



# BRITISH STRATEGY AND POLITICS DURING THE PHONY WAR

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Before the Balloon Went Up

Nick Smart

**BRITISH STRATEGY  
AND POLITICS  
DURING THE PHONY WAR**

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NICK SMART

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JEREMY BLACK

Series Editor

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# Introduction

British schoolchildren are not deliberately misled when they are told that the Second World War began when, in response to the German invasion of Poland, Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939. Their teachers do not set out to deceive, nor is there any agency or government department that profits by or has an interest in spreading a particular lie about the British national past. It is as though a mutual process of consent allows teachers and pupils to agree on Britain's place in the starting lineup. The famous 3 September Sunday morning broadcast, with the 'tired and defeated' prime minister,<sup>1</sup> Neville Chamberlain, announcing that 'this country is now at war with Germany,' is the commonly accepted starting point.

But the convention, though a weighty one, is not quite right. Judging by the amount of literature available to them, the British seem to like being told that there were evil things their country was fighting against between 1939 and 1945. But in cherishing a myth about themselves and calling it the Second World War they err slightly. However comforting it is to be reminded that while other countries were knocked out of this war at various stages, with others entering the lists at subsequent dates, the notion that the British saw the thing through from beginning to end has a misleading edge to it. The story of Britain standing alone in 1940 and, Horatio-like, defending the bridge against the invading hordes until reinforcements arrived, is the stuff of powerful legend. But a degree of terminological inexactitude surrounds the idea that the British provided the thread of continuity that turned a conflict restricted to only a part of Europe into global war.

The German invasion of Poland began on 1 September 1939, and the British government did, along with the French, declare war on Germany two days later. But these events did not mark the start of the Second World War. That conflict began more than two years later in December 1941 when, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and with Mussolini in tow, Hitler declared war on the United States of America. The moment serves a dual purpose. It was when world war began and, in some accounts at least, marked the emergence of hemispheric superpowers and the onset of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Something that had occurred at a point on the earth's surface about as distant as it is possible to be from Europe caused all this to happen. As far as the Second World War was concerned, the main alignments were set. Until the end came in 1945 there was only one piece missing from the matrix (the Soviet Union and Japan were not at war with each other till the very end). Other than that, from December 1941 the statuses of friend and foe were more or less fixed. The British Empire, the United States, and the Soviet Union were ranged on one side, while on the other stood Germany, Japan and, to a diminishing extent, Italy.

Saying this is neither striking nor original. The point made years ago that the four powers which went to war in September 1939 made up, 'in the simplest geographical sense,'<sup>3</sup> only a part of Europe and a minority of its population, does not excite much controversy these days. But world war did not simply develop from this regionally constrained struggle. The connections between the often unexpected and, for all their horrors, small-scale and usually short conflicts that began in 1939 and later global developments are extremely tenuous. Not even Hitler's apocalyptic ambition provided clear causal links. The war which he brought on when he ordered the invasion of Poland preceded the global conflict, but it was not as though he planted an acorn from which some mightily destructive world-shaping oak grew. Hitler was surprised when the British and French declared war on him in 1939. He did not tell the Italians to invade Greece or attack Egypt, nor did he confer with the Japanese prior to his invasion of the Soviet Union. By the same token they did not inform him of their intention to immobilize the Americans' Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

Moreover, the pattern of warfare from 1939 through 1941 was different. It was, in comparison with what came after, quite peculiar. Operational theaters were few and restricted. There were long periods of time when little fighting took place. The war Britain and France began with Germany in September 1939 was, on land and in the air, for most of its duration, quiet. There was a six-week-long German war with Poland at the start, and a war between Finland and the Soviet Union over the winter months which, though it attracted a good deal of attention, remained separate. There was a nasty, brutish, and short resistance to the German invasion of Norway in April 1940. The following month, in a sudden flurry of intense military activity in western Europe, the Germans launched their offensive on Bel-

gium, Holland, and France. Their triumph was complete. The fighting was over within six weeks.

This was warfare. Some said it was a new type of warfare; with the Germans able to fuse mobility with firepower in devastating *Blitzkrieg* offensive tactics. Large tracts of territory were overrun, plenty of people were killed and much property was destroyed. Regimes were toppled, occupation forces moved in, and some frontiers were redrawn. The overall outcome: Soviet territorial gains and German conquest of Denmark and Norway; swiftly followed by stunning victories in the west that made Hitler's mastery over Europe positively Napoleonic in its scale. While the British were left with their alliance strategy in shreds and their forces expelled from the continent, the war that had begun the previous autumn was effectively brought to an end.

For the next ten months, that is, in the space of time between the end of June 1940 and mid-April 1941, Europe was substantially at peace. Many countries groaned directly under the weight of the Nazi yoke, others were drawn into the German orbit. To the east, the Soviet Union made further territorial gains. Peace was, nevertheless, the norm. Britain, it is true, remained undefeated. But for all the defiance of the government led by Churchill, and notwithstanding his determination to wage war by every means, whatever the threat of invasion and ravages of the blitz, it was to be a full eight months after the fall of France before the British army did battle with German opponents. The rhythm of war in this period was decidedly staccato. It was rare for fighting to take place on land in more than one theater at the same time. Campaigning was usually of short duration, and standoff phases of inactivity were not exceptional. This was not so after December 1941. The scale, scope, and velocity of hostilities which began with the onset of the Second World War were all transformed. Operations were often fluid, but there was a relentlessness and continuity about the fighting which previously had been absent. Beforehand, from 1939 through 1941, fragmentation and discontinuity were the distinguishing features. Then, though some neutral states were more important than others, neutral opinion counted. After, it did not. An added confusion to the warfare that took place before December 1941 was that it was not always clear who could be relied on as a friend and who should be treated as an enemy.

