of the mainland had always been crucial to Britain. From it in 1588 sailed Parma's soldiers of invasion; in the following century it had been the field upon which Marlborough's victories over Louis XIV were fought. Once again the security of the island was seen to be at stake.

On 15 March Hitler broke the Munich agreement and marched into Prague, taking Czechoslovakia. Every signal sent to Hitler was ignored. He turned his attention next to Poland. On 21 March Chamberlain declared Britain's support for Poland, a futile gesture at that distance. Russia remained unaligned but fear of Bolshevism made Britain's approach tardy, so much so that by the time an approach was made, Russia had agreed a pact with Germany to divide Poland. On 1 September 1939 that country was invaded by Germany, and two days later Britain declared war. Historians have been divided ever since these events, seeing them either as a shameful indictment of a craven policy of giving in to brutal force, or as an attempt bravely to reach a solution and avert a global catastrophe. It can also be claimed that if Chamberlain had failed to buy time Britain would have been annihilated.

Things were not as they were in 1914. The country's huge commitments to maintaining the Empire and Commonwealth had been viewed as precluding Britain from taking part in any European war. Such a conflict would have to be paid for, and it could lead to bankruptcy. There was as yet no indication that aid would be forthcoming from the United States which had gone into isolation. The resources of the Empire could, however, still be counted upon. The viceroy of India had the right to commit the country to war, which he did. Canada and Australia, both still deeply tied to the mother country, offered their support, as did South Africa, where General Smuts overthrew the Prime Minister who opposed the move. Even with this support, Britain was pathetically weak in 1939. The Expeditionary Force which crossed to



The cartoonist David Low's comment on Neville Chamberlain in 1939. The Nazi tiger has devoured him, tossing his moustache and top hat to one side, and is about to munch the umbrella of 'Appeasement'.

France was put together in a hurry. The navy's ships were old and its aircraft carriers inferior. The Royal Air Force offered the country's only possible salvation. Nothing could obscure the bitter truth that Britain was about to embark on a war which could not be afforded.

For ten months, labelled the 'phoney war', nothing much seemed to happen. Britain had no alternative but to stand by while Russia and Germany carved up Eastern Europe without much opposition. Germany took Poland while Russia took over Finland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Then in April 1940 Germany invaded Denmark, moving on after to Norway. The navy was sent and there was a confused sea battle which for the British was a disaster. Chamberlain was forced to resign. (He died two years later.)

On 10 May 1940 Winston Churchill, a formidable and maverick politician, who knew more about the war than any other minister, became Prime Minister. This was to be one of those rare moments when events and the man were to be perfectly matched. Indeed Churchill, then aged sixty-four, saw himself as destined for the part. Here was not only dogged determination and genial ebullience but a mind imbued with a deep sense of the country's history and a tongue blessed with rare rhetorical powers, passionate and powerful enough to hold a people together. A Coalition Government was formed with a War Cabinet. The Labour Leader, Clement Attlee, became Deputy Prime Minister. Among those who held office the Labour politician Ernest Bevin, as Minister for Labour, was to prove crucial in ensuring the support of the unions.

On that day, 10 May, the German armies swept into Belgium and the Low Countries. The French army and the British Expeditionary Force moved northwards to Belgium to meet them but the Germans made a lightning thrust through the Ardennes and as a result the French and British forces found themselves cut off. The decision was taken to evacuate. This was a terrible and humiliating defeat. The navy, aided by a flotilla of any kind of sea-worthy vessel, rescued some 224,000 British and

95,000 French troops from Dunkirk. On 14 June Paris surrendered and a week later France fell.

