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The Rivals Who Defeated Hitler

ALLIES AT WAR



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TIM BOUVERIE

Tim Bouverie is the author of *Sunday Times* best-seller *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War*, which was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize. He studied history at Christ Church, Oxford, and was the 2020–21 Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford.

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To Clemmie

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There is only one thing worse than fighting
with allies and that is fighting without them.

Winston Churchill

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Contents

Preface xi

PART ONE: THE ANGLO-FRENCH ALLIANCE, 1939–1940

I Allies 3
II The Scandinavian Fiasco 16
III The Fall 28
IV Unfriendly Fire 47
V Rebels with a Cause 63

PART TWO: SEEKING ALLIES, 1940–1941

VI The Battle for America 83
VII The Reluctant Neutral 104
VIII Friend or Foe? 119
IX Greek Tragedy 140
X Desert War 159
XI Fighting France 171
XII The Soviet Enigma 185
XIII Allied with Hell 203
XIV 'In God's Good Time' 217
XV Atlantic Meeting – Pacific Infamy 235

PART THREE: THE GRAND ALLIANCE, 1942–1943

XVI Forging the Alliance 249
XVII The Rising Sun 262
XVIII Fronts and Frontiers 278
XIX The Flickering Torch 302
XX Casablanca 319

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XXI Special Relationship 337
XXII Stress and Strain 356
XXIII The Big Three 378

PART FOUR: TOWARDS VICTORY, 1944–1945

XXIV The Fourth Policeman 399
XXV Turncoats and Partisans 420
XXVI Brave New World 436
XXVII The Polish Agony 453
XXVIII Spheres of Influence 472
XXIX Yalta 494
XXX Triumph and Tragedy 524

Epilogue 536
Acknowledgements 551
Sources and Bibliography 555
Notes 589
Index 627

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Preface

Stalin was in excellent spirits. As host to thirty-one guests, including three interpreters, he set the tone by telling jokes, clinking glasses and attacking the dinner of whitefish in champagne sauce, caviar, mutton and quail with zeal. Rising from his place at the centre of the table, he proposed a toast to the guest on his left, 'the leader of the British Empire, the most courageous of all Prime Ministers . . . who, when all Europe was ready to fall flat before Hitler, said that Britain would stand and fight alone against Germany, even without any allies'. Later, he paid tribute to the British–Soviet–American alliance that had driven the German Army back from the steppes of Eurasia, the sands of North Africa, the shores of the Mediterranean and the English Channel to the Nazi citadel:

> In the history of diplomacy I know of no such close alliance of three great powers as this . . . Allies should not deceive each other . . . Possibly our alliance is so firm just because we do not deceive each other, or is it because it is not so easy to deceive each other? I propose a toast to the firmness of our Three-Power Alliance, may it be strong and stable, may we be as frank as possible.[1]

The ironies within Stalin's statement, made on the fifth evening of the Yalta conference, 8 February 1945, abound. While Winston Churchill had been vowing to 'fight on' after the fall of France, Stalin had been collaborating with Hitler. Despite his injunction against deception, the Soviets had installed dozens of secret listening devices in the palaces housing the British and American delegations. Every morning before the conference resumed, Stalin was briefed on the private conversations of Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. That afternoon, he had met the American President and received the promise of territory in China and the Pacific in return for the Soviet Union joining the war against Japan. Neither

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the British nor the Chinese Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, were consulted. Most serious of all, Stalin had repeatedly stated his wish to see a 'strong', 'independent' and 'democratic' Poland, while remaining steadfast in his determination to preserve the communist puppet regime he had recently installed in Warsaw. Little wonder that Churchill, as he confessed in his toast, felt the burden of responsibility more heavily than at any other moment of the war. The future of Eastern Europe, he had complained to the Soviet diplomat Ivan Maisky two days earlier, 'rests on your bayonets'.[2] And yet, as Stalin himself had said, it would not have been 'possible to win the war without the alliance'.[3]

As Churchill remarked shortly after returning from Yalta, 'There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies and that is fighting without them.'[4] This epigram encapsulates one of the most important themes of the Second World War. In order to defeat the Axis, it was necessary for the British, the French, the Americans, the Soviets and the Chinese to work together. Their collaboration was sophisticated, diverse, mighty and conquering. Yet it was also fractious, suspicious, duplicitous and rivalrous. This book sets out to explore this antagonism: to examine the conflict and co-operation within the anti-Axis alliance, with all its consequences for the twentieth century and beyond.

The only reason why Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and the militarist governments of Emperor Michinomiya Hirohito did not triumph between 1939 and 1945 was that they were confronted by a superior coalition of nations and empires that shared their resources and co-ordinated their plans to thwart them. The combined population of the three main Allied powers – the British Empire, the United States and the Soviet Union – stood at approximately 830 million at the outbreak of war. The total population of the Axis – Germany, Italy and Japan – was less than 260 million. The financial, industrial and material resources of the Allies dwarfed those of their adversaries. In 1943 alone, the Allies produced 2,891 naval vessels, 60,720 tanks and 147,161 aircraft. The Axis, by contrast, built 540 naval vessels, 12,825 tanks and 43,524 aircraft.

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Yet the neat statistics are only partially explanatory. In order to bring its economic and demographic weight to bear, the anti-Axis

alliance had to be formed and then maintained despite profound differences in ideology, ethics, personality, political systems and post-war aims, as well as disagreements over strategy, diplomacy, finance, imperialism, the allocation of resources and the future peace.

The Second World War is the most chronicled conflict in history. Thousands of books exist on its battles, generals, foot-soldiers and victims. It is not this book's purpose to add to this mountain of military history. Rather, it sets out to explore the politics and diplomacy of the improbable and incongruous alliance that ultimately defeated Hitler. Naturally, some of the events and the most prominent personalities – Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin – will be familiar to readers. Yet this book differs from the existing literature. Rather than keeping within the limits of the British–Soviet–American alliance – what Churchill liked to call the 'Grand Alliance' – or the wartime conferences, it examines the salient features of Allied wartime politics and diplomacy in their entirety. Thus, while the first part of the book deals with the Anglo-French alliance and its disintegration, subsequent sections consider the Free French, British colonial policy in light of the Japanese onslaught and Western interaction with that vast, complex and frequently neglected ally, Nationalist China. Other subjects beyond the confines of exclusive 'Big Three' diplomacy include relations with Francoist Spain and neutral Ireland, Allied policy in liberated Italy and war-torn Yugoslavia and British intervention in Greece.

Finally, I have broken my own self-denying ordinance to describe military events involving current or former allies, such as the sinking of the French Fleet at Mers el-Kébir by the Royal Navy, the crushing of the Iraqi revolt of May–June 1941 and the British–Gaullist campaign to oust the Vichy French from the Middle East. These were critical actions with far-reaching consequences and yet they remain little known, with most receiving scarcely more than a paragraph in general histories.

Of course, relations between the three main Allied powers and the politicking of their leaders are at the centre of the text. This was the triumvirate that won the war and shaped the peace. But the lens has been widened to include the foreign ministers, ambassadors,

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civil servants, emissaries and observers who participated in discussions, tendered advice and commented on events. Writing in 1936, the historian G. M. Young criticised 'much of what passes for diplomatic history' as 'little more than the record of what one clerk said to another clerk'.[5] Yet the opinions of those beneath and around the wielders of power are critical, since they reveal the context in which decisions were made; the nexus of attitudes, prejudices, knowledge, advice and assumptions from which political action derives.

Five years later, the British Director of Military Operations, Major-General Sir John Kennedy, ruminated on the 'frightful task' that awaited the historian of the future. 'I suppose no war has ever been so well documented,' he mused in his against-regulations diary. 'Yet the records do not often reveal individual views. It is essentially a government of committees. Opinions are nearly always collective or anonymous.'[6] Fortunately, thanks to diaries like Kennedy's, we are able to recreate debates and chronicle dissent.

This book has benefited from more than 100 collections of private papers and archives in Britain and the United States. The obvious lacuna is Russia, where archives have been closed to Western scholars for many years. It is possible that there are unpublished documents in Russia that will, when they finally emerge, enhance our understanding of Soviet foreign policy during the 'Great Patriotic War'. Yet we should not set our expectations too high. Unlike in the West, Soviet diplomats rarely expressed their honest opinions and seldom kept diaries or wrote memoirs. Even when they did, as in the case of Ivan Maisky, they were aware that their words were likely to be read by the Soviet secret police (the NKVD) and could be used to incriminate them. Stalin forbade his associates from taking notes during meetings (the exception being translators), while apparatchiks found it safer to repeat party prejudices than speak truth to power. It is therefore unlikely that our understanding of Soviet wartime diplomacy will alter fundamentally from that which we are able to gain from foreign sources, the extensive published documents and digital collections such as the Stalin Archive and the Molotov Secretariat.

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The difficulties inherent in maintaining a global alliance between rival great powers with different strategic goals, combat priorities,

governmental systems, ideologies and economies were immense. Only Hitler could have brought them together. The Allies were united in their desire to defeat the Nazi dictator and rid the world of German, Japanese and Italian militarism. In this quest they co-operated successfully and to an unprecedented degree. Yet they were at odds over the best way to win the war and about the world they hoped to construct from its ashes.

The Anglo-American alliance was the most formidable, intricate and, in many ways, harmonious military alliance in history. Yet this did not prevent the Roosevelt Administration from trying to dismantle the British Empire and capture British trade. The Free French leader, General Charles de Gaulle, was determined to maintain the unity of the French Empire and see France re-established as a major power but was opposed by the American President and the US State Department. Britain had declared war in accordance with her pledge to preserve Polish independence and yet her wartime partner, the Soviet Union, had participated in the destruction of the Polish state and had every intention of reasserting her control over the region. Far from making the world 'safe for democracy', the tragedy of the Second World War, as prosecuted by the British–Soviet–American alliance, was that it made much of Europe and Asia 'safe' for communism.

Diplomatic history is unfashionable at present. Even more so are the deeds of 'great men'. Yet the history of the Second World War indisputably shows the importance of both. With war raging once more in Europe and with the West struggling to act strategically or in concert, it seems timely to re-examine these events.

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PART ONE

The Anglo-French Alliance

1939–1940

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I
Allies

Thank God for the French Army.

Winston Churchill, 23 March 1933[1]

As was typical of that fateful spring, the day began in glorious sunshine. Walking through central London, the chaff from the plane trees floating in the breeze, the Senior Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet, Colonel Leslie Hollis, marvelled at the serenity of the city: clerks and civil servants on their way to work, typists in gay frocks, shoppers and soldiers – all stepped brightly about their business, oblivious to the danger that hung over them. When he reached Hendon aerodrome, however, Hollis learnt of the storm raging on the other side of the Channel. The Royal Air Force wanted to postpone the trip but the Prime Minister was adamant: 'To hell with that . . . I am going, whatever happens! This is too serious a situation to bother about the *weather*!'[2]

The weather was, indeed, the least of Churchill's concerns. Not only had the Luftwaffe bombed the airfield at which he was due to arrive the previous evening but the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, when summoning his ally to this urgent and impromptu conference, had mentioned both the time and the location of the rendezvous over an open telephone line. Churchill was furious. Convinced that the Germans would have been listening in on the call, he ordered his Assistant Private Secretary, Jock Colville, to ring up Reynaud's Chef de Cabinet and cancel the meeting, as a deception, before being persuaded that this would cause unacceptable chaos at the other end.

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As it transpired, it is hard to imagine what further mayhem could have ensued. Landing on the pockmarked airfield near Tours shortly

before 1 p.m. on 13 June 1940, the Prime Minister and his party were disconcerted to find that there was no one to meet them. 'One sensed the increasing degeneration of affairs', recalled Churchill, who walked across the wet, dilapidated airfield towards a group of idling French airmen and requested *'une voiture'*.[3] Eventually, the Station Commander's Citroën was commandeered and the British set off, in considerable discomfort, towards the Préfecture.

Refugees clogged the route – a fragment of the six to ten million French men, women and children fleeing the advancing enemy – and it was with difficulty that the car reached the temporary headquarters of the French Government. There, in keeping with the theme of the day, the British found no one to welcome them, nor any clue as to the whereabouts of the French Prime Minister. Churchill, who had arrived in France looking as if he was 'trying to chew a mouthful of nuts and bolts', took charge.[4] It was already after 2 p.m., he declared, and before anything further was attempted he was going to have some lunch. The British made for the Hôtel Grande Bretagne where, after some forceful negotiations with the proprietor, they were furnished with a private room, some cold chicken and several bottles of Vouvray.