Plenty of national histories adapt to this short periodization of the Second World War with ease. Some do so with varying degrees of explicitness. American historians seem generally content to accept a 1939 start date, but, whether through habit or choice, tend to devote less time and fewer pages to what was happening before December 1941.<sup>4</sup> It used to be fairly common to talk of a European war taking place between 1939 and 1941.<sup>5</sup> This practice, though it carries a sense of differentiation, was never entirely satisfactory. It conveys the too neat sense of a lesser war sliding into a greater one more or less inexorably, and also implies a misleading sense of singularity.

Actually, and for all that it goes against the grain of many national historical traditions, it makes better sense to talk not of one rather incontinent European war taking place during this time, but several; 'each ha[ving] their own cause, course and consequences,'<sup>6</sup> and each made to look different from their various national standpoints.

A plural perspective, a point of departure that envisages a series of wars in the 1939–41 period which, while sometimes multilateral and overlapping in time, were nonetheless separate and distinct, has many advantages. It allows the Finnish-Soviet winter war of 1939–40 to gain in appreciation, just as it does Finland's war with the Soviet Union beginning in June 1941. It also serves to rescue the German-Polish war of 1939 from the mere campaign status it is usually afforded. Treating the Italian war with Greece as an autonomous affair, as well as the war Italy was engaged in with Britain from 1940 in North and East Africa and also in the Mediterranean, might be constructive. Adopting the Russian practice, and talking of the German war with the Soviet Union from June 1941 in 'Great Patriotic' terms, would also usefully emphasize the separateness of that conflict and provide better means of understanding the role played by Germany's allies. There is also much to be said for making plural the wars Britain fought with Germany and Italy after September 1939 but before world war began in December 1941.

To say this is, however, to enter dangerous territory. Although the themes of fragmentation and discontinuity have their practical applications and recognized uses, applying them to Britain between 1939 and 1941 runs up against a peculiarly national conception of what the Second World War amounted to. It remains in the popular memory as a singular entity. An interconnecting metanarrative chains the parts together to constitute a whole. Thus, from Chamberlain's post-Munich pronouncement of 'peace for our time', the country was, via the fall of France, reduced to such a point of 'dire peril' that only Churchill's blood,<sup>7</sup> toil, tears, and sweat 'passwords to national regeneration' saved it from invasion and defeat.<sup>8</sup> As presented it is as though the mere act of survival, of staying defiant and keeping at war in 1940, was Britain's main contribution to the eventual allied victory. But however familiar this landscape, and for all that it is usual to see British resistance in 1940 as necessary both to sponge away the stain of Munich and discredit those responsible for bringing the country to the brink of catastrophe, the differences of light and shade produced by flattening the hillocks and filling in the furrows can be instructive.

The shadow cast by Churchill remains enormous. The legend of him as national savior has many parts to it. With most of them we need not be concerned, but one that must be confronted here has less to do with his activities after he became prime minister than with the positioning of his predecessors in that twilight period beforehand. They stand condemned. Moreover, the maintenance of the Churchillian reputation requires that they should remain so. No pleas of mitigation can be entered to lessen their

shame. The more complacent these 'men of Munich' were, the more they neglected the nation's defenses, and waged war with halfhearted reluctance from September 1939, the greater Churchill becomes. The record of Chamberlain as prime minister, in peace and war, has to be presented as self-evidently catastrophic so as to give meaning to the Churchill rescue mission. Chamberlain's own admission of failure, his public realization in September 1939 that everything he had worked for had 'crashed in ruins', has to be constructed to show, not merely that he was no war leader, but that his removal from office had become a matter of national necessity. This, substantially, is how the metanarrative of Britain's Second World War works. The road that led to 1945 was long and winding. Beginning in confused uncertainty, the journey is routed inexorably through the national purging process of Dunkirk. That event, both a disaster and a miracle, led to the redeeming summer of 1940 and, in concert with allies, broad sunlit uplands.

Myths, by and large, are not prone to demolition. It is not the purpose of this book to attempt to do so. Nor is it intended to downgrade Churchill or seek to rehabilitate Chamberlain. The object is to make strange, or render less definitive, a piece of the British Second World War metanarrative, the phony war, that for too long has been allowed to assume all too familiar contours and fit rather too snugly into its overdetermined place. Disconnecting this phony war from what came after means that it can be discussed in ways other than as slough of despond or mere prelude to catastrophe. It permits a less teleological or purpose-driven view of a period of time when Britain was at war with Germany, but when Churchill was, though plucked from his wilderness and in the government, not yet prime minister. Such disconnected treatment will not make Chamberlain's wartime premiership appear any more successful. But in removing the dreadful veil of portending doom from it, we shall at least be able to assess it under a different and less damning light.

