

World War II

In the late 1930's Britain's foreign policy stagnated; there were too many problems to worry about at home. While domestic policies still had to find a way out of the unemployment mess, it was vainly hoped that the League of Nations would keep the peace. While the aggressive moves by Germany, Italy and Japan may not have been totally ignored in Westminster; their implications were not fully grasped. It seems incredible, in retrospect, how all the signs of a forthcoming major war were conveniently ignored.

In Germany, Hitler had become Chancellor on July 30, 1933, on a rising tide of nationalism and economic unrest. After he proclaimed the Third Reich in March, his regime was given dictatorial powers. Also in March, the Nazis opened their first concentration camp for Jews, gypsies and political prisoners. In August, Hitler became President of the Reich at the death of Hindenburg. He announced open conscription early in 1935, in defiance of the conditions laid down at Versailles. Unencumbered by obsolete equipment and even more obsolete thinking that hindered the British and the French, the German republic was able to rebuild her army and airforce from scratch. They were to be used soon in a bid to dominate Europe.

Italy had entered the scramble for Africa in 1881 by taking over Assab in northern Ethiopia. It then expanded its holdings in the East African highlands. In 1887 the Italian-Ethiopian War began. Three years later, Italy made Assab the basis of an Eritrean colony. By 1896, however, a series of defeats led to the Italians withdrawing from their protectorate. In 1906, a Tripartite Pact declared the independence of Ethiopia but divided the country into British, French and Italian spheres of interest.

In Italy, in November 1922, general fears of the spread of Communism led King Victor Emmanuel to summon Benito Mussolini to form a ministry in which he would be given dictatorial powers to restore order and bring about reforms. Earlier in the year, Mussolini had led his black-shirt Fascists into Rome. He secured his fascist dictatorship the following year through political chicanery and began protesting the terms of Versailles in 1930.

When Italian and Ethiopian troops clashed on the frontier between Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia in 1934, Mussolini had an excuse to invade Ethiopia. After his troops had occupied Addis Abbaba, he announced the annexation of Ethiopia and joined Eritrea and Italian Somaliland to create Italian East Africa. The League of Nations proved totally ineffective to prevent this seizure of the last bastion of native rule in Africa.

Lack of British resolve against the ambitions of Mussolini may have spurred Hitler to act. In March 1936, at the height of the crisis in Ethiopia, he sent his armies into the Rhineland. France was afraid to react without British support. It proceeded to fortify its Maginot Line as Hitler began to fortify the Rhineland. The dictators of Germany and Italy then signed the pact known as the Rome-Berlin Axis. Both leaders then supported General Franco's fascists in the Spanish Civil War (1936- 39). Britain and France stood back for fear of precipitating a general

European war; in their efforts to appease, they protested but did nothing except to embolden Hitler even further. His troops marched into Austria in March 1938. There was no resistance.

Hitler's next move was to surround Bohemia and then demand modifications to the Czech frontier, including the Sudetenland (with a large German population). Fearing a catastrophic war, and with the vivid memory of the carnage of World War I in mind, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain agreed, along with the French Premier, to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany. He thought he had bought "peace with honor." Hitler then showed his true intention by seizing the rest of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain finally saw what Germany intended to dominate Europe, and his extension of a guarantee to Poland, a country which geography he was incapable of aiding, practically ensured war.

In Britain, though there were two million unemployed, but things were generally looking prosperous following the slump of the Great Depression. Nevertheless, it was a totally unprepared Britain that declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939; two days after Hitler's armies had invaded Poland. Conscription was ordered for all men 20 years and older. Somewhat better prepared France followed Britain by declaring war on Germany.

German armies swept through Poland in 18 days. The allies turned to Russia for support, but Stalin had ideas of his own, coming to a marriage of convenience with Hitler in which Poland became a pawn in the hands of both. Stalin also took advantage of the situation to attack Finland.

Britain then prepared for total war. Cities were blacked out, rationing was imposed and rigidly enforced; children from the larger cities were moved into the countryside, clouds of barrage balloons filled the English skies, housewives turned in their pots and pans for scrap, iron fences, railing and gateposts disappeared into blast furnaces, gas masks were issued to every single person, including babies; total blackout was imposed and rigorously enforced by air raid wardens. While the country waited to see if the French could successfully resist the Nazi armies, British beaches were mined, protected by barbed wire; tank traps and other obstacles to invading forces appeared everywhere; air raid shelters were dug in back gardens and London subway stations prepared for their influx of nightly sleepers.

Trapped behind their so-called "impenetrable" Maginot Line, the French could not hold back the German tide, and the new weapon of war, the Blitzkrieg, swept all through it. Hitler's legions first occupied Denmark and then brushed aside a Franco-British force sent to help Norway.

