

► Now it can be told—that the
Island stood defenseless.

BRITAIN'S DARKEST HOUR

By HECTOR BOLITHO

DURING the early mornings of 1940 Londoners used to see Mr. Neville Chamberlain snatching a breath of fresh air in St. James's Park, smiling benevolently at the sailors and soldiers as he made his way to his desk in Downing Street. The war was young then and Britons weren't even consciously self-assured because there had been no dismay to make them examine their own danger. The silver balloons were in the sky and entanglements of barbed wire had already been spread on the grass verges of the London parks. But there were no doubts. Britain's pilots and soldiers were in France, safe in the promise of victory.

Mr. Chamberlain, benign and undoubting, was the symbol of Britain's complacency. In one hand he carried gloves; in the other a correctly rolled umbrella, in memory of the *Pax Umbrellica* which he had signed in Munich two years before. He used to walk slowly, pausing to stroke the famous black cat of Downing Street, since dead, which always squatted on the step of No. 10. The whole picture was elegant, self-assured, and terribly dangerous.

Then came the changes of early summer. On May 10, the blood of the country was quickened by news of the German invasion of Holland . . . then Belgium and Luxemburg. So a new Prime Minister climbed the steps of 10 Downing Street each morning, in too much of a hurry to bother about the fresh air in the park. He carried neither umbrella nor gloves. His clothes were incongruous: an air commodore's great coat over a boiler suit, and a warrior-like tin hat. He walked quickly, chin stuck out, without pausing to be either benign or gracious, because there was alarm in his heart. He knew that the pilots and soldiers were *not* safe in France and that it was his task to warn Britain of her danger. "If you ask what our policy is," he said, "it is to wage war."

A few weeks later Mr. Churchill was in France, begging the French not to capitulate. "We will go on fighting," he said. "What with?" asked the French. "I don't know," he answered. "I haven't had time to think about that yet."

So he came back. France crumpled

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in on her political perfidy and Britain was alone. The Germans were able to move their guns up to the coast and shell Dover, and they flew their aircraft to the French airfields. Farmers on the shore of England ploughed their fields with shells falling about them, and on clear days we could hear gunfire across the Channel. The war had truly come to England's doorstep.

The British islanders soon forsook the high notions with which they had begun the war. They stopped shaking their heads over the Poles and Czechs and Transylvanians, and as the Germans crept nearer, the British became coldly insular and began to shake their heads over themselves. A century of misguided diplomacy, which had taught Britons to care too much about Europe and not enough about their own kind across the Atlantic, suddenly lay revealed in all its error. The day of policing Europe was over for the British and the day for saving themselves had begun.

On May 27, 1940, while the nine hundred odd vessels were bringing our soldiers back from Dunkirk, the Royal Air Force shot down twenty-eight Germans for Britain's loss of five. On May 28, they shot down fifty and disabled twenty-eight, for a loss of fourteen. One hundred and seventy-nine of the enemy were shot down before the evacuation ended, for a loss of twenty-nine. Beneath the umbrella of combat, the soldiers had waited. The Guards, erect and unblinking, with the ghosts of Agincourt, Blenheim, and Ypres before

their eyes, stood shoulder to shoulder in the surf, knocked over into death like ninepins in a bowling alley.

One of the British pilots who escaped returned to England and landed. He gathered motor car oil and petrol together, plugged the bullet holes in his aircraft with chewing gum, and returned to fight over the terrible waters. He was a symbol of the spirit that was preparing to slay, when the Battle of Britain began.

Three hundred and thirty-five thousand soldiers were brought back, and the loss was six destroyers, a mine sweeper, a gunboat, and twenty-two small craft. Women pressed the backs of their hands against their temples as the wounded were carried past—long, terrible lines of half dead men, who choked the hospitals. They were spread on the floors of coast town cinemas, where school children had laughed at Fred Astaire a week before.

But there was a considerable army left in France. Two thousand four hundred British guns were in the hands of the enemy, and all the transport and tanks that had been with the army in the north: seven hundred tanks and fifty thousand vehicles in all. Mr. Churchill gave Britain the phrase which guided her emotions and steadied her reason. It was a "miracle of deliverance," he said, "not a victory." So apathy died, but terror did not take its place.