Presently, the Secretary of the French War Cabinet, Paul Baudouin, arrived and ruined the meal by seasoning it 'with an outpouring of oily defeatism'.[5] Resistance, he maintained, was futile. The Germans were pouring over the Seine bridges and were, at this very moment, on the outskirts of Paris. If the United States agreed to declare war on Germany *immediately* there was, perhaps, the possibility of continuing the struggle but otherwise the situation was beyond retrieve. Responding to this 'Niagara of doom', Churchill was imperturbable.[6] Certainly, he hoped that America would enter the war, he told Baudouin, but Britain would fight on regardless.

At last, Reynaud arrived at the Préfecture. There, the British delegation, consisting of the Foreign Secretary, Viscount Halifax, the newly appointed Minister of Aircraft Production, Lord Beaverbrook, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan, and the Military Secretary to the War Cabinet, Major-General Hastings 'Pug' Ismay, met Churchill's personal liaison with the French Prime Minister, Louis Spears, and the British Ambassador

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to Paris, Sir Ronald Campbell. On the French side, only Reynaud and Baudouin were present. Although the French Cabinet had invited Churchill to attend their session later that evening – an invitation Reynaud, inexplicably, failed to relay – the absence of the French Commander-in-Chief, General Weygand, or the Deputy Prime Minister, Maréchal Pétain, was an ominous sign.

Reynaud informed his British visitors that, at a Cabinet meeting the previous evening, Weygand had described the military situation as completely hopeless. The French armies were at their 'last gasp'. France had been defeated by the 'God of Battles' and had no choice but to plead for an armistice, to prevent the country from descending into anarchy.[7] Reynaud had insisted that all was not lost. If French forces had suffered great losses, then so had the enemy. If the Army could withstand the German invader for just a few more weeks, he had told the Commander-in-Chief, then they would receive more help from Britain and, eventually, the United States. With rising emotion, Reynaud had spoken of the need to save French honour and, although he did not repeat this to his British guests now, accused Weygand of critically misjudging their adversary: 'You are taking Hitler for Wilhelm I, the old gentleman who took Alsace and Lorraine from us [in 1871] and that was that. But Hitler is a Genghis Khan.'[8]

The French Cabinet had fallen in behind Reynaud. What significance had public order when the honour of France was at stake? What of the agreement signed with Britain not three months ago proscribing a separate peace? And what of the French Empire, from which it would be possible to continue the war?[9] Only Pétain had supported Weygand's proposal. And yet Reynaud now told Churchill that he would not be able to persuade his colleagues to continue the struggle without an immediate declaration of war by the United States. He was compelled, therefore, to ask how the British Government would respond to a French request to repudiate the agreement the two allies had signed on 28 March and seek an armistice with the Germans.

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This was the turning point. The moment the British had feared but rarely spoken of for three weeks. An occurrence so shocking that it would have been unthinkable only a couple of months ago:

the defeat, after just six weeks of fighting, of the second largest army in Europe. The end of a political and military partnership that had lasted just ten months.

⋆

The Anglo-French alliance, which creaked into action upon the outbreak of war, on 3 September 1939, was born not of love or friendship but of necessity. Although the two countries had fought side by side during the First World War, it had not always been a harmonious experience and they had soon found themselves at odds over the peace settlement and the treatment of post-war Germany. Whilst the French, for understandable reasons, wanted to see their still-powerful neighbour hobbled, the British – though happy to administer her colonies – were wary of fuelling the German desire for revenge. They therefore opposed the French demand to detach the Rhineland from Germany and, when Prime Minister Poincaré sent troops into the Ruhr, to seize German coal in lieu of unpaid reparations, publicly denounced the French action. Worst of all, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had neutered the post-war Anglo-French Treaty of Alliance – the 'ultimate sanction of the Peace Treaty' and 'keystone for European peace', as far as the French were concerned – by inserting the proviso that the agreement would only come into effect once the United States Congress had ratified the concomitant Franco-American Treaty – an event that duly failed to materialise.[10]

With some justification the French responded to these slights and deceptions by invoking the old trope of 'perfidious Albion'. Britain had been one of the architects of the Versailles Treaty but, once the ink was dry, showed little interest in enforcing it or providing the promised guarantees for French security. The British thought the French vindictive and needlessly aggressive. Accused of 'senseless greed' over the issue of German reparations by John Maynard Keynes in his best-selling *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, the French were considered 'intolerably foolish', 'impossible people' and 'rather insane' for continually poking the German 'tiger'.[11]

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Nor did the British attitude change with the advent of Hitler in January 1933. Considering the French largely responsible for this violent strain of German nationalism, the MacDonald–Baldwin Government refused to confront illegal German rearmament and, instead, tried to assuage the militaristic temper of the new regime. On 18 June 1935, it signed a naval treaty with the new Reich, which allowed the Kriegsmarine to expand up to the level of 35 per cent of the Royal Navy. Not only did this agreement abrogate the armaments clauses of Versailles, it was presented to Paris as a *fait accompli*. Understandably, the French Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, was incandescent, while the right-wing journalist Henri Béraud responded to this latest betrayal by castigating *les anglais* for their record of 'violence, perfidy, implacable selfishness and disloyalty'. 'I hate this people for myself and for my ancestors,' Béraud fumed, 'by instinct as much as tradition.'[12]

Yet the French dared not break with the British. Despite the turmoil of French Third Republic politics – which produced fourteen governments between 1933 and 1939 – all French prime ministers were united in the conviction that no French soldier would take up arms against German treaty-breaking unless France enjoyed the unequivocal backing of Britain. This gave the British considerable leverage and allowed first Stanley Baldwin, then Neville Chamberlain, to pursue their policy of appeasement with little regard for French sensibilities. Thus Lord Halifax, then Lord Privy Seal, informed Hitler in November 1937 that Britain had no *a priori* objection to frontier changes in eastern and central Europe and, in September 1938, at the height of the Czech crisis, Chamberlain made the momentous decision to fly to Hitler without informing, let alone consulting, the French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier. As the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bonnet, noted ruefully after Munich, 'The French Government was only a tail to the British kite.'[13]

Only when appeasement was shown to have failed – when Hitler continued to berate the 'Versailles powers' after Munich and then shredded the Agreement by invading the rump of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 – did the British actively begin to court the French. On 21 March 1939, Albert Lebrun stepped onto the dock at Dover and inaugurated the first state visit to Britain by a French president

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in more than a decade, or 'Frog week', as the Conservative MP and Wodehouse caricature Henry 'Chips' Channon called it.[14] Over the next four days, the First Gentleman of France and his wife were treated to the full panoply of England's *ancien régime*. The King spoke of an entente destined by 'Providence', while even the pro-appeasement *Times* lauded a renewal of Anglo-French 'solidarity'.[15]

Yet points of tension remained, as the British prevaricated during the summer of 1939 over negotiations with the Soviet Union and when, on 3 September, a combination of French muddle and funk led to the embarrassing spectacle of Britain declaring war on Germany six hours before her ally. This regrettable episode – widely interpreted as a cowardly bout of French chicanery – helped to reinforce the already existing view in Whitehall that however much the British might rely on the French soldier, the same confidence could not be placed in 'French politicians or the Quai d'Orsay [the French Foreign Office]'.[16]

Confidence in the French soldier, however, counted for much. At the outbreak of war, France possessed a regular army of 900,000 men, with five million reservists available for immediate call-up. The British, by contrast, had a professional army of 224,000 men (131,100 of whom were reservists) and 458,000 'Saturday night soldiers', or territorials. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that sailed for France in September 1939 was well equipped and, as recent historians have emphasised, uniquely mechanised.[17] But there was precious little materiel with which to furnish the irregulars or the newly conscripted. In April 1939, Viscount Gort, the commander of the BEF, had been appalled to discover a division of territorials without even mugs or cutlery and, one year on, the Conservative MP Quintin Hogg was still training his contingent of the Tower Hamlets Rifles without Bren guns or ammunition. 'Could you please oblige us with a Bren gun?' went Noël Coward's song of the same name. 'The lack of one is wounding to our pride / Last night we found the cutest little German parachutist / He looked at our kit and giggled a bit and laughed until he cried.'[18] Later, when the French Army began to collapse and one of the newly appointed Labour Cabinet ministers, Arthur Greenwood, referred sarcastically to Britain's 'bloody gallant allies', he received a sharp rebuke from

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the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir Edmund Ironside: 'I told him that we had depended upon the French Army. That we had made no army [ourselves] and therefore it was not right to say "these bloody allies". It was for them to say that to us.'[19]

In fairness to Britain's war leaders, it was no part of British, nor for that matter French, strategy to engage in major land offensives for at least two years after the outbreak of war. Aware of their materiel deficiencies, most crucially in the air, and based on the theory that the Allies could lose a short war but, with the mobilisation of their more abundant resources, were bound to win a long one – as they had in 1918 – the initial Anglo-French plan was overwhelmingly defensive. The French, with their large army and chain of fortifications along their eastern frontier – the famous Maginot Line – were to hold the Germans on land, while the British, repeating their actions from the First World War, planned to asphyxiate the German economy by naval blockade. To almost everyone, at least initially, this seemed like prudent strategy. There were several problems with this approach, however, the most immediate of which was that it did nothing to help the country for which the Allies had nominally gone to war: Poland.

On 31 March 1939, having failed to stand by Czechoslovakia and reaped the consequences, Britain and France had pledged themselves to the defence of Poland. Unfortunately for the Poles, it was an empty promise: a political gesture designed to deter Hitler rather than a military plan to aid their country. Although General Maurice Gamelin, the then French Commander-in-Chief, had committed himself to a limited attack three days after the Germans had crossed the Polish frontier, followed by a significant offensive on the seventeenth day of mobilisation, the reality, when war broke out in September, was a timorous incursion of nine divisions, 5 miles into the Saarland, before a full-scale retreat. 'Platoon tried to continue its advance', reads one inglorious entry from a French regimental diary, but 'was halted by the fire of an automatic weapon'.[20]

Understandably, the Poles felt betrayed. 'It is like a shooting party,' exclaimed the distraught Polish Ambassador, Count Edward Raczyński, after one of many fruitless attempts to persuade the British Government to help his country: 'We are the partridges and

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they [the Germans] are the guns.'[21] The French failed to cause a single German division to be diverted from Poland – despite the paucity of German forces in the west – while the British, sympathetic to French fears of reprisals and reluctant to be the first to cause civilian casualties, insisted on dropping leaflets rather than bombs on the Reich. On 6 October 1939, having suffered more than half a million military casualties and the destruction of much of Warsaw, the Poles were forced to surrender. France's twenty-year strategy of creating a system of eastern alliances capable of containing Germany had ended in brutal failure. The sovereignty of Poland, for which the Allies had finally gone to war, had been extinguished in just four weeks.

*

The swiftness of the Polish collapse was a bitter disappointment to the French, who, despite doing nothing to help, expected the Poles to hold out until the spring. The British were more sanguine. The Chief of Staff to the British Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant-General Henry Pownall, reflected that it would have been impossible to ship the 158,000 men of the BEF safely to France without the 'time and immunity' of the Polish campaign, while the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, retained an improbable faith in a collapse of the German home front. There were, however, problems that derived from a strategy of 'wait and see'.

Unlike in August 1914, the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939 was greeted with neither wild enthusiasm nor foolish jingoism. Most French soldiers, observed the émigré Austro-Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, 'did not care a bean for Danzig and the [Polish] Corridor . . . They rather disliked Hitler for all the unrest he created but they did not actually hate him. The only thing they really hated was the idea of war.'[22] Captain Daniel Barlone of the 2nd North African Division attributed the lack of zeal among both officers and men to a profound confusion about what they were fighting for. During the Great War, the French Army had been inspired by the need to expel the Germans from their soil and to regain the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. Now the average French soldier felt secure behind the

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Maginot Line and dubious of the claim that Hitler would 'hurl himself on us after having swallowed up the little nations, one by one'.[23]

In Britain, the situation was different. Chamberlain's highly publicised attempts to placate Hitler and the no less public failure of his policy had demonstrated the need to resist German aggression beyond all possible doubt. Aside from an embarrassment of dukes and a lunatic fringe from both right and left, opinion polls and Home Intelligence reports showed the nation to be solidly behind the declaration of war. But there was little enthusiasm. Rather, in Britain, as in France, the overwhelming sentiment was 'Let's get it over with.'*

This was easier said than done. Twenty-five years earlier, the Germans had opened the bowling by invading Belgium and driving, with all possible speed, towards Paris. In 1939, politicians feared a similar lightning attack but despite myriad scares and multiple predictions the blow did not come. For Jean-Paul Sartre, serving in a meteorological unit in Alsace, the lull was a boon. Between the outbreak of war and the onset of fighting in the west, he wrote nearly a million words, filling fourteen notebooks with philosophy and completing the first draft of his novel *L'âge de raison*. But most French soldiers were not literary polymaths and morale plummeted. Drunkenness, looting and absenteeism proliferated. 'The army was rotting from inaction', recalled a junior officer at the Ministère de la Guerre, while the 'slovenliness, dirtiness and inefficiency' of the French soldiers he met caused the commander of the BEF's II Corps, Lieutenant-General Alan Brooke, to wonder 'whether the French are still a firm enough nation to again take their part in seeing this war through'.[24]

While the French army stagnated, Parisian social life carried on as normal. Street cafés were full, race meetings continued at Auteuil and Maurice Chevalier sang 'Paris sera toujours Paris' at

* 'There was only one consideration which prevented the average French soldier from looking at the war as complete madness,' recalled Koestler, and that was the slogan *'Il faut en finir'* ('This must end'). 'He had been mobilised three times during the past few years and he was sick of having to leave his job and his family every six months and to return after a few weeks, feeling ridiculous and cheated.'