If we say that the late summer of 1940, Britain's finest hour, was a different war with Germany than the one that had ended that June with the fall of France, we cut a knot. In separating France's defeat and, an item of particular importance in the national mythology, the evacuation of most of Britain's army from Dunkirk, from what came after, we remove the connecting rods in an otherwise continuous story. Britain, in standing alone, may well have, through Churchill's eloquence, assumed the moral leadership of the free world. In accepting this it is not necessary to believe that a war of national redemption was being embarked on, or that 'in fighting for her own soul,' Britain (or England) was knowingly paying the price for past sins of omission. The war Britain had fought with France against Germany from September 1939 to May 1940 was over. It was already lost. Defeat in that war was hard to bear, but it was not inevitable. Hindsight might explain how it came about, but very few at the time foresaw it. The

same hindsight states that Britain was woefully unprepared for war in 1939, and that the Dunkirk evacuation was no more than a particularly dramatic and brutal form of national comeuppance. Dunkirk as a form of deliverance, an instance of almost divine intervention, foregrounds the heroic days of the 1940 'Spitfire summer.' However necessary it was for the 'Cato' trio to insist in their *Guilty Men* polemic that the British army sent to France at war's outset was doomed to defeat before it took the field,<sup>10</sup> we are not obliged to follow their line. Perhaps it was as well that Britain's army was so small. It limited the liability of Britain's continental commitment, and the loss of its equipment could be made up. There is little point, as they say in military circles, in reinforcing failure.

The 1939–40 Anglo-French war with Germany was distinctly punctuated. Though it lost its Polish *casus belli* almost as soon as it had begun, and ended on a furious note, it was, for most of its duration, quiet. The main front was along the Franco-German border. While French strategy dictated that the main zone of active operations would be in Belgium, there was, in Paris and London, a generalized nervous hankering to extend the war to Scandinavia. On land the British were happy to confer on France the role of senior partner. The French, rendered understandably unhappy by this elevated status, sought constantly to prod the British into action where they were strong—at sea. With the *entente* powers thinking of making war on the peripheries and ruling out any costly frontal attacks, the Germans were for a while uncertain about mounting an offensive of their own. A certain amount of foot-dragging by the German general staff, coupled with the particularly harsh climatic conditions of the winter of 1939–40 helped ensure that a long period of lull ensued. This, in brief, was the phony war. Britain's part in it is the concern of this book.

For our purposes the phony war dates from 3 September 1939 to 10 May 1940. It ran, with some slight seasonal readjustment, the length of an academic year. The exact periodization has a political as well as an operational validity. It began with the British and French declarations of war on Germany, and ended on 10 May 1940. This was when the balloon went up in the west—the start of the German offensive against France and the Low Countries. It was also the day, quite coincidentally, when Chamberlain resigned and was replaced by Churchill as prime minister.

Phony war is, for all its oxymoronic irony, a useful signifier. It does at least imply an episodic separateness from what followed and, covering a time when Britain, in alliance with France, was at war with Germany only, the ramifications of globally extended world war are kept nicely at bay. The figure of speech also holds the dubious abstractions of total war at a convenient distance. Allegedly coined by William E. Borah, an isolationist American senator from Idaho, the phrase has stuck. In observing in mid-September 1939 that the French and British seemed reluctant to carry the fight to their declared enemy, when German forces were still heavily

engaged in subjugating Poland, his pronouncement that ‘there [was] something phony about this war,’<sup>11</sup> afforded a handy, if variously spelled, label that has endured ever since. Wars, of course, are not supposed to be phony. Being at war with forces primed and mobilized, and yet not taking advantage of what, thousands of miles away, looked like an obvious strategic opening, seemed then and is still made to appear contradictory.

The British government declared war on Germany and sent its small field force army, along with some RAF squadrons, to France. There, subjected to French operational command, the officers ordered the troops to dig in on the Belgian frontier more than 100 miles from the nearest German soldier. At home the people were left to experience, so it is said, ‘[a]ll the sensations of war . . . except the fighting.’<sup>12</sup> Instead of great casualty lists and the expected aerial offensive, the ‘fussing and fumbling’ of excessive bureaucracy took over.<sup>13</sup> Amidst mounting government restrictions more people died as a consequence of the blackout regulations than were killed in action. There was a coal shortage that made everyone grumble, and with war aims left ill-defined, there was little to stir the hearts of a people gradually turning sour on this war in which nothing much happened. Gas masks were discarded and evacuees, though urged to stay away, drifted back to the cities. Nobody, it seems, had a good word to say for the newly-created ministry of information, and in the general purposelessness of it all, ‘[e]ven the sirens mocked’ when,<sup>14</sup> in the numerous false alarms, they let out their banshee wail. This was not war, it was said. It was more akin to the inconvenience of rain interrupting play.<sup>15</sup> Remembered as an unreal foolish time of ‘snobbery and privilege,’ when the ‘old and the silly still ruled,’<sup>16</sup> taxation was kept within bounds, and the greatest contribution a patriotic philatelist could make to the war effort was to cease collecting German stamps. A leisurely complacency, it is generally said, was the norm. With the call-up of men to the forces seemingly progressing ‘with the speed of an elephant trying to compete in the Derby,’<sup>17</sup> a million men were still out of work and the RAF dropped leaflets over Germany by night. As the government was disinclined, as the secretary of state for air put it, to bomb private property belonging to the enemy, the Germans adhered to the same principle and kept their bombers at home. For as long as France appeared invulnerable to attack, there seemed little point in stirring the hornet’s nest. The British phony war has its satiric novel; Evelyn Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags*.<sup>18</sup> In it the smart frivolous world of the bright young things enjoys a final brief flourish before disintegrating into disorder and defeat.