Beginning their march to the Channel in the Ardennes, after they had easily bypassed the Maginot Line, German forces took only five days to take Holland. They then raced forward at lightning speed to capture Paris. In one of the most successful campaigns in the history of war, German forces soon controlled France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway and Romania, leaving Britain alone in the West to face the Nazi hordes.

In May 1940, after a disastrous British attempt to force the Germans out of Narvik, Norway, a humiliated Chamberlain (who had earlier crowed that "Herr Hitler had missed the boat") resigned in favor of Winston Churchill. The 65-year-old veteran of many a political campaign was to prove a remarkable leader. The country quickly rallied behind him to expend its "blood, toil, tears and sweat" to eventually emerge victorious in what was to become a long, bloody war that, if it did not involve nearly every country on earth, certainly affected them.

British industry mobilized every person not on military service into production. Even the old and retired were called on to play their part as plane spotters, air-raid wardens and night watchmen. But single women played a major role. They had to report immediately to work in war industries or to work on the nation's farms in the so-called Women's Land Army. Women also entered the armed services by the thousands, to work as radar operators, mechanics, truck drivers and pilots in non-combat roles, even the retired.

After the complete collapse of France in June 1940, when it signed an armistice, Mussolini entered the war on the side of Germany, believing that Britain was doomed and that he could pick up rich spoils in Africa. When France fell, the British army was forced to evacuate the continent at Dunkirk, but somehow halting a German division at Arras, managed to save most of its cadre to train millions of new soldiers it needed to defend its Empire. One of the strangest fleets in history had rescued the bulk of the British Expeditionary Force from the burning beaches of Dunkirk. In the meantime, Soviet troops entered the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to incorporate them into the USSR.

New Prime Minister Winston Churchill informed the British people that the Battle for France was over: the Battle for Britain was about to begin. He stressed that Hitler would have to break Britain in order to win the war, and that no nation would be safe from sinking into the resulting darkness, not even the United States.

When France formed a "Vichy" government under Marshal Petain, the Royal Navy destroyed the French fleet anchored at Oran in North Africa. In the Atlantic, German U-boats were destroying thousands upon thousands of tons of allied shipping, but Britain precariously held out (those of us who were living in Britain at the time realize just how near to collapse we were). All Britain could do was to hang on, to fight on until the situation might eventually change. Hitler expected Britain to come to terms, but Churchill's defiant riposte was that he wasn't on speaking terms with Adolph Hitler.

Realizing that she would not come to terms, Hitler then planned an invasion of England, but first he would have to destroy the Royal Air Force. The task seemed easy enough; he had a decided advantage in the number of planes and in trained pilots. From airfields in conquered France, the English coast was only a few minutes away. At a time when the war at sea was rapidly turning in Germany's favor, the Battle of Britain began with an attack of German bombers on England, July 10, 1940 and artillery began shelling the English coast. The final assault was planned for August 13th. Hitler planned to have 125,000 men ashore by the end of the second day. Plans were meticulously drawn up for the government of a conquered Britain.

There was great fear throughout Britain during that late summer. In many villages, church bells rang in the mistaken belief that the invasion had begun. There wasn't much to stop the invader. Though 1,500,000 men in Britain had joined the Home Guard, they had only 70,000 rifles; the regular army had left most of its hardware behind in the evacuation from France. All that stood between the German armies and the planned invasion of Britain was the Fighter Command of the Royal Air Force.

During the early air war, the German Air Force conducted over 1500 missions a day over England, concentrating mainly on airfields and radar installations. Hitler's second-in-command Herman Goering miscalculated the resilience of the Royal Air Force. When British planes bombed Berlin to retaliate for bombs dropped on London (the German pilots had lost their way and missed their intended targets), Hitler determined to teach the British people, those "night gangsters," a lesson. Insisting on a thousand-fold revenge, he ordered the Luftwaffe to destroy London. It was a grave error.

The British Air Force did not rise to the bait to defend London; they conserved what was left of their strength. More important, their airfields (and pilots) were given a much-needed respite to rebuild. Skilled use of a secret new weapon, Radar, then gave them a decided advantage over incoming German airplanes.

Though almost exhausted and down to its last few pilots, the RAF fought on in what was becoming a war of attrition in the air. Eventually, the heavy losses sustained by the Luftwaffe put an end to any real chances of German forces crossing the Channel. On September 17, following decisive losses, Hitler postponed the invasion of Britain. Instead of keeping up the pressure, the frustrated German dictator decided to ignore Goering's pleas for just a few more days to destroy Britain's air forces and turned eastward, to attack Russia.

In June 1941 when the German armed divisions poured into the east, Britain breathed a huge sigh of relief. Hitler's hatred of Communism blinded him to the risks involved; it was a colossal mistake. His involvement in the Balkans, where he feared a British attack against his flank from Greece, had delayed his assault on Russia. The oncoming winter would prove to be a deciding factor in the holocaust that ensued.

