

## Holding out for a hero

From *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill; Alone, 1932 – 1940*, by William Manchester:

The appeasers distrusted France, blamed her for the punitive Versailles clauses, felt Germany had been wronged, and were determined to make restitution. Lord Lothian declared that it was Britain's moral obligation to support the Germans in their struggle to "escape from encirclement" (the encircling powers, presumably, being France, Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg) "to a position of balance." He neglected to add that **any shift in the status quo would mean the liquidation of legitimate governments.** At Versailles the 1914-1918 holocaust had been blamed on the Germans. Now the fashionable scapegoat was Germany's ancient enemy. "Lady Astor," *The Week* reported, "is obsessed with a vivid personal dislike of the French." As late as November 7, 1936, a member of the cabinet told his ministerial colleagues that Francophobia was increasing in England because the French were an obstacle to Britain "getting on terms with the dictator powers."

The British yearning to accommodate their former enemies took peculiar forms. Upper-class Englishmen had been bred to handle foreign affairs with grace and subtlety. But many of the new breed of German diplomats were boorish. Therefore, envoys from Whitehall, eager to court them, tried to teach the Wilhelmstrasse manners. On August 22, 1932, for example, Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary of the cabinet and of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), sent a long memorandum to Prime Minister MacDonald, expressing apprehension over the likelihood that the Germans' claim to *Wehrfreiheit* – the right to rearm – would be "conducted with their usual clumsy and tactless way," which "might have a disastrous effect." He proposed making a demarche, after consulting the French, urging the Germans to postpone their demands. This failing, Britain should attempt to persuade the Wilhelmstrasse "to make their proposals in as harmless a form as possible."

The foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, had his own euphemism for the rebuilding of the Reich's armed might. It was "parity". His resolve – and the cabinet's – was to sanction an expanding German army while disarming the French, until, after an infinite number of carefully monitored phases, both nations possessed the same number of soldiers, tanks, artillery pieces, warplanes and warships.

*The Times* thought it "essential" that the Germans be permitted "to build the forbidden weapons at once." Restoring Germany's martial might would restore her pride and strengthen her feelings of security; then Germany and England, "in company," would launch a program of genuine, large-scale disarmament. The prime minister was first impressed, then inspired. Thus was the seed of the extraordinary MacDonald plan

implanted. Its first tenet was that England, as the conscience of Europe, would divest herself of her most formidable weapons. ***The press, the universities, labour unions, and every sounding board of public opinion would enthusiastically endorse the plan.*** When the League of Nations Union conducted a nationwide poll, the Peace Ballot, it found that 10.4 million Britons favoured international disarmament, while 870,000 – about 8 percent – opposed it.

[Emphasis ours.]

From '[The day Churchill saved Britain from the Nazis](#)' by Boris Johnson:

..David Lloyd George had been so dazzled by the Führer that he compared him to George Washington. Hitler was a “born leader”, declared the befuddled former British prime minister. He wished that Britain had “a man of his supreme quality at the head of affairs in our country today”. This from the hero of the First World War!

*The Daily Mail* had long been campaigning for Hitler to be given a free hand in eastern Europe, the better to beat up the bolshies. “If Hitler did not exist,” said the Mail, “all western Europe might now be clamouring for such a champion.”

*The Times* had been so pro-appeasement that the editor, Geoffrey Dawson, described how he used to go through the proofs taking out anything that might offend the Germans. The press baron Beaverbrook himself had sacked Churchill from his *Evening Standard* column on the grounds that he was too hard on the Nazis. Respectable liberal opinion – theatre types like John Gielgud, Sybil Thorndike, GB Shaw – was lobbying for the government to “give consideration” to talks.

Of course, the mood had changed in the last year; feelings against Germany had hardened. All I am saying – in mitigation of Halifax – is that, in seeking peace, he had the support of many British people, at all levels of society. And so the argument went on, between Halifax and the prime minister, for that crucial hour.

It was a stalemate; and it was now – according to most historians – that Churchill played his masterstroke. He announced that the meeting would be adjourned, and would begin again at 7pm. He then convened the Cabinet of 25, ministers from every department – many of whom were to hear him as prime minister for the first time.

The bigger the audience, the more fervid the atmosphere; and now he made an appeal to the emotions. Before the full Cabinet he made a quite astonishing speech – without any hint of the intellectual restraint he had been obliged to display in the smaller meeting.

He began calmly enough: “I have thought carefully in these last days whether it was part of my duty to consider entering into negotiations with That Man.”

And he ended with this almost Shakespearean climax: “And I am convinced that every one of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender. If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.”

At this the men in that room were so moved that they cheered and shouted, and some of them ran round and clapped him on the back.

Churchill had ruthlessly dramatised and personalised the debate. By the time the War Cabinet resumed at 7pm, the debate was over; Halifax abandoned his cause. Churchill had the clear and noisy backing of the Cabinet.

Within a year of that decision – to fight and not to negotiate – 30,000 British men, women and children had been killed, almost all of them at German hands. Weighing up those alternatives – a humiliating peace, or a slaughter of the innocents – it is hard to imagine any modern British politician having the guts to take Churchill's line.

He had the vast and almost reckless moral courage to see that fighting on would be appalling, but that surrender would be even worse. He was right.

On 23 June 2016, 17.4 million Britons voted to leave the European Union – the largest vote for anything, ever, in the history of the United Kingdom. It is impossible to watch the Brexit process two years later without being reminded of the 1930s appeasement crisis – when seemingly almost the entire British nation, including its politicians, its intellectuals, its media, most of its major institutions, and its civil service, whilst fearful of the threat of advancing Bolshevism, fell under the spell of an untrustworthy continental dictator negotiating in bad faith. One man could see what they could not, and was willing to fight to defend the cause of democracy and national self-interest. So where is our Churchill today ?

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