The more frivolous and foolish Britain’s phony war is described as being, the more dramatic and cataclysmic the real war is made to appear when the Germans began their offensive on 10 May 1940. All the timid assumptions of the by now disgraced Chamberlain government, made up for the most part of those who had hoped to appease Hitler, were exposed as fatuous. Having reluctantly led the country into a war for which it was woefully



unprepared, Chamberlain allegedly made no constructive use of the eight-month breathing space afforded him. Mouthing platitudes about Hitler 'miss[ing] the bus,' and displaying, it is said, an 'obtuseness [that] defies retrospective belief,'<sup>19</sup> it took a famous parliamentary revolt to pry him from office. On the very day that the purposeless phony war was ending with a vengeance, a coalition government under Churchill's leadership took the helm. Thus the Labour party shared with Churchill the task of turning resistance into a struggle for national redemption and created, if only in myth, something they called the people's war. The ostrich, forever burying its head in the sand, turned itself into the lion at bay. Churchill possessed enough false modesty to claim that all he did was to supply the roar.

This is the typical fix on the phony war. Things that some said should have been happening, which had been expected to happen and which later happened by the bucketful, were conspicuous in their absence. The French had their term for it, *drôle de guerre* or funny war, and the Germans, though it seems unlikely, are said to have referred to a *Sitzkrieg*, or sitting down war. But the sense of paradox—of farce even—conveyed in these various constructions is itself a bit phony. For the phony war was not, whatever the legend, the prelude phase in a world war gathering momentum. It was a separate affair, possessing its own causes and course. In describing its own trajectory a war in Europe came to an end in June 1940. This had as little bearing on the later Second World War as, say, Roosevelt's re-election as president later that year, or the playground-bully war Britain fought with Italy in Africa from about the same time. The phony war was not total war, whatever meaning the phrase conveys, in the making. Whether it would have been less phony, and therefore somehow more authentic had more civilians been bombed from the beginning, had the French attacked Germany in the autumn of 1939, or had the Germans chosen Belgium as their invasion route the next spring, are questions that seem academically spurious. A lot of things might have happened. What did happen was that after a long lull France was defeated in a campaign that lasted barely six weeks.

People and governments cannot be blamed for going to war reluctantly. There was, in contrast to August 1914, little flag-waving in September 1939, and, despite whatever Senator Borah may have thought, the adoption of a defensive strategy did not display an Anglo-French unwillingness to fight. For all the descriptions of the faint-hearted timidity of allied leaders, their behavior can, under a different light, be made to appear patient and even wise. They believed the war would be long, and that a steady buildup of forces was necessary to win it. With imports having to be paid for, 'business as usual' was less an attitude of mind than a sound, indeed necessary, policy. As the days shortened and autumn gave way to winter, various quick-fix solutions recommended themselves. The leaders of the *entente* were not wrong to consider them, and, though catastrophe was just around the corner, they were right to turn them down. People generally believe

what they see. What they saw, on the *entente* side, was a gradual improvement in the capacity to resist a German attack on France. In this, of course, they were mistaken. But in noting the error, we need not rush to assume that ignorance, stupidity, and complacency reigned supreme among the leaders of Britain and France. In other words, the Anglo-French phony war with Germany was a complex affair which, for all its frivolous ornamentation, merits discussion in its own autonomous terms.

The *entente* war leadership was made up of people who were neither treasonous knaves nor elderly fools doing their best according to their dim lights. A governing supposition of this book is that the strategic assumptions the Anglo-French leaders adopted in their war with Germany were reasonable, their troop dispositions by and large logical, and their equipment inventories on land and in the air adequate. A degree of suspicion is inherent in any military alliance, and the Anglo-French *entente* of 1939–40 was not without its frictions. However, good working relations were established, and a high degree of mutual confidence was achieved. There was always the hope the German home front might crack. It was never certain, until it came, that the Germans would mount their offensive. Certainly there were many in Germany alarmed at the prospect of fighting in the west and, on paper at least, the combined Belgian, British, Dutch, and French defending forces seemed to provide a sufficient margin of security.

None of this, of course, stood in the way of the stunning German successes of May–June 1940. But the French, the senior partner on land in the *entente*, were not wrong to adopt a defensive strategy from the outset. Nor were they wrong to remain skeptical of the war-winning potential of blockade. While the British continued to believe that a German war economy starved of raw materials was the route to victory by economic means, French nervousness about this proposition was a constant feature of their phony war. There were defeatist elements in France as there were in Britain. How strong or influential they were is difficult to gauge precisely, though the numerous sideshows the French governments of Daladier and Reynaud floated at various times were not grounded in it. Fired by the anxious wish to remove the threat of invasion from their country's borders, the French were naturally keen on making the British assume their share of responsibility for operations. Thus Scandinavia, where a war between Finland and the Soviet Union was ongoing, and where, in Sweden, lay the source of Germany's iron ore supply, beckoned as a theater of war. This interest, so often condemned as delusory, or as evidence of a French desire to wrap up the war with Germany and begin a different one with the Soviet Union was, given its context, a sensible military projection.

The British, though the French rather less so, began the war firmly believing that time was on their side. We have every reason to believe that Hitler agreed with this view. It was his generals, or some of them, who were 'mistaken in believing that a bold strategy would not yield large

results.<sup>20</sup> Though Hitler features little in this book, it was clear that the military initiative belonged to him. This need not mean he was consistently determined to eliminate British and French military power as soon as he found himself in a state of war with these two states. Why he ever launched his offensive in the west, when, if his numerous biographers are to be believed, his eyes were set firmly eastward and the *entente* powers had telegraphed their intention not to attack him, remains an unanswered puzzle. The problem, perhaps, lies less in the phony war's longevity than in its sudden and brutal ending.