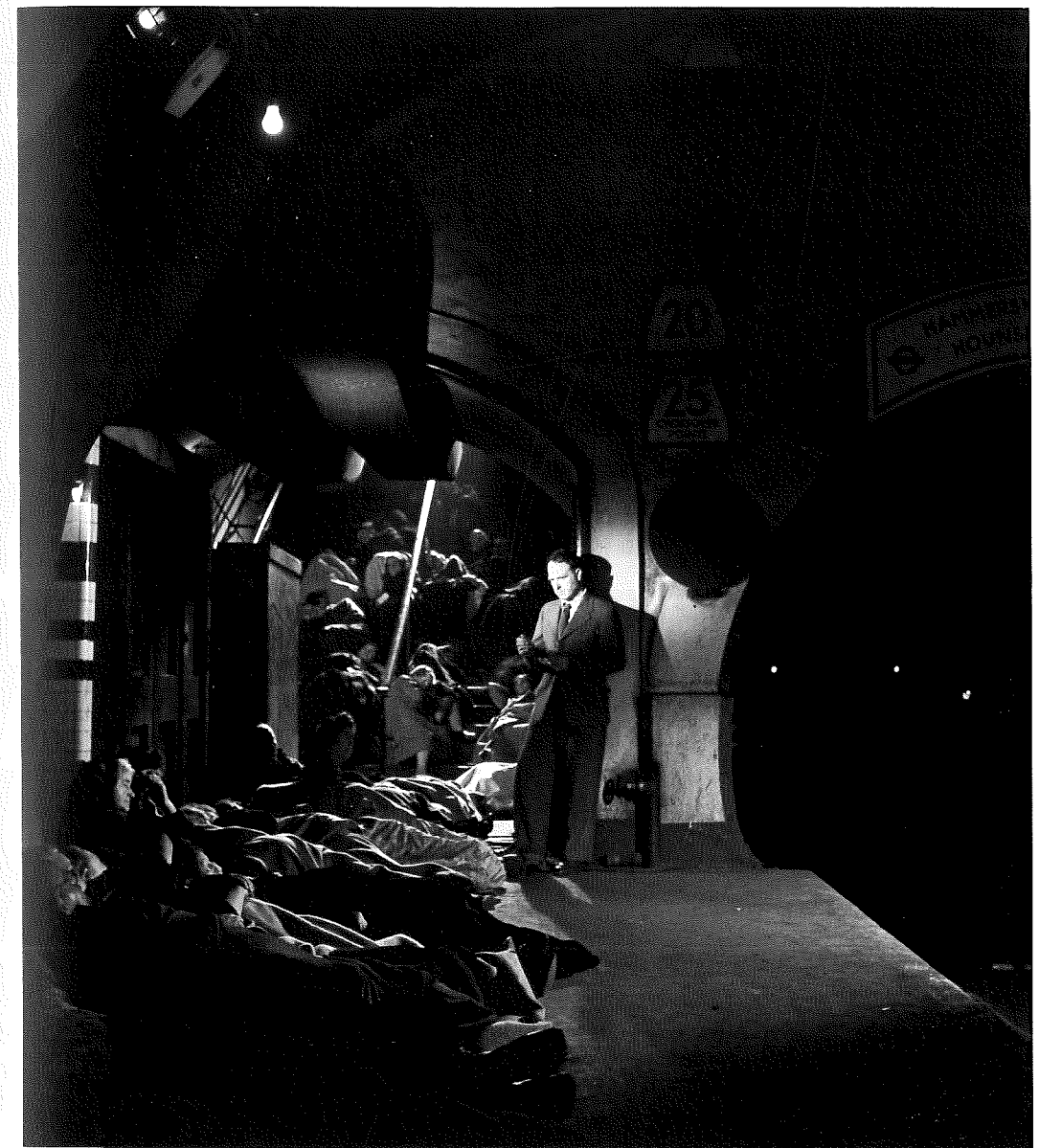
Britain stood alone. Never before in the history of the island had there been a crisis quite like this one. Hitler, like Napoleon before him, had taken most of Western Europe with an army which had proved unstoppable. The barges began to assemble at Boulogne to carry the German troops across the Channel to invade England. But they could only sail if the victory of the skies was won. All that Britain had was her navy, her Spitfire planes, and the rhetoric of Churchill to inspire her people. In a speech which ranks alongside that of Gloriana at Tilbury, Churchill exhorted the island people with these words:

'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."'

The battle of the skies, the Battle of Britain, began and was to rage on through the summer and early autumn of 1940. The Luftwaffe had met its match in the RAF, which was aided both by radar, which warned of the enemy's approach, and ultrasound, which enabled German signals to be read and thus their strategy to be known. The enemy, however, was to make a fatal mistake. It turned from bombing airfields to bombing London in the hope of shattering public morale and producing panic. That decision gave the RAF space to recoup and on 15 September it repulsed a huge raid in which sixty German planes were shot down. Two days later Hitler postponed the invasion of Britain and then in January it was delayed indefinitely. The Battle of Britain had been won and morale soared. Churchill was to sum up the achievement, saying 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.'