Britain was a poorly armed country. One of the men who were to blame, Ramsay Macdonald, was dead. The other, Stanley Baldwin, had re-

tired to the country, with the forgiveness of an indulgent people and the remnants of his conscience to console him. The country had sent almost everything she had across the water with her soldiers. The official handout said, "Before Dunkirk all available reserves of equipment were required to equip, to their war scale, the units which went overseas. This left at home only sufficient for the training of units preparing for active service." Then the grave statement, "When the equipment of ten complete divisions, together with that of the accompanying corps and army troops were lost, the army faced the threat of invasion with a grave shortage."

II

Now the true figures are known. Britain's forces at home were less than a score of divisions against the German's two hundred. Her equipment was hardly adequate for a tenth of her normal forces. Captain Margesson admitted these facts a year later. "Of tanks," he said, "there were virtually none." In 1942, more figures came to light. Lord Beaverbrook said on April 23, "Forty-seven warships were sunk in the operations off Norway and Dunkirk. When the evacuation was over, half the destroyer fleet lay awaiting repairs in the shipyards." The Royal Air Force, which was to become the pride of the land, had lost 40 per cent of its bomber strength during forty-two days of fighting in the Battle of France.

The human memory is selective and Britons don't remember those days very clearly, because the horror of them has passed, and perhaps the lesson they taught has passed with them. But they do remember the curious loneliness they felt during the time when the war suddenly became their own: when they looked across a channel to Europe in dismay and across an ocean to America with hope in their hearts. What matters now is the spirit that was born of this loneliness; the sudden proof that Britain was not decadent; that she could turn her native stubbornness and arrogance into a sword of defiance, and her independence and her talent for improvisation into preparation for what was to come.

Then Hitler made his cardinal error: he did not invade. Two and a half years afterwards, Mr. Churchill said that he had often asked himself, during those first months, what would have happened if Hitler had "put three-quarters of a million men on board all the barges and let them stream across," taking the chance of "losing three-quarters of them." But Hitler did not take the chance. Mr. Churchill has since admitted the facts of Britain's weakness: facts which were hidden from her at the time. He has said, "There would have been a terrible shambles in this country because we had hardly a weapon. We had not at that time fifty tanks." He said this when the darkness had passed and when the factories had produced 12,000 tanks. He said also that after

Dunkirk there were not more than a couple of hundred field guns in the country.

The Home Guard, long after its founding in May 1940, had to go to bizarre lengths to arm itself, however poorly. The 49th Lancashire Battalion, for instance, borrowed several score of old Snyder rifles from Bellevue Zoological Gardens, Manchester — rifles that had been used in the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny! The 55th County of Lancaster Battalion could find nothing better than six-foot spears, the 10th Norfolk Battalion borrowed from a local museum the weapons on exhibition there, and there is even a record of a platoon rigged out with twenty-four cutlasses and commanded by an old naval rating. The 30th Middlesex Battalion was the most unfortunate of all: for a long time it had nothing better than broom handles, which it used for drilling purposes. Individuals armed themselves with anything they could get hold of, from ancient sporting guns to bombs improvised from beer bottles, cocoa-tins, and whatnot.

As the summer of 1940 passed and winter came, a miracle of industry spread over Britain. The result of that miracle increased her farm produce by 75 per cent. It has armed her forces in Africa and sent them on to Sicily. It has trained thousands of Canadian soldiers in Britain and it has bombed the cities of Germany and sent the waters of the Moehne reservoir thundering into the valley of the Ruhr. One of the most important parts of

the miracle came through self-discipline, expressed in economy and salvage strange in a people who live on overdrafts and who hoard and fill their house with junk. The English like their attics and spare rooms to be piled high with their grandmothers' possessions; it is part of their sense of continuity. But, in those summer months of 1940, salvage became a crusade and economy became a fever. During the days after Dunkirk, when Britons felt so dependent upon their own resources, people emptied their houses of all they could spare.

The most remarkable figure in salvage came from London. Almost every iron railing was torn up from parks and gardens. The result was a delight to the eye. Squares became like village greens and parks melted naturally into the shape of the city, because there were no iron barriers — remnant of the possessive Victorian defenses of the rich — to keep the scruffy ones at bay. The iron railings from London alone produced 140,000 tons of metal; enough to make 140 destroyers or sixteen cruisers. Old writing desks were emptied because a postcard would make fifty cartridge wads. Gramophone records to which the soldiers had danced in the spring of ten years before, were turned out because they could be made into accumulator tops for aircraft. When Londoners went to the tobacconist for their cigarettes, they carried them away loose in their hands because sixty big cigarette cartons would make one shell container.