## NOTES

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# September 1939

## HONORING OBLIGATIONS

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the notorious nonaggression agreement signed by the German and Soviet foreign ministers in Moscow in the early hours of 24 August 1939, preceded the German invasion of Poland by barely a week. The invasion began in the early hours of 1 September. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. Such close proximity suggests an easy causal relationship of events, with the signing of the pact often presented as diplomatic curtain-raiser to the outbreak of the Second World War. However, cause and effect were not quite so simply arranged as the close chronology implies, and certainly few at the time could have predicted with certainty what would follow.

Of all the interested parties Stalin was probably alone in hoping that general war in Europe would develop in 1939. Having obtained that degree of security he needed through his agreement with Germany, he knew that if war began he would be out of it. So suspicious was he of all the imperialist powers—whether describing themselves as fascist or democratic, it made no difference as far as he could see—that the image of him looking forward gloatingly to the spectacle of them fighting each other in a protracted fight of mutual destruction seems entirely plausible.<sup>1</sup> If such was Stalin's expectation, he would have drawn some short-term gratification from the course of events. But a European war did not break out because Stalin wished it to. Indeed, it happened despite Hitler's best laid plans to avoid it.

As far as Hitler was concerned, Ribbentrop had pulled off in Moscow a diplomatic triumph of Bismarckian proportions. Striking a deal with the Soviet Union was the clinically neat checkmate move which demolished Anglo-French efforts to thwart him. Poland's fate was now sealed but, thanks to Soviet connivance, a problem which had threatened to cause a general conflagration over the previous six months was now, he confidently believed, reduced to regional and eminently manageable proportions. Had the Western powers been able to net Soviet agreement to aid Poland in the event of a German invasion, Germany would have been faced with defensive fronts to west and east which might have deterred even Hitler from his recently acquired habit of grabbing territories and peoples not his own. With the Soviet Union now removed from that hopeful equation, Hitler reasoned that with Britain and France in no position to make war on Germany, they would refrain from doing so. The pact he declared would 'strike like a bomb'<sup>2</sup> in London and Paris, presenting the Chamberlain and Daladier governments with the kind of *fait accompli*, which would, he momentarily thought, lead to their downfall. At the very least it would remove from the bounds of realism any Western action to aid the hapless Poles. For whatever the paper state of their obligations to that country, there was nothing the British and French could do militarily or diplomatically now that the Soviet Union had concluded its *détente* with Germany.

The previous year Czechoslovakia, after all, had been declared a strategically indefensible 'far-away country' involved in a quarrel 'between people of whom we know nothing.'<sup>3</sup> Poland was further away still. Whatever interim hopes the British and French governments had entertained for the containment of Germany in eastern Europe were summarily dashed. Thanks to the pact and his newfound friendship with the Soviet Union, Hitler now felt he had that free hand which was the object of his foreign policy. Ruling out a French attack in the west as impossible, and discounting the effects of blockade due to his newfound access to sources of supply in the east, he boasted of the 'probability . . . that the West will not intervene.'<sup>4</sup> Confronted by such a clear demonstration of superior German statecraft, Anglo-French leaders would surely bow to the inevitable, recognize their bluff had been called, and sink into humiliated acquiescence. If logic counted for anything in war and diplomacy, there was no logical reason for any country, other than the unfortunate Poland, to contemplate war with Germany in the late summer of 1939.

The Poles, imbued with the kind of stubborn bravery that now appears quixotic, were determined to defend every inch of their country. Having both witnessed and participated in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia the year before, their policy since the spring of 1939 had been one of intransigent resistance to any of Hitler's demands. In different circumstances they might have been willing to discuss the fate of Danzig and the return of that overwhelmingly German city to the Reich. No doubt, too, arrangements

could have been made to construct a transit corridor through West Prussia to their port city of Gdynia. A revival of their own non-aggression pact with Germany might have been a diplomatic goal worth pursuing. But since March 1939, and in particular since receiving Britain's guarantee which the French had endorsed, they were in no mood to concede anything. However, if this was the predominant feeling regarding Germany, it also applied to their neighbor to the east, the Soviet Union. To the dismay of their Western patrons, the Polish government was inflexibly opposed to any form of military collaboration with the Soviet Union. The consequence of Soviet troops deployed in Poland's defense, it was reasoned, would be no more than an 'excuse to occupy Polish territory permanently.'<sup>75</sup> What the Poles thought they had was a blank check; an unequivocal copper-bottomed Anglo-French obligation to fight Germany on their behalf. With this in their locker they departed from the policy which any buffer state must adopt if it is to survive; the playing of one great-power neighbor against the other. In the belief that Anglo-French assurances of protection offered all the defense they needed against Germany the Poles discounted the need to make friends with the other neighboring adversarial power. Consequently the fourth partition of Poland was set in motion.

Western leaders' interest in Poland over the previous five months was no more than instrumental in nature. They had made commitments to Poland—and Romania too—which became so precipitate they now sought to qualify. That which had appeared firm at the end of March was by August presented as conditional. They wanted a Poland flexible on territorial questions, but above all, a Poland that would seek and embrace near-to-hand allies. The merest glance at the map told them that the Soviet Union—very much cold-shouldered during the Czech crisis of the previous year—was a necessary partner in any putative alliance credible enough to deter Hitler. We now know, of course, that the Soviet leadership played a double game that summer: conducting wearying negotiations with Britain and France, while reserving the *volte face* option of concluding a non-aggression pact with Germany. Though much has been written on Soviet intentions in the later 1930s it will probably never be established with any certainty exactly when, or for what precise reason, the Soviet leadership decided friendship with Germany was a safer option than any Anglo-French-Polish entanglement. Nor, in all likelihood, will it ever be firmly established how much Anglo-French lack of vigor in pursuit of a Soviet defensive alliance contributed to that decision. What we do know is that when news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact seeped out—a day or so before the actual signing—the reaction in London and Paris was one of indignant surprise but not necessarily of dismay.