The island had been saved but that battle only proved to be the prelude to a mighty conflict which was to spread around the globe. The Luftwaffe turned its attention next to Britain's ports and industrial centres and from November to May some 36,000 tons of bombs were dropped on them. In the latter month, however, Hitler turned his attention eastwards to the state he hated most, Russia, and invaded it. The British, always fearful of the Soviet Union, now entered into an alliance. Across the Atlantic the American people had been both shocked and moved by the heroism of the British, stirring them out of their isolation. President Roosevelt offered unlimited credit, Lend-Lease. That meant that the war could be paid for but it also meant an ever-growing mountain of debt which would have to be dealt with at a later date.

The skies may have been won but Britain could only survive if the Atlantic sea



routes were kept open, ensuring the supply of food and raw materials for her people and her factories. More than once starvation was closer than the population ever realised as German U-boat submarines took their toll. A third of British merchant shipping was sunk and 30,000 lives were lost at sea. This was a grinding, seem-

The sculptor Henry Moore sketching in the London Underground during the Blitz of 1940. Night after night Londoners sought refuge below ground from the unrelenting bombing of their city by the Germans.



ingly unending battle, which went on for three years until, by 1943, the U-boat losses suffered by the Germans became so great that victory came to the allies.

It was a complicated war because the defeat of her land forces meant that Britain could only attack her inland foe by air. The attacks began in 1941 but it was not until the following year that there were enough planes to launch what was a mass terror bombing of Germany, flattening whole areas of Cologne, Hamburg and Berlin. It took a huge toll on the RAF, as hundreds of planes were shot down. It was not until the Americans produced a new long-range escort fighter in 1944 that the raids really became devastating. But their effect on the German people was the same as such raids had on the British, it only served to strengthen morale.

War in the Atlantic, war over German skies, and then came war in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Italy under Mussolini entered the conflict on the side of Germany, a decision which gave Britain some early victories. In November 1940 half of the Italian fleet was destroyed at Taranto. The Italians then advanced into British-administered Egypt only to be faced by a counter-attack which virtually took over North Africa. Meanwhile the Germans invaded the Balkans. A British force was sent to Greece, but in April 1941 was forced to evacuate. Worse was to follow in Africa, where Hitler sent Rommel and the crack Afrika Corps. The British were driven back and forced to surrender at Tobruk.

The war continued to escalate throughout 1941. In June the Germans invaded Russia reaching the outskirts of Moscow in December. The bitter winter did to the German troops what it had done to Napoleon's. They were forced for the first time to retreat. In the same month of December the Japanese bombed the American fleet in Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered the war. The Japanese armies then proceeded to sweep through the Far Eastern parts of the British Empire. On Christmas Day Hong Kong surrendered. Two months later one of the Empire's lynchpins, Singapore, fell. Malaya was lost and the Japanese pushed on through Burma to the Indian frontier.

At last in 1942 the tide began to turn in favour of the allies. The Germans were locked from July to November in the battle for Stalingrad, where they lost a quarter-of-a-million men. In Africa the British Eighth Army, under generals Montgomery and Alexander, defeated Rommel and his troops at El Alamein. By the summer of 1943 the Germans had abandoned North Africa and the allies turned their attention to Italy, landing in Sicily in July and taking Naples in October. Mussolini fell from power, and the new Italian government sought an armistice only to find themselves occupied by the Germans. A long-drawn-out war of attrition was then fought over the mountain ranges which divided the peninsula.

Much pressure had been exerted on the allies to invade Europe in 1943 but it was too early. During the year which followed Britain acted as an aircraft carrier for a massive build-up of land forces. Operation Overlord as it was called proved to be an organisational triumph as, in a period of two days in June 1944, 185,000 men and 19,000 vehicles were landed on the beaches of Normandy. A reflection of Britain's future status in the world was the fact that the commander-in-chief was an American, Eisenhower. The British engaged the German troops in a long battle around Caen while, at the end of July, the Americans broke out of Avranches and in one vast sweep trapped most of the German army. On 21 August the remnant surrendered. Three days later, Paris was liberated.

The Americans pressed on through Alsace while the British liberated Belgium but a failure to open the port of Antwerp for supplies enabled the German army to regroup. On 16 September the allies made a small bridgehead over the Rhine at Arnhem which proved to be a disaster and they were obliterated. The German counter-attack swept into the Ardennes but then petered out. By then Germany was grinding to a halt due to the lack of raw materials such as oil and aviation spirit with which to continue the war. Weariness was setting in, as indeed it was in Britain, where the population found itself exposed to waves of a new terror, V1 and V2 weapons, falling from the skies. But the end was in sight. From the east the vast Soviet armies were advancing, swallowing up Eastern Europe on their way. Montgomery wanted the allies to make a dash for Berlin but Eisenhower opted for a uniform advance. On 4 May 1945 German forces surrendered to Montgomery. From the east the Russians had reached Berlin the previous month. Hitler and his cronies had committed suicide in a bunker. The war in Europe officially ended on 8 May.