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the Casino de Paris. 'Every shop in St Germain and in the outskirts of Paris blazed to high heaven,' noted the young war correspondent Anthony Gibbs. 'The naphtha flares flickered blindingly in the street market stalls. Enormous naked electric light bulbs, of terrifying candle power, shone in batteries from uncurtained windows, lighting up the rain and the puddles and the thronging shoppers with the radiance of the tropic sun.' Soon Gibbs found himself up in front of the British Military Censor.

'You've described here the blackout in Paris. Well, I mean – We don't want the Germans to know *everything*.'

'Can I describe the blackout if I leave out Paris?' enquired Gibbs.

'Well, that's just the trouble. You see you rather give the impression that the French don't pay much attention to the blackout . . . It's a question of annoying our allies.'[25]

Not all British military personnel were so diplomatic. The distinguished medieval historian Marc Bloch, acting as a liaison officer with the BEF, observed that the average English officer, whilst doubtless kindly and good-natured in his own country, had an unfortunate tendency, once across the Channel, to 'confuse his European hosts with "natives" – in other words, with those inhabitants of his colonial possessions who are, by definition, his inferiors.' The British Tommy, wrote Bloch, was arguably worse: 'The soldier immortalised by Kipling knows how to obey and how to fight . . . But he is, by nature, a looter and a lecher: that is to say, he is guilty of two vices which the French peasant finds it hard to forgive when both are satisfied to the detriment of his farmyard and his daughters.'[26]

As the '*drôle de guerre*' or 'Phoney War' dragged on, relations between the Allies became increasingly fractious. French soldiers resented how much better paid their English counterparts were – a grievance the British would later feel towards their American allies – while the fact that Britain had only five divisions in the field (later rising to thirteen), compared to France's ninety-one, helped foster the notion that the British were, as German propaganda alleged, planning to 'fight to the last Frenchman'.[27] Day after day, the giant speakers along the Franco-German frontier, as well as the airwaves of Radio Stuttgart, bombarded French soldiers with lines such as 'It is all the fault of the English!' and 'Britain provides the

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machines, France provides the bodies.'[28] Louis Spears, the Francophile Conservative MP known in Westminster as the 'Member for Paris', reported the view from the French provinces that 'France and France alone appears to be bearing the brunt of the fighting' – this before any fighting had actually taken place – while, in October 1939, Prime Minister Daladier raged to a senior air officer about the 'English, behind the Channel . . . conserving their energies so as to last out'.[29]

In order to counter such sentiments and promote allied unity, fraternisation between British and French soldiers was encouraged at various levels. Although Alan Brooke found the lunches with his French colleagues a strain on both his work and his liver – the luncheon on 31 October, hosted by the Préfet du Nord for the Duke of Gloucester, consisted of oysters, lobster, chicken, foie gras, cheese, fruit, wine and liqueurs – his colleague Lieutenant-General Pownall thought they served a useful purpose. British battalions flew the flag by patrolling the French frontier, opposite the Saar, and there was an assortment of inter-Allied sporting events.

In addition to working on an Anglo-French financial agreement (December 1939), cross-Channel trade (February 1940) and industrial co-operation (March 1940), officials in London and Paris spent time pondering increasingly creative schemes to promote Anglo-French unity. 'La Marseillaise', it was suggested, should be played in British cinemas after 'God Save the King'; a special stamp featuring the heads of both President Lebrun and King George VI was proposed by the Commissariat Général à l'Information; English, it was urged, should be made compulsory in French schools (and vice versa); and the Minister of Education, Earl De La Warr, wrote to Lord Halifax with a plan for British children to learn something of French gastronomy: 'I believe there are a number of unemployed French chefs in London whom we might get to go round the schools and cook French meals!'[30]

But it was action, not cultural exchanges, that British and French public opinion demanded as the 'Bore War' wore on. On 12 September 1939, the first meeting of the Supreme War Council, comprising Chamberlain and the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, Admiral Chatfield, for the British, and Daladier and

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General Gamelin for the French, took place at Abbeville. The Prime Ministers had no great respect for one another. Having been excluded from Chamberlain's meetings with Hitler and the post-Munich declaration – the infamous 'piece of paper' – the French Prime Minister was naturally suspicious of his British counterpart. When Chamberlain had taken his appeasement caravan to Rome in January 1939, Daladier told the American Ambassador that he 'fully expected to be betrayed', since this was the 'customary fate of allies of the British'. He went on to describe the British Prime Minister as a 'desiccated stick', King George VI as 'a moron' and Queen Elizabeth as an 'excessively ambitious woman who would be ready to sacrifice every other country in the world in order that she might remain Queen Elizabeth of England'.[31] For his part, Chamberlain thought Daladier emotional and vainglorious. He may have been given the soubriquet the 'Bull of Vaucluse' (the southern *département* the Premier represented in the Chamber of Deputies) but he had the horns of a snail.[32]

Nevertheless, at Abbeville, the two leaders put on a good show of Allied unity. Franco-British co-operation had never been stronger, declared Daladier. It was essential that the solidarity of France and Britain 'should be maintained and conveyed to the world', stated Chamberlain. Most satisfactorily from the latter's perspective, Daladier agreed that the Allies should be in no hurry to undertake 'large-scale operations' since time was on their' side.[33]

When the Supreme War Council reconvened in Hove Town Hall on 22 September, however, Daladier urged the establishment of a 'Balkan front' to forestall German penetration of the region. The British considered this pure 'moonshine' – the first of several attempts to shift the focus of the war away from French frontiers.[34] Yet the Balkan project was also symptomatic of the long-standing French interest in creating an eastern front. In April 1938, a French Army Staff study had spoken of the vital need, in the event of war, to establish a 'common front from the Baltic to the Adriatic' and, on 20 September 1939, Daladier spoke of the necessity of sending an expedition to the Balkans, 'to force Germany to disperse its military forces and to make the blockade as effective as possible'.[35]

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Either way, Chamberlain threw 'gentle showers of cold water' on the proposal.[36] Haunted by the memory of Gallipoli, the British had no desire to repeat that disaster with another Balkan adventure. This was to set the pattern for Allied strategic discussions during the Phoney War. Whenever the French proposed an expedition to some part of eastern or southern Europe, the British vetoed it and whenever the British suggested anything that might provoke a German response in the west, the French replied with a firm *'non'*. Privately, both partners expressed concerns at this state of strategic stalemate.

For the French, the main cause of restlessness was the growing sense that time was perhaps not on the Allied side after all. French economic malaise, her population deficit, production bottlenecks and a small but influential section of her citizenry in favour of a compromise peace, all contributed to the notion that it was the Germans, not the Allies, who were benefiting from the armed truce. The British shared this fear, while the demoralising effects of prolonged passivity represented an even greater concern. 'There has been a general grouse that here we are suffering gross discomfort, blackouts, rising food prices . . . evacuees in one's spare beds and nothing to show for it,' wrote the Conservative MP Jim Thomas to Viscount Cranborne on 25 September 1939.[37] Cranborne's father, the Marquess of Salisbury, thought the 'dead silence from the front . . . very trying to public nerves', while a 55-year-old woman from Bolton, asked by a Mass-Observation volunteer when she expected the war to end, replied, 'No idea; it hasn't started yet, has it?'[38] Even Chamberlain began to wonder whether the war could ever be won without first giving the Germans 'a real hard punch in the stomach'.[39]

On both sides of the Channel, there was thus a growing desire to do *something* even if there was no clear idea as to what that something should be or, in the words of a French naval officer and later historian, 'to do something even something stupid'.[40] As 1939 turned into 1940 and without any sign of the war starting in earnest, the Allies would come perilously close to doing just that.

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II

The Scandinavian Fiasco

Our task in this war is to defeat Hitlerism but it is still Hitlerism if the aggressor is called Stalin.

Daily Sketch, 22 December 1939[1]

Just before dawn on the morning of 30 November 1939, Soviet forces crossed the frontier and invaded neutral Finland. Some 450,000 men, 2,514 tanks and 718 armoured cars took part in the initial assault, which began with an artillery bombardment across the Karelian isthmus and the bombing of Helsinki. It was not a war Joseph Stalin had expected to wage. The Soviet dictator had expected the Finns, when threatened with the overwhelming might of the Red Army, to relinquish the territories he claimed. When a Finnish delegation arrived in Moscow on 12 October, however, they had shocked him by rejecting his demands. Even more astonishing was how this sparsely populated country, with an army of just 150,000 men and thirty-two tanks (only ten of which were operational at the outbreak of war), then proceeded to inflict a series of devastating reverses on the Red Army. Camouflaged Finnish ski-troops flitted through the birch forests like ghosts, ambushing Soviet columns and severing their communications. The Mannerheim Line – named after the septuagenarian Finnish Commander-in-Chief – proved a formidable obstacle, while thousands of underequipped and ill-trained Russian soldiers simply walked into the Finnish minefields and booby-traps. Inspired by Finnish resistance – a real instance of David defying Goliath – and outraged by Soviet aggression, there was soon a clamour in Allied capitals to aid the Finns, while British and French war leaders saw in the 'Winter War' an opportunity to shift the focus of their own conflict to Scandinavia and end the strategic stalemate.

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Long before the outbreak of hostilities, the British and the French had decided that economic warfare would be integral to their offensive strategy. Germany was deficient in oil, chrome, copper, tungsten, timber, iron ore, bauxite and rubber, as well as foodstuffs. By restricting her imports of these commodities, the Allies, so the theory went, would impair the Nazi war machine and attack the German home front, leading to a precipitous collapse, as had occurred at the end of the First World War. Unfortunately, as so often in political economics, the concept was more beautiful than the reality. Anglo-French estimates of German stocks of raw materials varied wildly – several suggested that they were substantial – while the ability of the Allies to strangle the German economy by means of blockade was undermined by Hitler's conquest of new territories and trade with the Reich's *de facto* ally, Soviet Russia. Yet if Allied leaders engaged in a certain amount of 'mysticism and hope' over the potentials of economic warfare, it is important to remember how few options appeared open to the British and the French in the winter of 1939.[2] With the British opposed to expeditions to the Balkans, the French averse to any action that might invite German reprisals and both countries determined to avoid massacres on the Western Front, the blockade represented a relatively safe arrow in an otherwise bereft quiver. Now, with the growing desire to 'do something' and declining faith in the 'long war' strategy, the Allies began to look northwards.

Germany's dependence on Swedish iron ore, the primary ingredient in the manufacture of steel, had long been recognised in London and Paris. Nine of the eleven million tons of ore imported by Germany each year came from Swedish mines near the northern town of Gällivare, estimated the British Industrial Intelligence Committee in August 1939. Three months later, the senior official at the Ministry of Economic Warfare, Desmond Morton, claimed that the figures were even greater. The conclusion, he argued, was obvious: 'barring unpredictable developments', the halting of Swedish iron ore exports to Germany had the capacity to 'end the war in a few months'.[3] Given such fantastical claims, it is not surprising that some began to refer to Morton's department as the 'Ministry of Wishful Thinking'.[4] But the civil servant had a powerful backer. The report, which Morton submitted on 27 November 1939, had

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been compiled at the request of the recently reappointed First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill.