In neither capital was reaction to the bomb Hitler had thought he had detonated hysterical. Some historians subscribe to a lingering spirit of appeasement view of Western leaders and their responses to Hitler's diplomatic

*coup*,<sup>6</sup> but there were few in positions of authority whose behavior suggested they sought only to wriggle out of the Polish commitment. The men of Munich were still in office, but if they thought, as allegedly they had done in September 1938, that any price was worth paying to avert war, they did not show it. As with any new and surprise development, not everyone formed quite the same initial view. Hankey, the recently retired cabinet secretary and soon to be a member of the war cabinet, noted 'how helpless we are to [save] Poland,'<sup>7</sup> and Henderson, the ambassador in Berlin, regretted having 'led [the Poles] up the garden path.'<sup>8</sup> But just as such thoughts did not amount to a desire to repudiate commitments, even those who had disliked the summer-long diplomatic pursuit of the Soviet Union understood that there was an undertaking to aid Poland which would have to be honored. Chips Channon gloomily realized that were the Poles to resist 'we automatically go to war,'<sup>9</sup> though Victor Cazalet, a fellow Conservative MP, did not think Germany had gained much from the pact.<sup>10</sup> Cadogan at the Foreign Office shared that view, and was glad to see 'the PM quite firm about [it] not altering things.'<sup>11</sup> From Paris, ambassador Phipps reported that French morale was high and that Daladier like Chamberlain, believed 'only firmness could save the situation.'<sup>12</sup> The general mood was that despite the Soviet Union's *volte face*, Hitler could still be deterred. Such may have been wishful thinking, and certainly it has become traditional for historians to castigate the old gang of western leaders for their invincible ignorance, misguided optimism, and other sundry thought crimes. But whatever their intellectual shortcomings, their spirit was good in late August 1939. They may have failed to deter Hitler absolutely, and they certainly failed to help Poland in any material sense once war broke out. Yet they showed considerable nerve and diplomatic resourcefulness in demonstrating their determination to resist German aggression with 'all the forces at their command.'<sup>13</sup>

Such signs of Anglo-French resolution puzzled Hitler enough to make him contemplate a pause in his program. That the British should respond to his latest protestations of respect and affection by signing with the Poles a treaty of mutual assistance on 25 August was another indication that things were not going entirely as planned. Most ominous, and in its way depressing, was news that came the same day from Italy. Worked on by British and French diplomats operating independently in Rome—aided and abetted by Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister Ciano—Mussolini gave notice of a *volte face* of his own. Italy, he informed Hitler, would be glad to join with Germany in a war against Poland, but was as yet materially unprepared to fight alongside Germany against Britain and France. Hitler, by all accounts, took the news very badly.<sup>14</sup> His humor was not improved the next day when he saw the list, 'enough to kill a bull—if a bull could read it,'<sup>15</sup> of raw materials and military equipment the Italians said they needed in the event of war. Suspecting, correctly, that the British and French knew that Italy had now, for all intents and purposes, declared her-

self neutral,<sup>16</sup> Hitler decided to delay. Orders to postpone the invasion of Poland, set for 26 August, were hastily—and not always successfully—sent out. The new date was set for 1 September.

The story of Mussolini's sudden and unexpected opting for nonbelligerence is usually told only in terms of its delaying impact on Hitler, and on how, while leaving his determination to invade Poland intact, it induced him to try what Halder in his diaries described as 'driv[ing] wedges between the British, French and Poles'.<sup>17</sup> From there the obscure shuttle diplomacy of the Swedish industrialist Birger Dahlerus is described amidst much complicated detail on the drafting of letters, ambassadorial audiences, much discussion on the status of Danzig, and proposals about the Polish corridor. Hitler's final demand that a Polish plenipotentiary be sent to Berlin so as to be, late at night and in the manner of Schuschnigg and Hacha, bullied into submission, features strongly in the narratives of those who hold stock in the 'suicidal irrationality of Hitlerite Nazism' view.<sup>18</sup> It also figures in the accounts of those seeking to demonstrate how arch-appeasers in London and Paris were 'working like beavers . . . [in] another attempt at a Munich and selling out on the Poles'.<sup>19</sup>

By turning away from the Italian dimension and using it only as an incident in a complex chronology of events, mainstream accounts of the road to war miss matters of real importance. The light Mussolini's adopted stance of nonbelligerence sheds on contemporary thinking about likely outcomes; both between peace and war, and on who would be the likely loser should war break out is in itself intriguing. Mussolini's instinct was to back winners. That he was persuaded, perhaps by his ambassador in Berlin, Attolico, or Ciano in Rome, to stand aloof from 'the great tragedy which is about to overtake the German people',<sup>20</sup> is proof enough that in the late summer of 1939 he reckoned that Hitler's preparedness to fight a European war outstripped Germany's capacity to wage one. Of greater interest, though, is the emboldening effect Mussolini's neutral stance had on decision makers in Paris and London. They were mightily encouraged by it; not merely because they believed it aided them in their diplomatic efforts to deter Germany, but also because it lowered their bellicosity threshold. If war had to come, they reasoned, there would be much to regret. But if it did come, war against Germany alone was not such a bad proposition after all.