In September 1940, following a total blockade of the British Isles ordered by Hitler, U-boats sank 160,000 tons of British shipping. (In a time of great food shortages, even the Royal Family was issued ration books). These were called "the happy times" for German U-boat crews, idolized by adoring crowds as they set out into the Atlantic to wreak havoc on merchant ships bringing supplies from America. The British people, huddled in their air-raid shelters awaited the worst. Their defiance of the might of the German air force, their courage in carrying on "business as usual" and their slogan "London can Take it" (relayed to the United States by radio commentators such as Edward R. Murrow) had a profound effect upon American opinion, especially upon the President.

In opposition to many in America who still thought that Britain's total defeat was only a matter of time, and a very short time at that, President Roosevelt came to the aid of the beleaguered island nation. He ordered his fleet to sink German submarines on sight. To meet the U-boat challenge, the US then provided Britain with Lend-Lease supplies in addition to handing over to the Royal Navy 50 much-needed destroyers. In November, British ships destroyed the Italian fleet at Taranto, putting it, like most of the French fleet before it, out of action for the rest of the war. Mussolini's grand boast of dominating what he called "mare nostrum" was defeated. The Royal Navy managed to keep control of the Mediterranean throughout the war.

In September, Japan had concluded a pact with the Axis powers in order to fulfil her designs on the Pacific, ranging from Hong Kong to Australia. On December 7, 1941 she seized her opportunity to attack. On the "day of infamy" so strongly proclaimed by Roosevelt, the Imperial Air force crippled the US Navy at Pearl Harbor. On December 11, Germany declared war on the US. Japanese forces then captured the British possessions of Malaya, Burma, Hong Kong and Singapore, the great symbol of the British Empire. They then advanced practically unopposed to the borders of India in the West and Australia in the South.

The Turn of the Tide

It seemed that the Japanese were unstoppable, but as had the Germans, they over-reached themselves. A string of successes was halted in May 1942 when they sustained heavy losses in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Germany too, suffered its first defeat when Hitler underestimated the strategic importance of Egypt. There, the British Eighth Army (the "Desert Rats") under Montgomery destroyed a German fighting machine of 250,000 men at the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942. After being blocked by the winter snows and the fierce resistance of the Russians, in February 1943, a huge German army surrendered at Stalingrad.

Later in the year, Allied forces recaptured Sicily to invade Southern Italy, and all through the year, Russian troops continued to inflict heavy casualties on the Germans, who lost over 2,000 tanks and 1,392 airplanes at the decisive Battle of Kursk. The tide of war had turned irrevocably on the side of the allies. It was still heavy going in Italy, but bit by bit allied armies advanced up the peninsular, despite determined German resistance, recapturing Rome to bring Italy out of the war. The whole country had been taken by the spring of 1945. It was now time for the allies to invade fortress Europe.

On the sixth of June 1944, "D-Day" the invasion of the Continent by allied forces in Operation Overlord marked the beginning of the end of the war in the West. Years of meticulous planning and careful preparation paid off and hundreds of thousands of allied soldiers were landed within a few days with their equipment. Deceptive messages had led the Germans to concentrate their forces around the port of Calais. An expected German counterattack at the landing beaches did not come.

Some failures in the re-conquest of western Europe inevitably ensued, notably the efforts of Montgomery to end an early stalemate in Normandy by the airborne attempt to capture bridges over the Rhine, but steady progress brought British, Canadian, French and American

forces into Germany. A failure of allied intelligence to spot 24 Nazi divisions gave the enemy temporary success in the Ardennes, at the Battle of the Bulge, but it was beaten back with heavy German losses. Hitler's exhausted forces in the west were finally brushed aside.

Back home, Londoners were once again forced into their underground shelters as V-1 rockets began to fall upon the city with terrifying effects. By September 1944, Germany still had enough resources to produce a thousand V-2 rockets a month, most of which were directed toward London. Only defeat of Germany would end the threat. In March 1945, the allies crossed the Rhine. In the east, a new Russian offensive began with 3,000,000 men polishing off one German division after another on an inexorable march to Berlin. In April, east met west as allied forces met with the Russians at the Elbe. On May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered.

The fall of Saipan in July had the same effect in the East. The War in Europe came to an end on May 8. The news eclipsed the news from Burma, where British forces under William Slim had stopped the Japanese efforts to invade India through Assam. By May 6, 1945, Burma had been retaken. The re-conquest was the most successful of all the campaigns British forces had undertaken during the whole war. It was the climax of a most difficult but brilliantly executed campaign.

The War in the Pacific came to an end on August 14, 1945. Japan surrendered only after the American Airforce dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.