Given the consequences for British domestic politics, most accounts of the Allied intervention in Scandinavia have focussed on the role of Churchill to the exclusion of other factors.[5] Yet the French dimension was just as, if not more, important. By the turn of the year 1940, most French war leaders had lost faith in the notion that 'time was an ally' and were seeking ways to shorten the war. 'We must use our maritime power to precipitate rather than to suffer events,' wrote the French naval Commander-in-Chief, Admiral François Darlan, in January 1940, while as early as November 1939, Daladier described it as 'puerile' to expect a collapse of the German economy from the blockade as currently constituted.[6] In particular, the French Prime Minister was impressed by a report from the German emigré industrialist and former Nazi, Fritz Thyssen, which argued that the side that controlled the Swedish ore fields would win the war.[7]

The Finnish war provided Daladier with the chance to act. French public opinion was outraged by Stalin's wanton aggression; an act, indeed, that united the left with the right for the first time in twenty years. Voices that had remained silent over Poland called for action to save the Finns. The 'civilised world would be abandoning its duty to itself and would ruin all faith in a noble ideal if it allowed heroic Finland to be crushed', opined *Le Temps* in December 1939. 'Finland should be saved at any price,' declared the former leader of the Popular Front, Léon Blum, while, throughout January and February 1940, a growing number of French deputies called for the despatch of military aid and even an expeditionary force to Finland.[8]

Daladier was in no position to resist these calls. Already blamed for French military inertia, he welcomed the prospect of Allied intervention in Finland as an opportunity to shift the focus of the war far away from French frontiers, to disrupt the Swedish ore trade and placate his critics. At a meeting of the Supreme War Council on 5 February 1940, therefore, Daladier placed before the British two operational alternatives: the Allies could mount an expedition to liberate the Finnish peninsula of Petsamo – the hope being that this would provoke the Germans to respond and, thus, allow the Allies to commence operations in Norway and Sweden – or they could

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land a force at the Norwegian port of Narvik which would occupy the Swedish ore fields *en route* to Finland.

Churchill had been urging his colleagues in the War Cabinet to halt the German iron ore traffic since the third week of the war. His solution was to lay mines in Norwegian territorial waters – thus forcing German transports onto the open sea, where they could be sunk by the Royal Navy – or, as Daladier now suggested, to despatch an expeditionary force to Sweden to occupy the ore fields. The problem was that he had been repeatedly stymied by his colleagues. Although the pugnacious First Lord enjoyed the support of the military planners, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Ministry of Economic Warfare, neither Chamberlain nor the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, was prepared to authorise action that would violate Scandinavian neutrality.

To a certain extent, this was understandable. Britain and France had gone to war, at least nominally, in defence of the rights of small nations and it would undermine the moral plane on which they stood – the salient topographical feature as far as the United States was concerned – to extend the conflict to a new region in defiance of international law. Between December 1939 and February 1940, the Allies tried their best to persuade the Swedish and Norwegian Governments to allow the passage of an Anglo-French force to Finland (which would also occupy the ore fields) and, simultaneously, to reduce the amount of iron ore they shipped to Germany. But the replies from Oslo and Stockholm were consistent and unbending: the Norwegians would do nothing that would risk German retaliation, while the Swedes – for similar reasons – refused to reduce the quantity of ore they sent to Germany.

For the more bellicose Anglo-French war leaders, this obstinacy was infuriating. The Germans were themselves abusing Scandinavian neutrality by sinking British and neutral shipping within Norwegian territorial waters and it was absurd, as Churchill argued in a memorandum for the War Cabinet, for the Allies to be punctilious in their respect for international law when their opponents were gaining advantages 'by tearing up all laws'.[9] On 20 January 1940, during a radio broadcast, he admonished those neutral nations who 'bow humbly and in fear to German threats of violence, comforting themselves meanwhile with the thought that the Allies will win . . . Each one hopes that if he feeds

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the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last.'[10] This produced howls of protest from the Scandinavians, Swiss, Belgians and Dutch, and Halifax – who, after all, was the one who had to 'be in daily touch with these tiresome neutrals' – sent his colleague a carefully worded rebuke.[11] Events, however, were to support Churchill's accusations.

On 14 February 1940, the German tanker *Altmark* was spotted off the coast of Norway. Believing the vessel to be carrying around 300 captured British merchant seamen, the Admiralty ordered a destroyer flotilla, led by Captain Philip Vian in HMS *Cossack*, to sail forth and intercept. On the afternoon of 16 February, Vian's force cornered the *Altmark*, forcing her to take refuge in Jøssingfjord. There, the *Cossack* followed but was impeded by two Norwegian torpedo boats whose officers insisted that they had already searched the tanker and that there were no prisoners abroad. As it transpired, they had neglected the hold, where the prisoners were kept.* Negotiations with the Norwegians were useless, Vian signalled to the Admiralty at 4.32 p.m., adding that one of the gunboats 'has a torpedo tube trained on me'.[12] At this fraught moment, Churchill, who had been following the hunt throughout the day, took charge. He telephoned Halifax and asked his permission to defy the Norwegians and free the prisoners by force. The Foreign Secretary asked for some time but Churchill told him that the ships were currently facing each other and that 'at any moment there might be trouble'.[13] After ten minutes' reflection, Halifax gave his blessing and Churchill signalled to Vian, ordering him to 'board *Altmark*, liberate the prisoners and take possession of the ship pending further instructions'.[14] At this, Vian sailed the *Cossack* into the fjord and, after some further fruitless negotiations with the Norwegians, set course for the prize. Realising he was about to be overwhelmed, the German captain tried to ram his assailant but the *Cossack*'s helmsman was too fast and the *Altmark* ran aground. In scenes reminiscent of the age of sail, British bluejackets leapt on board the tanker and, after

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* This bizarre omission takes on a more sinister complexion when one considers the noise the prisoners made whenever the Norwegian vessels were within earshot – a distress signal several Norwegian sailors admitted to having heard.

some fierce hand-to-hand fighting, in which six of the *Altmark*'s crew were killed, succeeded in freeing all 299 prisoners.

The *Altmark* incident provided a much-needed fillip to British prestige. Mussolini's son-in-law-cum-Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, complimented the British Ambassador on an action 'reminiscent of the boldest traditions of the Navy at the time of Francis Drake', while the cry 'The Navy's here!' – the phrase by which the prisoners learnt that they were being rescued – went round the world.[15] Yet though Norwegian neutrality had been shown to be woefully ineffectual, fear of Scandinavian opposition continued to exercise a hold on Allied plans.

The British had turned down the French proposal to invade the Finnish peninsula of Petsamo. Offering little prospect of curbing the Swedish ore traffic, it also risked war with the Soviet Union, 'a military gamble without any political prize', according to General Ironside or, to paraphrase Jacques Mordal, an opportunity to do something *extremely* stupid.[16] As compensation, the French demanded that the British enact the Narvik project, by which the Allies would despatch an expeditionary force to the north Norwegian port that would then proceed to Finland, occupying the Swedish ore fields on the way. Temperamentally opposed to any action that might start a 'shooting war', Chamberlain agreed on the condition that the Allies first acquire the assent of the Scandinavians. This, predictably, was not forthcoming. But Daladier refused to let the matter drop. Facing a barrage of criticism over his failure to help the Finns, the French Premier allowed news of the 'impending' operation to spread all over Paris – and, inevitably, further afield – before accepting the Finnish Ambassador's request for 50,000 Allied troops, despite knowing so large a deployment to be impossible. That same day, 1 March 1940, Daladier instructed the French Ambassador in London to impress upon the War Cabinet that his Government would fall unless an Allied expeditionary force was despatched forthwith, adding that his successor would likely feel compelled to pursue 'another policy' – a none too subtle allusion to a compromise peace.[17]

The British were incensed by such obvious blackmail but it had the desired effect. French pressure, alongside the wish 'to divert from ourselves the odium of having allowed Finland to be crushed', combined to give the go-ahead for a military operation that not

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only risked adding Russia to the list of Allied enemies but could be thwarted by cutting the power to the electric railway that ran between Narvik and Gällivare, the only viable route.[18] Only the capitulation of the Finns, on 13 March, saved the Allies from this 'hare-brained' scheme.[19]

Still, the collapse of Finland was a severe blow to Allied prestige. Neutral opinion, most crucially in the United States, interpreted Stalin's victory as a reverse for the democracies, while the German press crowed about 'an absolutely unique political defeat for London and Paris'.[20] The French Government blamed the British. 'All the influential circles . . . took the view that the fault lay with Great Britain for not having acted at an earlier stage,' explained a French member of the Armaments Commission, while Daladier spoke of a 'loss of faith in his ability ever to induce the British Government to take prompt action or a strong line.'[21]

The British refused to accept these strictures. Britain had despatched, or prepared for despatch, as much aid to Finland as France, noted Sir Alexander Cadogan, while the Under-Secretary of State, 'Rab' Butler, argued that the proposed venture would have ranked alongside the Duke of Buckingham's disastrous attempt to capture the Île de Ré in 1627.[22] They were, however, worried about the effect on French morale and the ramifications for French domestic politics. They were right to be. On 19 March 1940, 300 French deputies abstained in a vote of confidence in Daladier's leadership and the Bull of Vaucluse, as he had predicted, was forced to resign. His successor was the Finance Minister, Paul Reynaud.

No less than Churchill, two months later, Reynaud believed he was the man destined to save his country. Intelligent, dynamic and ambitious, this diminutive politician, whose narrow eyes and natural smirk gave him 'the countenance of a Samurai educated at Cambridge', had distinguished himself during the 1930s as an opponent of Munich and a rare champion of the doctrines of mobile, mechanised warfare, as advocated by Colonel Charles de Gaulle.[23] Churchill rejoiced at his friend's elevation to the premiership but whilst the new head of the French Government may have appeared more resolute than his predecessor, his political position was incomparably weaker, with a majority of just one in the Chamber of Deputies and the smouldering

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resentment of Daladier, who refused to relinquish his post of Minister of Defence, to contend with.

Reynaud's answer to his political vulnerability was to demonstrate action on the war front. Writing to his British colleagues ahead of the meeting of the Supreme War Council on 28 March, the new Premier exhorted his allies to learn the lessons of their recent defeat and prosecute the war with an energy and determination that had, thus far, been lacking. Understandably, the British did not take well to this scolding. Chamberlain 'went through the ceiling', recorded General Ironside. 'He was horrified when he saw the paper. It gave him the impression of a man who was rattled and who wished to make a splash to justify his position.'[24] When the two men met in London on 28 March, Chamberlain delivered a ninety-minute statement, justifying his handling of the war and demolishing Reynaud's plans with such devastating logic that the French Premier could merely nod along in agreement.[25] The Allies did, however, reach two important decisions: Reynaud consented to Churchill's plan to disrupt German river traffic by dropping over 2,000 fluvial mines into the headwaters of the Rhine (Operation Royal Marine), while Chamberlain agreed to strike at Germany's iron ore supplies by mining Norwegian waters south of Narvik (Operation Wilfred). The meeting ended with the two Prime Ministers signing a joint declaration promising not to conclude a separate peace and pledging to continue to co-operate 'in all spheres' after the war was won.[26]

The mining of the Rhine and the Norwegian coast was due to take place, in tandem, on 4–5 April 1940. On 31 March, however, the French War Committee refused to implement the Rhine project. The obstacle, the British learnt, was Daladier, who feared reprisals against France's aircraft factories and was determined 'to put every possible spoke in Reynaud's wheel'.[27] Daladier 'desires the victory of France but he desires my defeat even more', wailed Reynaud to his liaison with British General Headquarters, André Maurois.[28] The British were dismayed. The operations had been approved concurrently not only to demonstrate the Allies' determination to prosecute the war but also to deflect attention from their violation of Norwegian neutral rights.[29] When Chamberlain saw a clearly

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embarrassed French Ambassador, he was firm: 'No mines – no Narvik.'[30] But this was, ultimately, a bluff. Having tried and failed to persuade the French to change their minds about Royal Marine, the British decided that it would be a case of cutting their nose to spite their face if they cancelled Wilfred. Notably it was concerns about their French ally, rather than the arguments of Churchill, who had been agitating to mine Norwegian waters for months, that ultimately persuaded the War Cabinet. As Lord Halifax told his colleagues, it was the belief of the British Ambassador that Reynaud would fall if the British refused to proceed with the Norwegian operation. To base such a decision on 'French internal politics' was, he admitted, unorthodox but 'the bad effects which would follow a disturbance in the French political field, coupled with the general psychological position, constituted perhaps the most weighty factors in a very difficult situation.'[31]

During the previous three months, the Swedes and Norwegians had responded to Allied pressure – over ore, over Finland and over German acts of war within their jurisdiction – by restating their intention to maintain their neutrality under all circumstances.* Following the *Altmark* incident and the fall of Finland, however, this line had worn distinctly thin. 'Norway and Sweden are contemptible and lose all claim to be representatives of that higher international morality which they have so long preached at us,' recorded the First Secretary of the British Embassy in Paris, Oliver Harvey, on 14 March.[32] Rab Butler agreed. Although speaking specifically of the Swedes and with unintended irony, given his own previous support for appeasement, his remarks to Chamberlain's Assistant Private Secretary, Jock Colville, on 6 April 1940 are representative of the state of Allied frustration with both Scandinavian countries:

* The Swedish diplomat Gunnar Hägglöf was not alone in considering the British attitude towards the Scandinavian dilemma ignorant and callous: 'I have the feeling that England turns its back on Northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia . . . If there really are English hearts beating for Norway, I guess the reason is the salmon fishing.'