Britons thought in those terms. A country with the second highest spending power in the world learned to mend the worn wrists of jackets with leather; men who bought a pound of apples on the way home put them into their pockets, to save one paper bag for better purposes. One shivered when one saw an American, newly arrived here, cut the string of a parcel. Business men emptied their key chains of all that they did not need, because forty-two keys would make a steel helmet . . . and a steel helmet was more useful to them than a clutter of old keys. It was all part of the coldly practical character of the English; the character which made it possible for them to change their habits overnight.

They made themselves old and tired with work. Men of forty became white-haired in a few months. Visitors who flew here from America said we looked pale and anxious; they remarked on the fact that people fell asleep in trains.

Two other qualities were bred at the same time; cohesion and kindly humor. Rich and poor felt that they were in the maelstrom together — there was a bond between the woman who gave up her old aluminum saucepans and the pilot flying his Spitfire up to the sun in conflict. She saw the saucepans in which she had stirred scrambled eggs, suddenly become airborne and belligerent. The thought passed through her mind and made her smile. A sort of divine grace seemed to settle on the land. It passed with the

danger, for with the promise of victory human nature is already assuming its old sins. But for those few months, when peril cleansed Britons of fake, one really believed that Christianity was alive again.

Kindness and laughter became important antidotes when Britain realized that the Germans were sinking her ships faster than she could build them. It was not until two and a half years afterwards that the people were aware of the full horror of their position in those days. A speaker in the House of Commons in the summer of 1943 admitted that two and a half years before, the country was on the brink of famine. Britain was saved from this famine by the United States: she fed the hungry island from her granaries and her stores. She may have been slow to make up her mind but she had already made up her heart.

III

Two other manifestations are of importance in any historical estimate of Britain during the months before the Battle of Britain: the development of hatred, and the honesty with which people told of their physical fear.

Neither Britons nor Americans are good haters. Hatred of the Germans was lukewarm in Britain when the war began, because rancor does not come easily to the British, and perhaps because of their aloofness and their belief in their own superiority. The British pity foreigners and therefore find it difficult to hate them.

In the fair month of May, when Mr. Chamberlain still walked in the park, a German bomber came down near Clacton. Its magnetic mine exploded, killing the German crew and killing or wounding over 150 civilians. But there was little bitterness, it seemed. English women put posies on the graves of the dead enemy. About the same time a German pilot came down in a field in Kent. RAF officers took him back to their mess and gave him tea and cigarettes. It was not until later that they learned that he had shot down one of their own pilots who had bailed out; shot him while he was falling with his parachute. But the tune changed after Dunkirk. A month after the women of Clacton had placed their posies on the German graves, some captured German airmen from Flanders walked through the town. The women had to be held back from revenge. One of the pilots who had helped the German pilot to a sandwich wrote to me, a month after, "I hate their bloody guts." This was one of the miracles that followed Dunkirk — the turning of the water of apathy into the red wine of revenge.

It will be difficult, in a century's time, for historians of other countries to comprehend the emotions of Britain in what is now called her darkest hour, to realize how stubborn and defiant Britons became, in their loneliness. It was Mr. Churchill who wrote our history in the moment it was being made. He said, "We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on the beaches; we shall

fight in the fields and in the streets."

This is what we prepared to do. It is almost funny now, to go through the English countryside and see the barricades of old carts, and trees felled across the roads — pathetic little souvenirs of our fear. The carts and old motor cars that were to be our barricades are rusting beside the road.

Now our vision embraces the world once more, with allies to stimulate our faith, with Americans and Britons deep in Italy, and the thunder of our vengeance already setting the coasts of Europe on fire. All this is tremendous. But there was nothing tremendous in the months of unarmed anxiety — except the renaissance of the English spirit.

There is also the clear honesty of our mind to be remembered. I have never heard a pilot hesitate to confess fear. He knows that fear is inevitable in an intelligent man and that he cannot conquer it, but that he can adapt it so that it is part of his intelligence and sensibility. I have heard many a pilot state, quite frankly, in a crowded room, "I have never been so afraid in all my life." This honesty was healthy and it pervaded the land — battlers and civilians alike.