The British and French governments had always regarded the Italian position very seriously, and earlier that summer there had been much discussion of the need to 'pay the high price which [Italy] would doubtless demand to stay neutral'.<sup>21</sup> The noncost achievement of this in late August was therefore a considerable bonus. In the wake of the nonaggression pact they detected '[d]istinct signs of wobble,' and when they knew that the likelihood of Mussolini 'ratting from Germany' had hardened into a certainty,<sup>22</sup> their understandable reaction was to feel that their line of 'at once firm yet unprovocative' resolution was beginning to pay dividends.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the



Italians 'had the wind up' and had not needed much pushing,<sup>24</sup> but what had been achieved was, all the same, a neat form of tit-for-tat. Hitler, having, courtesy of the Soviet Union, extricated himself from the strategic dilemma of fighting a war on two fronts, was now confronted with an assertive France which, courtesy of the Italians, had pulled the same kind of trick. With Italy absent from the equation Gamelin, the army commander in chief, was able to report with confidence to Daladier that '[w]e can face the struggle . . . we now have a respectable parity of equipment.'<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in London the admiralty was able to breathe more easily about supply lines and bases in the Mediterranean. With the Spanish reaction to news of the German-Soviet *détente* known to be lukewarm, and the Japanese positively hostile, the prospect of war against three enemies at the same time, which had so oppressed the British chiefs of staff for years, began to recede. Amidst the definite feeling in London that Hitler's 'new deal of Russia in place of Japan, Musso and Spain was a very poor exchange [which] made things better for us', the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, could cheerfully confide that 'Hitler was now in a fix.'<sup>26</sup>

Hitler no doubt saw things differently. But the notion that he had weakened his position by making new friendships at the cost of losing old allies was a prevalent Anglo-French perception. At the time critics of government on both sides of the Channel, and many historians since, suspected or thought they smelled, in their governments' willingness to negotiate with Hitler, a hankering for a second Munich.<sup>27</sup> However, such criticisms are generally ill-founded. There was a willingness to negotiate. Foreign ministries, after all, exist for such purposes. Coupled with the realization that Poland should not be, indeed could not be, bullied into accepting German demands, Western leaders viewed their position in late August 1939 as one of strength not, as it had been in September 1938, weakness. The German leadership was considered to be in a state of nervous isolation. Halifax certainly thought this was the case and meant it when he said that 'negotiations [would be] very stiff and then Hitler would be beat.'<sup>28</sup>

Such bullish remarks by Halifax on the eve of war have been used, with good effect over recent years, to rescue his historical reputation from the dustbin into which discredited arch-appeasers are dumped. It is therefore curious, and perhaps a little unfair, that his French opposite number, Bonnet, has not enjoyed similar rehabilitation. For Bonnet, despite his 'twisted ambitions [and] deathly fear of war as something which threatened his command of his office',<sup>29</sup> had ideas on resolving the crisis which were not so very different from Halifax's. It is true Bonnet wished to pressure the Poles into ceding Danzig to the Reich (coinciding with Daladier's and Halifax's realistic assessment that Danzig was a lost cause anyway), and it is also true he grasped at the straw of Mussolini's proposal to stage a five-power peace conference on 2 September, the day after the German invasion of Poland had begun, with embarrassing alacrity. But for all Bonnet's desire

to keep the diplomatic door ajar longer than other Western leaders, Halifax included, there was an intellectual basis to his judgement. It was not grounded in that pathological hankering for a second Munich which his detractors and the appeasement-detectors are so quick to sniff out. Instead it was a Munich-in-reverse that he envisaged, hinging on the logical assumption that as Mussolini had an interest in averting war and knew the British and French were not bluffing, his role would be to broker a deal (involving plebiscites, exchanges of populations, and international guarantees) which in conserving Poland's vital interests would still afford Hitler some face-saving formula. As it was Bonnet was overruled by Daladier anyway. The French premier, in literally turning his back on his foreign minister, declared he would rather resign than embark on negotiations with the Germans *in situ*, and pronounced himself ready to 'pick up the gauntlet' that the German attack on Poland had thrown down.<sup>30</sup> In adopting the line that 'no negotiation should be entered upon . . . before the threat of force had been withdrawn,'<sup>31</sup> Daladier ensured that only the thinnest of wedges was driven between France and Britain.

Of course, save for the odd crackpot, nobody in either country positively wanted war with Germany in the late summer of 1939. However there is very little evidence that anyone, save perhaps Bonnet, was that desperate to avoid it. Indeed it is the sheer undesperateness of diplomatic efforts to halt Hitler with measures short of war that emerges as the characteristic feature of the last week of peace. On the British side this may have had to do with what has been described as a retreat into 'one of those profoundly non-realistic states of conviction' by which a nonsense can be made of 'realism.'<sup>32</sup> It may also be that a sense of shame over betraying the Czechs so cravenly at Munich the year before played its part, and that confused but powerful notions of honor surfaced in the public consciousness which demanded of the government that if the Germans used force the British should take up arms to oppose them. That the French, for all the supposed logical basis of their national thinking, should popularly adopt a shoulder-shrugging *il faut en finir* attitude to war with Germany is an often recalled description of fatalistic resignation.<sup>33</sup> But it also reflected a degree of determination and Anglo-French mutual confidence which had been conspicuously absent in September 1938.<sup>34</sup> The people, it seems, were in good heart and, though much has been written to suggest otherwise, their leaders, in the main, were too.