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> The key to their attitude is a determination to avoid fire and the sword at all costs. They would rather sell their souls and their country to the Nazis (provided the sale were effected without bloodshed) than stand up boldly for their beliefs and independence. They would invite Germany to occupy their country peaceably rather than risk an armed invasion.[33]

On the morning of 8 April 1940, four British mine-laying destroyers laid 234 Mark-17 mines in Vestfjord off Narvik. Responding to the news, the Secretary-General of the Swedish Foreign Office (who happened to be in London negotiating an Anglo-Swedish war trade agreement) told Sir Alexander Cadogan that the British had done the 'silliest thing in history'.[34] Yet the mine-laying came too late to have an effect. Well aware of Allied intentions, thanks to French Government leaks, Hitler had ordered his military planners to prepare for the invasion of Norway (Operation Weserübung) as early as 21 January. On the morning of 9 April, a mere twenty-four hours after the British mine-laying operation, German troops landed and captured the Norwegian ports of Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim, Narvik and Oslo, while also overrunning neutral Denmark. Belatedly the Allies realised that their months of 'arglebargling', in General Ironside's phrase, had allowed Hitler to steal a march on them.[35] The Germans had been 'very clever', the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, told Jock Colville, 'and we were ninnies, we were ninnies!'[36]

The ill-fated Anglo-French attempt to expel the Germans from Norway put a further strain on the alliance. Undermanned and grossly underequipped – with a dearth of maps, radios, skis, snow boots and, most crucially, air support – the British, commented one French officer, seemed to have conceived the campaign along 'the lines of a punitive expedition against the Zulus'.[37] Although the Royal Navy succeeded in sinking ten German destroyers in Narvik Fjord (for the loss of two British destroyers), the Allied expeditionary force did not take the town until 28 May. In the meantime, the War Cabinet had decided to shift the focus of operations towards the capture of Trondheim. Between 14 and 21 April, 3,500 British troops and 2,500 French *chasseurs alpins* landed at Namsos, some 130

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miles north of the city, while 1,000 British soldiers disembarked at Åndalsnes, 60 miles to the south of the ancient capital. The ensuing attempted pincer movement was a shambles. Bereft of transport, heavy guns and air cover, the uncamouflaged soldiers, floundering through 4 feet of snow, proved easy targets for the Luftwaffe. 'The British troops', wrote Lieutenant-General Adrian Carton de Wiart, 'had been issued with fur coats, special boots and socks . . . but if they wore all these things they were scarcely able to move at all and looked like paralysed bears.'[38] Namsos and Åndalsnes were reduced to splinters. German destroyers sailed up Trondheim Fjord and shelled the expeditionary force from the sea. 'We had rifles, a few Bren guns and some two-inch smoke bombs but none of them were either comforting or effective against a destroyer,' recalled de Wiart.[39] By 27 April, the War Cabinet had decided to cut its losses. Southern Norway would be evacuated but without informing the Norwegians, who were still resisting gallantly. It was a shameful end to a military fiasco.

The British, who had been responsible for the ill-considered and – thanks to the indecisiveness of Churchill and the War Cabinet – perpetually mutating campaign, did not blame the French. Although Reynaud's clumsy attempts to influence strategy caused the British Ambassador to Paris to refer to the French Premier's 'pocket Napoleon proclivities', Norway, it was widely recognised, was a British debacle.[40] Reynaud complained about 'old men who do not know how to take a risk', while Daladier accused the British of pushing France into war and then failing to prosecute it with the necessary vigour.[41] When the War Cabinet decided to evacuate southern Norway without consulting Paris, the French went 'up in smoke'.[42] 'One must think big or stop making war, one must act fast or lose the war,' wrote Reynaud to Chamberlain.[43]

It was, however, in the domestic political sphere that the most important consequences of the Norwegian campaign occurred. Buoyed by ludicrously optimistic press reports, the British public had expected a victory. Instead, they learnt of a humiliating defeat one month after the Prime Minister had assured them that Hitler had 'missed the bus'.[44] Although much of the blame belonged to Churchill, the broad mass of opprobrium fell on Chamberlain.

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Eight months of frustration at Allied military inertia was distilled into the two-day parliamentary debate on the Government's handling of the Scandinavian crisis. Norway was a 'shocking story of ineptitude' that 'ought never to have been allowed to happen', declared Sir Roger Keyes, resplendent in the uniform of an admiral of the fleet.[45] The Prime Minister had met Hitler in both peace and war and 'always been worsted', jeered Lloyd George.[46] The former Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, quoted Oliver Cromwell: '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!'[47] On the evening of 8 May, eighty-one Government MPs voted against or abstained on a motion of confidence. Chamberlain was forced to resign and Churchill, in one of the climacterics of the Second World War, became Prime Minister.

In France, Reynaud determined to sack General Gamelin. Appalled by the insouciance with which the French Commander-in-Chief had reacted to the news that the Germans were invading Norway ('You are wrong to get agitated . . . War consists of the unexpected'), the French Prime Minister held this 'nerveless philosopher' culpable for his failure to anticipate or prepare for such an eventuality.[48] At the Cabinet meeting on the morning of 9 May, Reynaud read a long indictment of Gamelin's handling of the Norwegian campaign to his colleagues. When Daladier, still Minister of Defence, refused to dismiss the General, Reynaud announced that he had anticipated this and had already placed his resignation before the President of the Republic. He intended to form a new government that would resolve the question of the high command. Gamelin's fate appeared sealed.

Seven hours later, however, German army groups received the code word 'Danzig'. Soon French and Belgian soldiers stationed along the Western Front heard an ominous murmur as the German vanguard tested its engines and moved towards its jumping-off points. At 4.20 a.m. on 10 May 1940, Hitler's war machine smashed into Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg, while Generaloberst Gerd von Rundstedt's forty-five divisions (including seven panzer divisions) made their way through the supposedly impenetrable forest of the Ardennes. The Battle of France had begun.

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III
The Fall

What hell it is having to fight battles with Allies!

Oliver Harvey, 6 June 1940[1]

The Allies had expected the Germans to repeat their strategy of August 1914, the famous Schlieffen Plan, and attack France through Belgium. This was not unwelcome. Not only did it offer the chance to halt the enemy away from French soil, it would also add twenty-two Belgian divisions to the Allied side – double the size of the British Expeditionary Force – and, potentially, should Hitler extend his front to the north, nine Dutch divisions. The problem was that, in October 1936, the Belgians had reverted to a policy of strict neutrality, while the Dutch continued to cling to that historic neutrality which, so they believed, had saved them from the horrors of the First World War. The British and the French were, therefore, unable to prepare for the German assault as they expected it to unfold.

Considering Hitler's growing record of international brigandage, the Allies expected the Belgians and the Dutch to realise the naïveté of their positions and make the appropriate corrections before it was too late. Put simply, this meant inviting the British and French armies to take up defensive positions within their territory *before* the German invasion began. In February and May 1939, the British and French invited the Belgians for staff talks.* The Belgians refused. After the German attack on Poland in September 1939, the Allies renewed their request and were again rebuffed. The British were

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* Sharing a frontier with Germany *and* France, as well as being the route through which the Kaiser's armies had marched in 1914, Belgium loomed considerably larger in Allied deliberations than the Netherlands.

disquieted but composed. If the Belgian attitude did not change and the Germans invaded, General Ironside told the War Cabinet, then it would be necessary to 'harden our hearts' and resist the appeal for assistance that would inevitably follow.[2] The French were less calm. Having accused the Belgians of 'playing entirely into German hands', the normally unflappable General Gamelin decried these 'villains . . . [these] unthinking, short-sighted mediocrities'.[3]

The chief villain was the King of the Belgians, Leopold III. A constitutional monarch with considerable power – most notably in his command of the Belgian armed forces – and undemocratic tendencies, this dashing sovereign had fought with bravery during the First World War as the youngest soldier in the Belgian Army. In October 1936, however, it was the 34-year-old monarch who took the lead in renouncing the 1920 'Franco-Belgian defensive military agreement, in the case of unprovoked German aggression' and establishing what he euphemistically called a 'policy of independence'.[4] Over the next four years, the maintenance of Belgian neutrality, although supported by the Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, and a majority of parliamentarians, became so identified with the views of the sovereign that it became known as 'the King's policy'. 'I ask each one of you to impose upon himself . . . the rigorous discipline that strict neutrality commands,' Leopold adjured his subjects upon the outbreak of war.[5] In February 1938, as Hitler was preparing to invade Austria, he ordered the fortification of the Franco-Belgian frontier, while, in October 1939, he complained to King George VI that the British Government was asking him to behave dishonourably by requesting staff conversations, since these would entail going 'behind the back of the Germans who had equally guaranteed Belgian neutrality'.[6]

To be sure, Leopold's position was an unenviable one. As the American Ambassador to Brussels put it to Churchill in April 1939, Belgium was balancing on 'the rim of a volcano', terrified of provoking a German invasion by co-operating with the Allies but aware of the need for collaboration if an attack was to be repelled.[7]* Yet the way in which Leopold continued to believe that Hitler would

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* Churchill expressed irritation with Belgium but confidence in France: 'We are entitled to know where Belgium stands . . . After all we did in the last war and

respect Belgian neutrality, despite the multiple alarms, despite the accruing intelligence to the contrary and despite increasing calls from parliamentarians and the Belgian press for co-ordination with the Allies, savours of a delusional obstinacy.

The first major scare came in mid-November 1939. Following Chamberlain's rejection of his 'peace offer', on 12 October, Hitler had ordered his generals to prepare for an assault in the west, *Fall Gelb* (Case Yellow), to commence exactly one month later. As German troops began to mass along the frontier and the Luftwaffe flew reconnaissance flights over the Low Countries, politicians in Brussels and The Hague began to panic. On 7 November, the Queen of the Netherlands and the King of the Belgians appealed to the belligerents to accept their offer of mediation. The following day, Spaak told the British Ambassador that he expected his Government to allow the Allies to cross their territory if the Germans attacked Holland but not Belgium. When Sir Robert Clive asked about staff talks, the Foreign Minister replied that he thought these would be established imminently, although 'there was still opposition from a certain quarter' (i.e. the King).[8] The British were relieved. 'I should fancy that even the King of the Belgians begins to realise by now that the policy of the ostrich doesn't pay . . . and that he is likely to get the kick in the backside that is due to him,' noted the Chief of Staff of the British Expeditionary Force.[9] But Lieutenant-General Pownall had spoken too soon. After initially delaying the attack, scheduled for 12 November, for three days, due to bad weather, Hitler was subsequently forced to postpone *Fall Gelb* a further twenty-nine times. As the danger receded, the Belgians slipped back into neutrality. The affair was to have important military implications, however, since it was the threat to Holland that persuaded Gamelin to extend his plans for a thrust into the Low Countries, with the left flank of the Franco-British armies now marching beyond the Scheldt estuary to a line running southwards along the River Dyle – 'Plan D'.

The next scare had even more important consequences. On 10

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the English dead that were left on Flanders fields . . . We do not need Belgium anyway. The French Maginot Line will do the necessary.'

January 1940, a German reconnaissance plane lost its way in fog and crash-landed at Mechelen-sur-Meuse, on the Belgian–Dutch border. The passenger, Major Helmuth Reinberger, was carrying plans relating to *Fall Gelb*, then scheduled for 17 January. Naturally, once he had clambered out of his now wingless Messerschmitt and discovered where he was, Reinberger tried to burn the documents but his lighter failed. Fortunately for him, an obliging farmhand provided him with a match. Less fortunately, some Belgian border guards arrived and, noticing a small bonfire behind a thicket near a crashed German aeroplane, arrested Reinberger and confiscated the papers. When, thanks to some quite staggering incompetence, Reinberger was able to make a second attempt at destroying the documents – grabbing them from the desk of his interrogator and shoving them into the stove, only to have them rescued again – the Belgians were left in no doubt as to their value.

The charred but legible papers revealed the essence of *Fall Gelb*: an attack along a broad front, through Belgium, Holland and northern France, with the decisive thrust coming through Belgium. Still, the Belgians tried to hedge their bets. Rather than inviting the Allies immediately into his country, Leopold III contented himself by having his military adviser hand the French and British Military Attachés a two-page summary of the captured documents. When the French asked to see the originals, the Belgians refused. At 1.20 on the morning of 14 January, however, General Gamelin was woken by the Belgian Military Attaché to be told that the attack was expected that day. Convinced that the Belgians were about to invite the Allies in, Gamelin ordered a general advance. Throughout the night of 14–15 January and during the following day the BEF and a French army, under General Billotte, waited along the Belgian border in freezing conditions. At various points, acting on orders from the Belgian Chief of Staff, General Van den Bergen, Belgian soldiers removed the frontier barriers and, in one place, a French cavalry column crossed into Belgian territory. But the invitation from Brussels never came. Van den Bergen had acted without orders, while the King had temporised until the danger had passed. On 16 January, the Belgian Government formally declined the Allied request to enter their country.