I do not know whether American children learn the poem about the boy who stood upon the burning deck, whence all but he had fled. It is a jingling piece which was hammered down our throats when we were young. Now we know that it was a wisp of pompous Victorian humbug and that

the boy was a fool to stand there when escape was possible. May we take it that education has improved the broad standard of intelligence during the past quarter of a century and that those months of danger provided an interesting proof of this. They showed that the mass of people, by intelligently admitting fear, halved the dangers arising from it. We talked of fear and studied it.

A farmer friend of mine who had noticed that women were less afraid of bombs than men — always rushing into the street to watch battles in the air — came to the conclusion that women, having less imagination than men, had more physical courage. Then he watched the animals on his farm, in a part of the country which was continuously shelled and bombed. He saw that the male beasts — horses, cattle, and dogs — ran about nervously during the bombing while the females took it all rather calmly.

This is an avenue of research which is not important here, except that it shows how reasonable and frank we were; how free of humbug in considering our own reactions to the dangers that threatened us.

IV

Now almost four years have passed since all this, and we begin to wonder if the early summer of 1940 was Britain's darkest hour after all. When we remember what was born of those weeks, it seems wiser to call them Britain's greatest spiritual experience of

the war. We saw courage and independence and honesty blossom over night.

But nearly four years have had their mellowing influence upon these startling virtues. The grabbing has begun and voices are losing their gentleness. We know that the one hope of Britain, not as a world power but as an honest people, lies in the survival of the spirit of 1940. Does the sight of victory already dilute that spirit? Is the war merely a cynical attempt to save us as we were? Or is it a vast spiritual opportunity through which we shall emerge, using those powers that were given us in our darkest hour, to take our place in the world, not because of what Britain was but because of what she ought to become?

Britons like doting on the past. During a war, the present is melancholy and the future uncertain, so we like sighing for the musky smell of old avenues. Only the past is safe. But safety is dangerous, and the Briton who looks upon victory as safety is already beginning the third world war. We know quite clearly that it is only by keeping the spirit of those dark months alive that we can prevent this horror. So we find ourselves wondering where we are to find our leadership in this renaissance. Good men know that this leadership was given to them two thousand years ago. But churches and creeds have confused the wise voice that spoke on the shores of Galilee. It seems to be lost in the archives of time.

It won't be a politician who will provide the leadership we need, for politicians must be clever men who thrive upon crisis. The need is for a wise man, which is more, who can guide his country by avoiding crisis. If that wise man does not arise, then Britain's leadership must come from

within herself: each Briton's leadership must come from within himself. It can come only if Dunkirk and the months that followed are not forgotten, not turned into an incident in history, but used as a living power during the frightening responsibilities of peace.



"Better take a good look, Karl."

► *The actors of Norway refuse to collaborate with Nazis.*

SABOTAGE BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS

By ALBIN E. JOHNSON

FOR almost four years Norway's actors and actresses have been driving the Nazi propaganda authorities to frenzied and futile distraction. Despite threats, imprisonment, torture, and even murder, they have revised the theatre's traditional slogan to read, "The Nazi play must *not* go on."

The first German attempt to harness the Norwegian theatre to Goebel's propaganda wagon was sly. Groups of so-called guest actors were imported from Berlin and Hamburg, to fraternize with Norwegian actors and create "cultural solidarity" between the nations. These German performers were snubbed completely in Norway, and soon retreated to the Reich in disappointed confusion.

The Nazi and Quisling authorities then tried bribery, promising financial rewards and stardom to actors who would take part in stage, screen or radio productions boosting the Master Race. The net catch in Oslo: a measly two Quislings. Even the poorest "ham" and the most ambitious understudy refused to com-

promise his patriotism for fame and fortune. The lives of those who yielded to temptation very soon became unbearable, and their stage careers ended, as far as appearance before the footlights was concerned. There was too much danger that a heavy piece of scenery might unaccountably drop upon their heads. Such "unavoidable accidents" have more than once been reported.

Angered over these rebuffs, Reichscommissar Terboven, the German Governor of Norway, issued an official decree ordering all actors to participate in propaganda pieces. The penalty for refusal was severe: debarment from all theatres in the country, and loss of unemployment benefits. But the actors, at a secret meeting, voted unanimously to ignore the proclamation and continue their non-cooperation.

The Nazis now countered with a peremptory order for all actors to return to the theatre. They warned that recalcitrants would be considered saboteurs and punished accordingly — meaning that they would be killed.

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