For all that we know how horribly it turned out, it is historically inaccurate to describe the mood in Britain and France on the eve of war in terms of grim foreboding or of retreats into unreason. Halifax was no strategist but when he said that the situation 'was not so militarily catastrophic in 1939 as it would have been in 1938'<sup>35</sup> he was echoing the military chiefs of staffs' 'remarkable recovery in confidence'<sup>36</sup> concerning a war which, should it break out, would leave Germany with no allies and the dubious asset of unreliable friendships. Across from Whitehall at the war office, Pownall, the

Director of Military Operations, was positively optimistic. Conscious as he was of the shortcomings of British rearmament, especially as far as the army was concerned, he was nevertheless reassured by the absence of flurry and worry that had been so evident at the time of the Czech crisis. Made sick by the memory of the frantic flag-waving of August 1914, he much preferred the mood of quiet determination he felt all around him.

Moreover, he thought it justified. The strategic situation was better than he had dared to hope less than a month previously; with fewer enemies to face he believed the moment was right to 'finish off the Nazi regime this time'. If war were to come, he noted, '[w]e can't lose it.'<sup>37</sup> The Poles, it was generally understood, would probably not be able to resist a German assault for long. Nor, it was appreciated, could any direct help be given to them. But it was assumed their fight against Germany would be vigorous enough to deplete Hitler's resources considerably and add to his problems of replenishment. In the west, provided the French could resist what they called *une attaque brusquée*—and the chances of success given that eventuality were, it was thought, all the greater now that Italy was neutral—the avoidance of early defeat would bring certain eventual victory.

## DECLARATIONS OF WAR

The German invasion of Poland began before dawn on 1 September 1939. Under the pretense of a few SS inspired staged incidents the previous evening—a faked Polish attack on the radio relay station at Gleiwitz being the best-known—the German government, claiming Poland as aggressor, justified military action of a policing nature without a formal declaration of war.<sup>38</sup> In Danzig the *Landespolizei* attacked the Polish post office and railway station, while the old German battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* bombarded the Polish shore battery sited on the Westerplatte. There were also numerous attempts, as ingenious as they were largely unsuccessful, by groups of suitably disguised assault engineers to seize bridges and railway tunnels just inside the border.

From a military point of view none of this really mattered. Hitler had committed the bulk of his forces to the Polish campaign, aiming to trap and destroy the Polish armed forces within the three week space of time before the onset of the September rains. Whatever the diplomatic complications of the previous ten days, the *Wehrmacht* was as poised and ready as it could be. Tactically, many Polish units were caught unawares by the suddenness and weight of the assault, but the German army was fully mobilized. Some sixty divisions were used in the invasion, many more, apparently than had been available for the original jump off date of 26 August.<sup>39</sup> Whether this meant that Hitler so discounted the possibility of Anglo-French intervention that he felt free to leave his rear—Germany's western borders—thinly protected, or that he was determined to stake everything on a speedy decision

in Poland before transferring forces to the west, the German forces struck fast and hard. Major cities, Cracow, Katowice, and the capital, Warsaw, were bombed on the first day. Poland's scanty and largely obsolete air force was stationed far back, though the airfields it needed for forward sorties were particularly hard hit. Many infantry formations, positioned too far forward for prudent defense, were overrun.

Despite the emphatic nature of the German attack, news of it filtered out slowly enough to the rest of the world to make it difficult to pinpoint exactly when Western leaders realized that war—as distinct from the border incidents of the diplomatic war of nerves that had been waged over the previous ten days—was upon them. Naturally they had known of the German troop concentrations in Pomerania, East Prussia, and Silesia. Their military intelligence was quite good. But they had lived with Hitler's demands and German mobilization long enough to hope, and even perhaps believe, that their own steadfastness and tenacity were gradually defusing the threat to peace. Even the various twists of a drawn out diplomatic crisis can be, to those involved, internalized and rendered routine, and certainly the notion that Hitler was 'at bottom a coward,'<sup>40</sup> that his nerve would crack first, and that he would effect some face saving climb down, was prevalent enough in London to lead to the supposition that, as Chamberlain put it, 'every hour that passes without a catastrophe . . . [adds] to the weight of the slowly accumulating antiwar forces.'<sup>41</sup>

Such optimism, of course, proved misplaced. But Chamberlain was only echoing the sentiments of his foreign secretary and government strongman, Halifax. Cool throughout the crisis, and apparently convinced that with the 'moral issues . . . now clear,'<sup>42</sup> the odds on war were lengthening, he could reassure ministers over lunch on 31 August, in one of his less fortunate hunting metaphors, that in Hitler he had 'the first view of the beaten fox.'<sup>43</sup> That night the dog-tired Cadogan could only note that Hitler was 'hesitant and trying all sorts of dodges, including last-minute bluff'.<sup>44</sup> Telephoned at 7 A.M. the next morning with news of German troops crossing the Polish frontier, it took him a while to realize that Hitler had placed his military cards firmly on the table.

Information was hard to come by on the morning of 1 September. There were Reuters reports, and coded telephone messages from Kennard, the British ambassador in Warsaw, naming places the Germans had bombed which the foreign office people had never heard of. To add to the incredulity of it all, Theodor Kordt, the German *chargé d'affaires*, told Halifax, probably truthfully, that he had no information, and telephoned later to deny that any bombing of Polish towns had taken place. While the German radio spoke only of the annexation of Danzig, border incidents, and retaliatory assaults on military targets, Count Raczyński, the Polish ambassador, relayed to Halifax reports of German troops crossing the frontier in four places, and a verbal list of yet more towns bombed. All this was before