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The 'Mechelen incident' increased mistrust and resentment on all sides. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Ironside, complained of trying to help a country that 'is so terrified of infringing its own neutrality that it will make no preparations', while Daladier informed the Belgian Ambassador that henceforth France would reserve 'an entire freedom to form their own appreciations of the situation'.[10] But it was in Germany that the most important ramifications occurred. With the plans having fallen into enemy hands, *Fall Gelb* was substantially revised, with the majority of the German panzers transferred to Generaloberst Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A and the focus of the attack shifted from central Belgium to a thrust through the Ardennes Forest in the direction of Sedan. On the morning of 10 May 1940, the guns opened.*

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The onset of the German *Blitzkrieg* in the west put an intolerable strain on the Anglo-French alliance, as both politicians and military commanders floundered to influence events from which they were increasingly disconnected. It was early on the morning of 15 May 1940 – five days after the battle had begun – that Churchill was woken by a call from Reynaud, who informed him, in near-hysterical tones, that France had been defeated: 'We are beaten; we have lost the battle.'[11] Bewildered, Churchill replied that it surely could not have happened so soon but Reynaud was insistent: while the cream of the French Army and the BEF had charged headlong into Belgium – Gamelin's 'Plan D' – the spearhead of the German invasion had appeared further south. The previous day, the Germans had pierced the French front at Sedan and the various counterattacks had failed. A gaping hole had appeared in the French line and the road to Paris was open.

* That the French High Command failed to countenance the idea that the Germans would change their plans following the Mechelen incident, while ignoring the steady stream of intelligence pointing towards the Ardennes, remains the gravest indictment of General Gamelin.

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Upon receiving this devastating news, Churchill decided to fly to Paris – the first of five visits the new Prime Minister would make to France during the battle. As he would admit in his memoirs, he was slow to grasp the extremity of the crisis: he had, after all, experienced the First World War, where multiple breakthroughs had occurred before the front had stabilised, while the revolution in mechanised, armoured warfare remained an alien concept to him. Arriving in Paris shortly after 4 p.m. on Thursday 16 May, however, the British party – which included the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir John Dill, as well as General Ismay – soon realised that the situation was significantly worse than they had imagined. The Parisians 'seemed listless and resigned', recalled Ismay, while at the Quai d'Orsay officials were pushing wheelbarrows full of secret documents towards a constellation of bonfires, disfiguring the lawn.[12]

At Reynaud's request, Gamelin provided the British with a summary of the battle, his 'ladylike hand' moving over the map, which showed an ominous bulge around Sedan.[13] '*Où est la masse de manœuvre?*' ('Where is the strategic reserve?') enquired Churchill. '*Aucune*' ('There is none'), replied the Commander-in-Chief.[14] It was, Churchill later recalled, among the greatest shocks of his life. According to the French minutes of the meeting, however, the Prime Minister still failed to appreciate the extent of the disaster that was unfolding: 'Mr Churchill hesitated to take the threat presented by the tanks so seriously. So long as they were not supported by strong infantry units, they were only a limited force; so many little flags stuck on the map.'[15] Reynaud disagreed. 'The hard point of the German lance has gone through our troops as through a sand-hill,' the French Prime Minister declared. Then, pointing at the large bulge on the map (which in Churchill's idiomatic French was translated simply as 'boolge'), he stated his profound conviction that upon the outcome of this battle depended 'not only the fate of France but also that of the British Empire'.[16]

Churchill did not agree. Britain's fate, he had already decided, did not depend on France. Yet he did everything he could to rally the French: urging Gamelin to counterattack and disputing the decision to abandon Louvain. Later that night, in Reynaud's flat, 'crowned

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like a volcano by the smoke of his cigars', he bludgeoned his French counterpart with Britain's determination to continue the war, no matter what: 'We will starve Germany out. We will destroy her towns. We will burn her crops and her forests.' He was convinced that the United States would enter the conflict and even if France was vanquished and Britain razed to the ground, the British Government would continue the struggle from Canada.[17]

The meeting at the Quai d'Orsay brought to the fore the issue that was to cause more controversy during the Battle of France than any other. Responding to Churchill's criticisms of his decision to retreat, Gamelin pointed to the need to check the German advance towards Paris. For this, the British must send more fighter squadrons. Churchill replied that there were only thirty-nine squadrons not engaged in the battle and that these were essential to the defence of the British Isles. Moreover, fighters were no use against tanks, which should be dealt with by the artillery. Nevertheless, the War Cabinet had, that morning, agreed to send an additional four squadrons to France and, following the meeting at the Quai d'Orsay, Churchill obtained their consent for the despatch of a further six.

This was no small act of courage. The previous day, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, head of Fighter Command, had vigorously opposed the sending of one 'single additional Hurricane' to France, pointing out that if Britain continued to reinforce losses at the current rate then there would not be 'a single Hurricane left in France or in this country'.[18] Yet the decision to throw an additional ten fighter squadrons into the cauldron, though a recognised risk, could be defended on both strategic and political grounds. After a mere six days of fighting, few could believe that the military position was irreparable, while Britain's paltry contribution to the battle – 390,000 soldiers compared to some 600,000 Belgians and over two million French – seemed to justify a further effort.* Before long, however, Churchill's unswerving commitment to the

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* Contrary to what was believed at the time, the German and Allied forces were, in fact, evenly matched, with the Allies enjoying a superiority in tanks and armoured vehicles.

Anglo-French alliance would lead him into decisions that were militarily unsound and, potentially, disastrous.

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On 20 May, the German spearheads reached the Channel. By the following day the British Expeditionary Force, along with a considerable body of French troops and the remains of the Belgian army, was encircled. Two British infantry regiments and a tank brigade counterattacked south of Arras but lacked the strength to maintain their momentum or the ground they had gained. On 25 May, the Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, Lord Gort, and Churchill independently decided that the only available course was for the BEF to fight its way to the coast prior to re-embarkation. Three days later, with the evacuation from Dunkirk already underway, Leopold III surrendered. The French, almost relieved to have found a scapegoat, cried betrayal. 'Without warning . . . without a word for the British and French soldiers who, at his agonised appeal, had come to the rescue of his country, King Leopold III of Belgium threw down his arms,' declared a furious Reynaud, in a broadcast to the French people.[19] Belgian refugees were thrown out of French houses while, in Britain, Lloyd George claimed that it would be impossible to find a 'blacker and more squalid example of perfidy and poltroonery than that perpetuated by the King of the Belgians'.[20] Yet it was not Leopold but Reynaud who was responsible for what turned out to be the gravest threat to the independence of France. On 18 May, in an effort to boost morale and replace the lethargic Gamelin, he recalled Maréchal Philippe Pétain, the octogenarian hero of Verdun, and General Maxime Weygand, Chief of Staff to General Foch in the last war, to become Deputy President of the Council and French Commander-in-Chief respectively. It was a decision that was to prove fatal to the Third Republic.

The rout of the British and French armies led to increased suspicions and mutual recrimination. When Gort decided, on his own initiative, to abandon the Arras garrison and withdraw 15 miles to the north-east during the night of 23–24 May, Weygand accused him of compromising his plan for a co-ordinated counterattack, even

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though the 'new French Army' designated for the purpose consisted of a mere five divisions spread over 65 miles. In Paris, the American writer Clare Boothe Luce watched 'the hatred of the French for the English growing by giant leaps and bounds', while Reynaud charged the British with always heading for harbours in an emergency.[21]

The evacuation from Dunkirk brought relations between the Allies to their nadir. French soldiers, finding that the British had blocked key sections of the roads so as to facilitate their march to the sea, talked of 'training their guns on them and shooting'.[22] Priority was given to the BEF – 'every Frenchman embarked is at [the] cost of one Englishman,' explained Gort to Dill – and when French soldiers attempted to board the boats, they were (at least initially) turned away, occasionally at gunpoint.[23] When, at the meeting of the Supreme War Council held in the Ministère de la Guerre on 31 May, Weygand accused the British of abandoning the French, his voice, recalled Louis Spears, was 'high, querulous and aggressive'. For a moment it looked as if Churchill would answer him in kind. But the Prime Minister's expression then changed and, with tears in his eyes, he gave the indisputable reply: 'We are companions in misfortune; there is nothing to be gained from recrimination over our common miseries.'[24]

There were many reasons, Churchill went on to explain, why only 15,000 French soldiers had so far been evacuated out of a total of some 165,000. These included the fact that until 29 May, the French had not received orders to embark. But henceforth the evacuation would continue on an equal basis, '*bras dessus, bras dessous* [arm in arm]'.[25] Moreover, Churchill promised that three British divisions would hold the perimeter, to allow the remaining French forces to escape. This, as even the Francophile Spears thought, was excessive. As anyone, except perhaps the Prime Minister, could see, the Battle of France was lost, the men around Reynaud actively defeatist. Already on 24 May, seven days after he had taken over as Commander-in-Chief, Weygand told Paul Baudouin that he saw no hope of redeeming the situation and wished merely to save 'the honour of the French flag'. When Reynaud's Chef de Cabinet – a slippery technocrat who admired Mussolini and had opposed the declaration of war on

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Germany – replied that France must be freed from her present ordeal so as 'to rise again' in the future, the General had said that he shared these sentiments.[26]

Fortunately for the British, Churchill's ill-judged magnanimity was not acted upon. Although the Prime Minister's decree was communicated to Admiral Abrial, responsible for the defence of Dunkirk, the commander of the BEF's remaining divisions, Major-General Harold Alexander, received orders from the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, to continue to evacuate his force on a fifty-fifty basis with the French. In the end, it was the French who gallantly held the Dunkirk perimeter between 2 and 4 June, though the rancour this caused was mitigated by the evacuation of 98,000 French troops during this period. Almost all of these would later choose to be repatriated.

The Supreme War Council also considered the perennial problem of Italy. There was little doubt as to where Mussolini's sympathies lay. Since 1938, the Duce had aligned himself with Hitler's determination to redraw the map of Europe and, in May 1939, had entered a formal military alliance with Nazi Germany, the so-called 'Pact of Steel'. The Italian dictator promised to support the Führer over Poland, while Hitler agreed that Mediterranean policy would be in the hands of the Italians. On 25 August, however, Mussolini had been forced to admit to his German ally that Italy was in no fit state to go to war and must remain, at least officially, non-belligerent until 1940. The Allies tried to exploit this reality. Encouraged by the obvious antipathy towards the Nazis of influential sections of Italian society, including Mussolini's son-in-law and Foreign Minister Count Ciano, the strategy the British and French deemed most sensible was to show the Italians that 'neutrality pays' – in other words appeasement.[27]* In January 1940, the British offered to purchase £25 million

* This policy horrified those who had opposed previous attempts to appease Mussolini. 'I do not feel that these rather feeble blandishments are the slightest good,' wrote Lord Cranborne, who had resigned as a Foreign Office Minister, in February 1938, upon this very issue. 'On the contrary, they only encourage Italian arrogance.' His correspondent, the Chairman of the Conservative Foreign Affairs Committee, Paul Emrys-Evans, agreed. 'I have a feeling that a completely false

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worth of Italian arms and horticultural produce, while the French did everything they could to assure Mussolini that Italy would benefit from Allied victory. Yet the Duce could not be prised from the Axis. Although he raged intermittently at German arrogance, he yearned for the spoils of war and felt certain that Hitler would triumph. He therefore spurned the British and French offers and when Churchill, upon becoming Prime Minister, sent him a cordial letter, replied by reaffirming his loyalty to the Führer.

By this stage, the British retained little hope of keeping Italy out of the war. The success of Hitler's Norwegian venture had emboldened the Duce and there was a vicious anti-Allied propaganda campaign in the Italian press. Later, when musing on paths not taken, Lord Halifax wondered whether it might not have been possible to bribe Mussolini but concluded ultimately that the Allies could never have 'offered him enough to tempt him' and Sir Percy Loraine, the British Ambassador to Rome, always disliked the idea of slipping Ciano '£50,000 on the golf links'.[28]

As the Wehrmacht cut through France, however, the French became increasingly desperate. On 29 May, in a last-ditch effort to keep Italy out of the war, Daladier asked the British Government's permission to make certain specific territorial offers to Mussolini. This was a sensitive subject. Two days earlier, when Reynaud first raised the topic in London, he had found a sympathetic listener in Halifax, who, like him, wanted to use the Duce as an intermediary to explore peace terms. Over the proceeding forty-eight hours, however, Churchill had succeeded in outmanoeuvring his Foreign Secretary, thus quashing an initiative that came terrifyingly close to handing Hitler victory. After the crucial Cabinet meeting on 28 May, Churchill informed Reynaud of the British Government's rejection of the Italian approach and, the following day, few were prepared to take an alternative view. 'Discussion of what to do with ice-cream vendors,' recorded Sir Alexander Cadogan in his diary, 'drown the brutes is what I should like to do.'[29]

Nevertheless, the French went ahead with a unilateral approach.