But the war in the Far East still went on. Success there came as a result of a decision which had been made by Roosevelt and Churchill in the summer of 1942, to pour resources into making the first atomic bomb. The cost was gargantuan. Although the British regained Burma, defeat for the Japanese only followed the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August. On 14 August the war in the East was also at an end.

This had been a war unlike any other. Although far fewer people had been killed than during the First World War, the effects of the war on the British were cataclysmic. For the first time, war had affected every single person on the island. The psychological, physical, emotional and mental impact cannot be over-estimated. For six years Britain was to all intents and purposes a totalitarian state, albeit preserving the veneer of democracy. The Emergency Powers Act of May 1940 had given the government unlimited authority over both people and property. The British people



Winston Churchill inspecting bomb damage resulting from the blitz. Air raids brought the devastation of war to ordinary people as never before.

were taken over, and regimented as never before. Children were evacuated to the country away from the bombing, identity cards were mandatory for everyone, labour was directed, work was classified into essential and non-essential. Food rationing was introduced, something which was to last until 1954. Clothes were also rationed. Luxuries had a 100% tax imposed upon them. Everyone of fighting age was conscripted into the forces, and those left behind either joined Air Raid Precautions or the Home Guard. The ARP watched the night skies and saw that every house was blacked out, that windows were taped and underground shelters maintained. The Home Guard was a body of 1.5 million volunteers who relieved the military of routine tasks and trained to meet an invasion.

Women were central to the war effort. They served in the forces in the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Women's Royal Air Force and the Auxiliary Territorial Service. They also ran the Women's Voluntary Service, coping with every kind of task that the war threw up on the home front. And, even more, they were the work force, keeping the munitions factories at the peak of production. It was to take a heavy toll, for women were not only workers but wives and mothers as well.

The comforts were few, the hardships many. Double, even triple, shifts were put in. When the miners went on strike it was through exhaustion, and Bevin met it by conscripting young men to the mines. The country was taxed as never before, in the case of unearned income at the rate of 94% in the pound. Even so people gave what they could in war bond contributions. The war demanded from everyone unremitting hard work and discipline. And it levelled out society. Servants virtually vanished.

Everyone ate the same food and wore the same utility clothes. Classes, hitherto segregated, were thrown together in the countryside or Home Guard. Everyone knew that they either had to stand or fall together. In retrospect, the war was to be looked back upon with a certain nostalgia as being almost enjoyable. All classes shared a unity of spirit and purpose which still casts a radiance decades later.

Victory, but of what kind? The Second World War was to prove to be a far greater turning point in the nation's fortunes than its predecessor. The international settlement was being worked out while the war was in progress in a series of meetings between the allied leaders. Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Already in such meetings Britain was relegated to third place, for power had now passed to Russia and the United States. In February 1945 an agreement was made at Yalta, which was the one put into effect at the war's end. Russia swallowed the whole of Eastern Europe including Poland, imposing on those countries what was a brutal dictatorship. Germany was divided into three major zones of occupation: the British, the Russian and the American. Berlin, in the Russian zone was likewise divided.

In the West democracy had survived, but Britain was reduced to being a client state of America. It has been argued recently that the United States was well aware that it was asset stripping Britain, but without aid from the United States, both during and after the war, the British people would have endured untold hardship. Britain's subsequent collapse from a major power to an offshore island was to be a rapid one. The war had in fact reinforced insularity in the minds of the British people making them, as in 1918, wish to turn their backs on the European mainland. During the war London had been the capital of free Europe, with every political and military leader at some stage established there. Britain could have played the leading role in creating a new Europe after 1945. A great opportunity was missed.

Nonetheless, but for Britain, Europe would have become one vast German Empire. She had stood alone, going to war in defence of international law and honour. Along with the defeat of the Spanish Armada and of Napoleon this has become one of the great icons of the island's history. But it has now begun to be questioned, as documents have revealed that negotiating a peace with the Germans after the Battle of Britain was seriously considered. Only in the aftermath of the war, however, did the full horror of the Nazi régime come to light, above all the appalling concentration camps and the liquidation of some six million Jews. That knowledge was to endow the struggle in retrospect with a moral dimension of good triumphing over evil. No wonder that the British people believed that the age of Utopia was about to dawn for them.