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impression is being created about the position of Italy,' he noted on 17 March 1940. 'Mussolini is an implacable enemy.' (Emrys-Evans Papers, ADD MSS 58261)

Mussolini did not even deign to reply. 'It is not that he wants to obtain this or that,' noted Ciano. 'What he wants is war and even if he were to obtain by peaceful methods double what he claims, he would refuse.'[30] Indeed, the Duce was in a hurry to enter the conflict before the German victory was complete. By 30 May, the final decision had been made and at 6 p.m. on 10 June Mussolini announced Italy's entry into the war, before an unenthusiastic crowd, from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia. At his farewell interview with Ciano, the French Ambassador predicted that the Italians would come to regret their alliance with the Germans while Loraine had already expressed his unquenchable faith in Allied victory, since 'the British were not in the habit of being beaten'.[31]

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By the time of Dunkirk, most British military and political leaders had lost confidence in their French allies. 'There hardly seems to be any mistake the French did not make,' noted Chamberlain, after hearing Gort's damning description of the weeks preceding the evacuation.[32] 'I have an uncomfortable feeling that there is everywhere a lack of direction from the people who ought to be directing and that the subordinates are consequently at sea,' wrote Sir Ronald Campbell to Halifax on 30 May. There was no doubt about Reynaud's integrity but 'he is a bundle of nerves and is hardly up to the herculean task of galvanising his rather flabby team'. Of these, the Ambassador was scathing but accurate. Pétain, unable to follow a discussion for more than a few minutes, gave 'the impression of having lost hope'. Weygand was more alert but, similarly, resigned to defeat. And Daladier had 'gone to pieces' and was being 'worked upon by the wobblers'. 'The fact is', Campbell explained, 'there is practically no single Frenchman among those who know the full gravity of the situation that does not feel – even if he does not admit it – that France is beaten.'[33]

On the evening of 31 May, following the meeting of the Supreme War Council, Churchill gave Spears the impression that he knew the French were played out. He did not say it but, before going to bed, Spears recalled a phrase that the Prime Minister had used during

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the afternoon's conference: 'The partner that survives will go on.'[34] If this was the case it begs the question why Churchill continued to press for further British military support for France – support which Britain could ill afford to give and which the Chiefs of Staff and a majority of the War Cabinet opposed. As so often with Churchill, the personal combined with the political, the strategic with the sentimental.

Even more than his Francophile colleagues, Churchill loved France, the country he had visited regularly since 1891 and whose cultural achievements appeared to him the apogee of civilisation. ('Winston loves France like a woman,' his physician, Lord Moran, would note at Yalta.[35]) Then there was his sense of chivalry, sharpened by his awareness of history. France was Britain's ally and he would not have it said that Britain had dishonoured herself by abandoning her in her hour of need. 'He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene.'[36] But there were also strategic reasons. Every day France went on fighting she weakened Hitler's war machine and gave Britain precious hours in which to prepare. The French Empire remained a valuable resource from which, in the last resort, the French might continue the fight, while the French Fleet was a significant asset or major liability depending on who controlled it. Finally, there was the Prime Minister's natural Micawberism: the hope that, so long as the French continued fighting, something might 'turn up'.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's sense of chivalry caused him to make at least one decision that was militarily unjustifiable and potentially catastrophic. On 12 June, eight days after the 'miracle of Dunkirk' – in which 338,226 Allied soldiers had been rescued from France – Lieutenant-General Alan Brooke disembarked at Cherbourg. It was only two weeks since he himself had been evacuated but on 2 June he had received the shattering news that he was to return to France and form a new British Expeditionary Force. Looking back, Brooke – who went on to serve as Chief of the Imperial General Staff between December 1941 and June 1946 and experience multiple disasters – described this as one of the 'blackest moments' of his career. As commander of the BEF's II Corps, he had witnessed the collapse of the French Army at close quarters

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and harboured no illusions as to the ultimate fate of that force. 'The mission I was being sent on from a military point of view had no value and no possibility of accomplishing anything,' the plain-speaking Ulsterman told General Dill.[37] But Churchill was adamant. 'The BEF in France must immediately be reconstituted, otherwise the French will not continue in the war,' he instructed Ismay on 2 June. Even if Paris were lost and organised resistance ended, the French must be persuaded to continue a 'gigantic guerrilla', sustained by an Allied bridgehead in Brittany, the so-called 'Breton redoubt'.[38] When Ismay, who like Brooke was appalled at the idea of sending some of Britain's last trained reserves to reinforce failure in France, suggested that they might quietly delay the departure of these divisions, Churchill was scandalised: 'Certainly not. It would look very bad in history if we were to do any such thing.'[39]

Of course, Brooke and Ismay were right and Churchill was wrong. Meeting General Weygand, who had replaced Gamelin as Commander-in-Chief on 20 May, at Le Mans on 14 June, Brooke was told by the tired-looking General what he already knew: 'the French army had ceased to be able to offer organised resistance and was disintegrating into disconnected groups.'[40] Following this conversation, Brooke immediately telephoned Dill, now Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and told him that the only sensible course was to re-embark the Expeditionary Force as quickly as possible. The Brittany scheme was a 'wild project which was quite impossible'.[41] Four hours later Dill called back and told him that the Prime Minister did not want him to withdraw.

'What the hell does he want?' snapped Brooke.

'He wants to speak to you.'

A difficult conversation ensued but, after half an hour, Brooke succeeded in convincing Churchill that the position was hopeless and that all British forces should be evacuated from France forthwith.[42]

There was also the ever-present question of air support. No sooner had Churchill returned from Paris on 11 June, than the British began to receive near daily French pleas for more fighters. Churchill was torn. 'We must give them more than we can spare', he told a

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crush of ministers on 3 June, but 'we must not denude this island'.[43] Regarding the former determination, the Prime Minister was in a minority of one. The Air Staff was adamant that to throw further squadrons into the Battle of France was to risk losing the Battle of Britain. The War Cabinet agreed. Echoing the sentiments of Halifax and Chamberlain, Cadogan expressed the blunt view that further assistance to France would not do 'any good' and would not even prevent 'the French reviling us. I'd really sooner cut loose and concentrate on the defence of these islands.'[44] Two days later, however, Churchill returned to the question, arguing that it would be wrong for Britain to have fewer squadrons operating in France than they had at the start of the battle. Lord Beaverbrook was working miracles at the Ministry of Aircraft Production – though Britain's output of fifteen fighters per day was dwarfed by daily losses of twenty-five – and, in any case, 'we could never keep all that we wanted for our own defence while the French were fighting for their lives'.[45] Fortunately for the Air Staff, the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, intervened to emphasise the alarming loss of pilots, in particular squadron leaders, as well as the general disorganisation of Fighter Command. These arguments carried the day and a telegram was despatched to Reynaud, declining to send additional squadrons. Hearing of this refusal, Pétain allegedly told the French Premier, 'Well, there is nothing left but to make peace. If you do not want to do it you can hand over to me.'[46]*

The next few days brought more of the same. The French continued to berate their ally for husbanding their air force, while the British became increasingly convinced that the French were seeking to blame them for the unfolding catastrophe. On 10 June, as the Germans continued their drive towards Paris, Churchill made one of his 'lightning decisions' to fly across the Channel to try and bolster the French. Just as he was about to leave, however, he received news that the French Government was abandoning the capital and, since there appeared 'no perch on which he could alight', he reluctantly gave up the idea.[47]

At 2.30 the following afternoon, however, Churchill, accompanied

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* There were, nevertheless, 144 British fighters operating in France on 6 June 1940, the equivalent of twelve squadrons.

by Eden, Dill, Ismay and Spears, flew from Hendon to Briare, on the Loire. There they were met by a French colonel 'who might have been welcoming poor relations at a funeral', before being driven to what Spears described as a 'hideous house', a dwelling expanded by 'successful business in groceries or indifferent champagne into a large monstrosity of red lobster-coloured brick, and stone the hue of unripe Camembert'.[48] The name for this incongruous setting of what was to be the penultimate gathering of the Supreme War Council was Château du Muguet – Lily of the Valley Castle.

The Briare conference of 11 June began by Reynaud asking, somewhat embarrassedly, that the joint raid on the Italian heartlands of Genoa, Turin and Milan, planned for that evening, be cancelled. He was aware that he had agreed to this operation only a few days previously – this according with the long-held Allied determination to strike Italy hard the moment she came into the war – but it now transpired that Lyons, as well as the petrol depots around Marseilles, were unprotected by anti-aircraft guns and he feared Italian reprisals. Churchill looked grim but after a brief conference with General Ismay his face softened into a wry smile. The operation could not be cancelled, the Prime Minister's chief military adviser explained, since the bombers had already left England.*

Churchill announced that he and his colleagues had come to France to survey the situation with 'unclouded eyes' and to concert plans for continuing the war.[49] Whatever happened, Britain would continue the struggle and if France could only hold out for a little longer, ideally – though fantastically – until the following spring, then she would receive the assistance of between twenty and twenty-five new British divisions. When Weygand gave an appraisal of the military situation it made for depressing listening. The battle, the Commander-in-Chief explained, was raging along the entire front and consumed the totality of French forces. 'We are fighting on our last line and it has been breached,' he declared, his fox-like

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* In the end, the operation did not take place as French ground crews, fearful of retaliations, drove cars and lorries onto the aerodrome near Marseilles to prevent the British bombers, which had stopped to refuel, from taking off.

face strained with emotion: 'I am helpless, I cannot intervene for I have no reserves, there are no reserves. *C'est la dislocation*.'[50] Still, the C-in-C asked that Britain deploy her complete air strength, since this was 'the decisive battle that would settle the fate of both nations'.[51] Ismay held his breath. For a moment he worried that his chief's sympathy for France might cause him to repudiate the decision of the War Cabinet and agree to the French request. But his fears proved groundless. 'This is not the decisive point', Churchill intoned; that 'moment will come when Hitler hurls his Luftwaffe against Britain. If we can keep command of the air over our own island – that is all I ask – we will win it all back for you.'[52]

The crossroads was in sight. After Weygand had repeated his stock phrase, that the French were at 'the last quarter of an hour', causing Spears to snap his pencil in frustration, the General declared that if the military situation deteriorated further then he saw no way that France could continue the war.[53] This earned a rebuke from Reynaud, who reminded Weygand that this was a political decision, exclusive to the Government. Churchill continued to urge the French to carry on the fight – to defend Paris, to hold a bridgehead in Brittany, to paralyse Hitler's armies with guerrilla warfare – but his real emphasis was on Britain's determination to fight on '*toujours*, all the time, *partout*, everywhere, *pas de grâce*, no mercy, *puis la victoire*!'[54] When an incredulous Weygand asked him how he proposed to deal with the hundred or so German divisions poised for the invasion of Britain, Churchill replied that he was no military expert but that his technical advisers were of the opinion that the best method was 'to drown as many as possible on the way over and knock the others on the head [*frapper sur la tête*] as they crawled ashore'. Weygand acknowledged that the British had 'a very good anti-tank ditch'.[55]

When the conference resumed the next day, Reynaud told Churchill that Pétain, who was not present, had informed him of his view that it was necessary to seek an armistice. The Maréchal had even written a paper on the subject but, apparently, felt too ashamed to share it.[56] The discussion was no more constructive than the one the day before. Reynaud renewed his request for more fighters and Churchill promised to raise the matter with the War Cabinet. Eden and Dill both

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spoke of the coming British reinforcements – Brooke and the second BEF were disembarking that very day – while Churchill repeated his entreaties to defend Paris, to counterattack along the lower Seine, to contemplate the possibilities of guerrilla warfare, to hold out until the United States came in. When these suggestions were summarily rebuffed – Weygand had given orders on 10 June that Paris was to be declared an 'open city' – he made an even more solemn request. Speaking slowly and with emphasis so that no one could fail to understand his meaning, he asked that, should there be a 'fundamental change in the situation', the British Government be informed at once so that it might return 'to discuss the new circumstances with you'.[57] The British then flew home.

⋆

And so we return to 13 June 1940: to the pockmarked airfield at Tours, the cold chicken and Vouvray, the confusion at the Préfecture, the meeting with Reynaud and Baudouin and the French Prime Minister's enquiry about an armistice. Churchill said that he sympathised deeply with France in her suffering. Britain would be attacked next but she was ready. 'The British people have not yet felt the German lash, but they do not underestimate its force . . . far from being cowed, they are looking forward to thrashing Hitler.'[58] When Reynaud pointed out that this did not answer his question, Churchill replied that the British Government would not waste time on reproaches or recriminations but this did not mean that it was prepared to release France from her commitment to continue the war in conjunction with her ally. In any case, the question was premature. Reynaud had proposed making a final appeal for immediate aid to President Roosevelt and until this telegram had been answered it was necessary to wait. Churchill then asked if he might consult his colleagues '*dans le jardin*'.[59] The British delegation trooped onto the wet grass. For a moment, nobody said a word. Then Beaverbrook spoke for everyone:

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> There is nothing to do but to repeat what you have already said, Winston. Telegraph to Roosevelt and await the answer. Tell Reynaud

> that we have nothing to say or discuss until Roosevelt's answer is received. Don't commit yourself to anything. We shall gain a little time and see how those Frenchmen sort themselves out. We are doing no good here. In fact, listening to these declarations of Reynaud's only does harm. Let's get along home.[60]

Back inside, the British discovered that they had been joined by the newest member of the French Government, the Under-Secretary of State for War, Brigadier-General Charles de Gaulle. Churchill explained that his colleagues had unanimously supported his stance and the two Prime Ministers then discussed the terms of the appeal to Roosevelt. Outside the Prefect's office the British found scenes of disorder and distress. While the British delegation had been traipsing round the garden, Reynaud had met with the Presidents of the two French Chambers of Parliament, who protested the Premier's conduct, arguing that he had no right to contemplate an armistice. When these patriots saw Churchill, they assured him, with tears in their eyes, of their desire to continue the fight. It was then – if Churchill's memoirs are to be believed – that he went up to de Gaulle and whispered, *'L'homme du destin'*.[61] As he got into his car, he told General Doumenc: 'You may be sure that, whatever happens, England will not abandon France.'[62] It was a noble sentiment, sincerely meant and emotionally felt but there was no use pretending: the Anglo-French alliance was all but over.

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IV
Unfriendly Fire

What the consequences . . . will be it is impossible to foretell. But I imagine the Germans may very possibly force the French into war against us . . . It was all inevitable, no doubt, but a terrible tragedy.

Leopold Amery to Lord Linlithgow, 4 July 1940[1]

At 9.05 a.m. on 3 July 1940, Captain Cedric Holland descended from the deck of HMS *Foxhound* and boarded the destroyer's motorboat. The haze had melted with the North African heat and a perfect day was developing as the launch chugged towards the harbour sheltering the two modern French battlecruisers *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, the two elderly (though recently modernised) battleships *Bretagne* and *Provence*, the seaplane tender *Commandant Teste*, and six destroyers. 'Hooky' Holland, as he was known due to his Roman nose, was liked and admired in both British and French naval circles. Having joined the navy at the age of fifteen, he had served in both the North Sea and the Mediterranean during the First World War, before being sent to Paris as Naval Attaché in 1938. His two years in the French capital were a great success. A competent French speaker with natural charm, he 'enjoyed the confidence and esteem of all the French officers with whom he was in contact', according to Sir Ronald Campbell, and 'in particular of Admiral Darlan', who spoke of the Captain and his work 'in terms of the highest praise'.[2] Now, however, as the launch cut through the waves towards the harbour of Mers el-Kébir, Holland was facing the most difficult task of his career.

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His destination was the French flagship *Dunkerque*, where he wished to speak with the fleet commander, Vice-Admiral Marcel Gensoul. Just after he had passed the anti-torpedo boom, however,

he was intercepted by the Admiral's barge, commanded by Flag-Lieutenant Bernard Dufay, an old friend of Holland's from his time in Paris. Earlier that morning, when the *Foxhound* had first appeared outside Mers el-Kébir, Dufay had told Holland that Gensoul was too busy to receive him. This was after Holland's decision to signal, at 7.09 a.m., in plain language, the purpose of his presence to the port admiral's signal station:

> The British Admiralty has sent Captain Holland to confer with you. The British Navy hopes that their proposals will enable you and the valiant and glorious French Navy to be by our side. In these circumstances, your ships would remain yours and no one need have anxiety for the future. A British fleet is at sea off Oran waiting to welcome you.

As Holland later explained to his superiors, he had decided to send the signal – which could be read by the entire fleet – 'for the purpose of disseminating the reason of our arrival and giving some indications as to the proposals so that the Lower Deck [i.e. the ordinary sailors] should get to know of them since it was thought that Admiral Gensoul might otherwise keep the matter secret'.[3] Perhaps. But Holland's gambit, which he took on his own initiative, undermined trust with the Admiral, an unfortunate development, compounded by the arrival of a British fleet on the horizon. 'The English may consider this as bringing friendly pressure to bear', commented an irate Gensoul to one of his officers, 'but the presence of a British fleet comprising three battleships and an aircraft carrier is something else. This proposal that I should sail my fleet and join them merits no further examination . . . I will not be threatened in this way. I've told the British destroyer to get out at once.'[4]

This was a considerable blow to Holland, who had been hoping to use his powers of persuasion on Gensoul in person. Instead, he was now forced to negotiate through Dufay, who agreed to relay the British proposals to the Admiral. These were relatively simple. As the War Cabinet had agreed on 1 July, in order to prevent the French Fleet from falling into enemy hands, Admiral Somerville, commander of the hastily assembled British fleet known as Force H,

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was to offer Gensoul four alternatives: he could join the British and continue the war under his own colours; he could sail his ships to a British port where they would be interned and the crews repatriated; he could remove his fleet to the safety of the French West Indies or the United States; or he could scuttle his ships. If none of these options was accepted then, as Somerville's note concluded, 'I have orders from His Majesty's Government to use whatever force may be necessary to prevent your ships falling into German or Italian hands.'[5]

When Dufay returned with the reply that Gensoul stood by the assurance he had given Admiral Sir Dudley North on 24 June that he would not allow his ships to be captured and would respond to force with force, Holland set about deploying those arguments he had hoped to use upon the Admiral. The British, he said, had complete faith in the French Naval High Command but they were convinced that the Germans intended to seize the French Fleet through some 'dastardly trick' and that, owing to the political situation in France, Admiral Darlan could no longer be regarded as master in his own house.[6] Holland persuaded Dufay to take an *aide-mémoire*, containing these arguments, to Gensoul.

According to the French lieutenant, Holland was noticeably ill at ease: 'hesitant', 'pale-faced' and 'perspiring heavily'. He had confessed that he found Somerville's note 'somewhat *maladroit'* and, despite his years in Paris, seemed to be struggling with his French.[7] If Holland was nervous, he had good reason to be. When briefed on the operation on 30 June he had strongly opposed the use of force. Confident in the reasonableness of the French naval high command, he believed he could talk Gensoul round. But his tactics had rebounded and his negotiations had reached an impasse. Shortly after 9.35 a.m., he had noticed with alarm that the French warships were furling their awnings and getting up steam. A reconnaissance plane from the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* confirmed the French were preparing to sail and Somerville, in what the French later considered the 'first act of hostility', ordered the mining of the entrance to the harbour.[8]

At 11.09 a.m., Dufay returned to the torpedo boom, accompanied by Gensoul's Chief of Staff. They brought a bellicose response from the Admiral. Gensoul would only confirm the reply he had already sent: he had decided to defend himself by every means possible and

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would draw Somerville's attention to the fact that the first shot fired would 'put the whole French Navy against the British'.[9] After consulting Holland by signal and delaying the initial deadline of 1.30 p.m. to give the Admiral more time to reconsider, Somerville signalled Gensoul that he had until 3 p.m. to accept the British terms or he would open fire.

*

The question of the French Fleet had first been raised by British political and military leaders as early as 27 May 1940, one day into the evacuation from Dunkirk. On that date, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Lord Hankey, had written to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, with a draft of demands that the British might consider making in the event that the French asked to be released from the joint agreement prohibiting a separate peace. Unsurprisingly, the French Fleet was top of the list. In 1940, France possessed the second largest navy in Europe, consisting of five battleships, two battlecruisers, two aircraft carriers, eighteen cruisers, fifty-four destroyers and almost seventy submarines. In addition, there were two almost-completed 35,000-ton battleships, the *Richelieu* and the *Jean Bart*, which with their 15-inch guns could rival any warship afloat. If Britain were to thwart a German invasion, let alone maintain her Empire and lines of communication, then it was vital that this powerful weapon should not fall into the hands of the enemy.

As Churchill was leaving the Briare conference on 12 June, he had taken aside the commander of the French Navy, the highly efficient and ambitious Admiral Darlan, and asked for his assurance that he would never surrender the Fleet. That promise was duly given. Yet this was not enough to satisfy the British Admiralty. Three days later, the British Naval Attaché, Captain Edward Pleydell-Bouverie, made a formal request to Darlan's deputy, Contre-Admiral Gabriel Auphan, that, as a precaution, the *Richelieu* and the *Jean Bart* be transferred to British ports and the ships at Mers el-Kébir, the so-called *Force de Raid*, removed to the safety of Gibraltar. Although Auphan rejected this request, he assured Pleydell-Bouverie that the

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Richelieu and the *Jean Bart* would sail to England if the danger of air attack became too great or if a 'grave eventuality should arise'.[10]

The fate of the French Fleet and the question of an armistice were inextricably entwined. When, at the Council of Ministers on the evening of 13 June, Pétain had supported Weygand's now hysterical calls for an armistice, several ministers spoke against this proposal on the grounds that the Germans would demand the Fleet. Even if, as Weygand suggested, the ships were sent in advance to North Africa, the Germans could still insist on their return. Reynaud concurred. If the French Government were to break its agreement with the British and sue for peace, only to discover that the Navy was among the German demands, then they would have committed 'a cowardly act for no purpose'.[11]

It is, at this stage, worth considering the options that were open to the French Government. That the Battle of France was lost was now evident to even the most stalwart of French ministers. Since early June, there had been talk of trying to maintain a bridgehead in Brittany – the 'Breton redoubt' – yet this was a wild proposal, bereft of military logic. The alternative was to take the Fleet and as much of the Army as could be saved and continue the war from North Africa. Here too there were practical problems. Although Reynaud had raised the prospect as early as 27 May, neither the military nor the Ministère de la Marine had done anything to prepare for such a contingency. The operation would require 200 ships, Darlan informed the French Prime Minister, while the Army was currently in a state of disintegration. Nevertheless, the Fleet remained intact, while French bases in North Africa had obvious strategic value. Above all, the removal of the Government to some part of the French Empire would have provided a legal rallying point for the forces of resistance, while delegitimising any Quisling regime that attempted to assume power in France.

Reynaud favoured continuing the war from overseas. Yet the French Prime Minister was by now an increasingly isolated and demoralised figure, who lacked the strength to sack the *capitulards* and form a government united in its desire to carry on the struggle. On 15 June 1940, the day after the Germans entered Paris

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and the French Government moved from the Loire to Bordeaux, he accepted the infamous proposal of the former Prime Minister Camille Chautemps – a notorious defeatist – that the Government, before considering the question of relocating to Algiers, should first ascertain the German armistice demands. The final straw had been the predictable response from Roosevelt, explaining that he was in no position to declare war. That evening, Reynaud formally asked the British Government to release France from her obligations so that she might discover the German terms. If these proved unacceptable – the surrender of the Fleet was cited as an unacceptable demand – then France would continue the war from North Africa. If, however, the British refused this request then Reynaud would have no option but to resign.

Appreciating that there was now almost no chance of keeping France in the war, the War Cabinet responded swiftly and decisively. Early on the afternoon of 16 June, Sir Ronald Campbell informed Reynaud that the British Government agreed to release the French from the agreement of 28 March 'but only provided the French Fleet is sailed forthwith for British harbours pending negotiations'.[12] A few hours later, however, Campbell sent Reynaud a message saying that he should disregard his earlier communication in light of a new proposal: in order to keep France in the war, the British Government was offering to form a complete political union between the two countries.

The extraordinary suggestion for an Anglo-French union is typically portrayed as a desperate snatch at the last tuft of grass before the Franco-British alliance plummeted to its demise.* The idea had, however, been percolating within Whitehall since the beginning of the year. On 28 February 1940, the Deputy Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Orme Sargent, produced a minute in which he argued that the Government should consider a 'permanent system of Anglo-French unity' as a counterweight to German power; a 'joint executive machinery', not merely for the direction of military and diplomatic policy but for 'the whole domain of finance, trade

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* This notion was encouraged by Churchill, who, in August 1944, inaccurately claimed that the offer emanated from 'a wave of Cabinet emotion'.