

Prologue

The Storm Breaks

On the evening of Friday 1 September 1939, the former First Lord of the Admiralty, Alfred Duff Cooper, changed as usual into his dinner jacket before joining his wife, Diana, and three fellow Conservatives at the Savoy Grill. A day of brilliant sunshine had given way to a balmy evening and there was nothing within the splendid art deco dining room to denote a crisis. Emerging later, however, the Coopers were bewildered to find themselves in complete darkness – a result of the hastily imposed blackout. Taxis were nowhere to be found and the couple were beginning to wonder how they were going to get home when ‘Bendor’ Grosvenor, 2nd Duke of Westminster, appeared in his Rolls-Royce and offered them a lift. Gladly, the Coopers accepted, only to regret their decision when the Duke began to inveigh against the Jews, whom he held responsible for the coming war. Reminding himself that he and his wife were guests in the Duke’s car, Cooper, who had a volcanic temper, held his tongue. When, however, the Duke expressed his joy that Britain was not yet at war with Germany, since we were really Hitler’s ‘best friends’, the former First Lord could restrain himself no longer. Before making a swift exit at Victoria, he erupted, telling His Grace that he hoped Hitler would ‘soon find out that we were his most implacable and remorseless enemies’. The next day, Cooper was amused to hear that Westminster was going around saying that if Britain did end up going to war then it was all the fault of ‘the Jews and Duff Cooper’.¹

Twelve hours earlier, 1.5 million German soldiers, 2,000 aeroplanes and over 2,500 tanks had invaded Poland from the north, south and west. Luftwaffe bombers were currently laying waste to airfields and cities, while the Panzer divisions were well into their lightning dash

across the Polish countryside. In London, politicians and public alike felt sure that they were on the brink of war. Under the terms of the Anglo-Polish Agreement, signed just six days earlier, Britain was committed to coming to Poland's aid immediately following an attack. 'We are in the same boat now', the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, assured the Polish Ambassador, Count Edward Raczynski, that morning. 'England never breaks her word to her friends.'²

Later that day, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, raised cheers in the House of Commons when, banging his fist on the despatch box, he declared that 'the responsibility for this terrible catastrophe lies on the shoulders of one man – the German Chancellor, who has not hesitated to plunge the world into misery in order to serve his own senseless ambitions'. Hearing these words, the Conservative MP Edward 'Louis' Spears could not help recalling Chamberlain's boast, of only a year previously, to have secured 'peace for our time' at the Munich Conference. Now, however, the Prime Minister appeared firm, even bellicose. The Cabinet had authorised full mobilisation that morning, while the British Ambassador to Berlin had told the German Foreign Minister that if the German Government was not prepared to cease hostilities and withdraw its forces then 'His Majesty's Government' would 'without hesitation fulfil their obligations to Poland'. The British Government had, however, conspicuously failed to set a time limit on this semi-ultimatum.³

The next day, Saturday 2 September, the heat became heavy and oppressive. As MPs, unaccustomed to being in town over the weekend, struggled to entertain themselves, dark clouds began to marshal on the horizon; it was clear a storm was brewing. Meanwhile, precautions against the bombing onslaught which it was expected would follow Britain's declaration of war were continuing. Women were being evacuated to the country, following their children (most of whom had left the previous day) and most of the Old Masters from the National Gallery. Sandbags were piled in front of Government buildings while, overhead, an armada of barrage balloons floated listlessly. In a gesture of delusional futility the Duke of Windsor, the former Edward VIII, sent Hitler a telegram urging him to 'do his best for peace'.⁴

In the afternoon, crowds began to form in Whitehall as Cabinet Ministers arrived at Downing Street and MPs scurried to Parliament. The atmosphere, noted Rear-Admiral Tufton Beamish, Conservative

MP for Lewes, was markedly different to that of twenty-five years previously, when Britain had entered the First World War. 'Whitehall was then full of cheering crowds, with no thought of the millions to be killed, the conscription to come, the squalor and misery and chaos ... Now I see heavy hearts, clear minds and grim determination.'⁵

Members of Parliament were less calm. Disconcerted by the lack of precision in Chamberlain's statement the previous evening, they gathered in the Commons chamber at 2.45 p.m. expecting to hear that Britain was at war. Instead, Sir John Simon rose and explained that the Prime Minister had been delayed and would be making a statement later in the evening. Troubling rumours began to spread: the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, had proposed an international conference which the Cabinet were considering; the Labour Party had refused to join a coalition; the French were preparing to rat.

In order to kill time and calm their nerves, MPs indulged heavily in the Commons smoking room. 'The amount of alcohol being consumed was incredible!' recorded the former Cabinet Secretary Lord Hankey.⁶ 'There was a torrent of talk', recalled one Conservative MP. 'In every breast there was a gnawing anxiety about our guarantee to Poland.'⁷ 'We felt the honour of Britain vanishing before our eyes', noted another witness.⁸ Eventually, the bells rang out and MPs, filled with 'Dutch courage', piled back into the Chamber to hear what they assumed would be the belated declaration of war.⁹ The atmosphere was 'like a court awaiting the verdict of the jury'.¹⁰

At 7.42 p.m. Chamberlain entered and was cheered by his supporters. Two minutes later he was on his feet. Members leaned forward. 'One and all were keyed up for the announcement that war had been declared', wrote Louis Spears.¹¹ But it did not come. After speaking wearily of the Government's recent exchanges with Germany, the Prime Minister confirmed the rumours about an Italian proposal for a five-power conference to resolve the German-Polish dispute. Of course, he explained, it would be impossible to contemplate this while Poland was 'being subjected to invasion'. If, however, the German Government would 'agree to withdraw their forces, then His Majesty's Government would be willing to regard the position as being the same as it was before the German forces crossed the Polish frontier'. Indeed, they would be prepared to associate themselves with any negotiations which then ensued.¹²

The House was aghast. The Poles had suffered the most appalling bombardment for over thirty-six hours and the British Government was still prevaricating. Worse, many MPs concluded that the Prime Minister was actively seeking a shabby compromise – a second Munich. ‘Members sat as if turned to stone’, recalled Spears. ‘The shock was such that for a moment there was no more movement than there was sound when the Prime Minister sat down.’¹³ Not one single ‘Hear, hear’ greeted the close of Chamberlain’s statement.

When the acting Labour leader, Arthur Greenwood, rose to reply he was hit by a wall of sound. His own MPs cheered him, as was normal, but what was extraordinary was the roar of encouragement which came from the Conservative side of the House. ‘Speak for England!’ cried the former Colonial Secretary Leo Amery.¹⁴ Taken aback, Greenwood almost staggered with surprise. He rose to the occasion, however, declaring that ‘every minute’s delay’ meant ‘imperilling our national interests ... the very foundations of our national honour’. There might be good reasons for the Prime Minister’s hesitation (he was aware of the difficulty the Government was having in getting the French to commit to a time frame for the ultimatum) but this could not continue.

The moment we look like weakening, at that moment dictatorship knows we are beaten. We are not beaten. We shall not be beaten. We cannot be beaten; but delay is dangerous, and I hope the Prime Minister ... will be able to tell us when the House meets at noon tomorrow what the final decision is.¹⁵

When Greenwood sat down there was uproar. Waving their order papers, the normally servile Tory backbenchers cheered the Labour leader until they were hoarse. ‘All those who want to die abused Caesar’, recorded the junior Foreign Office Minister Henry ‘Chips’ Channon. It was ‘the old Munich rage all over again’.¹⁶ A pacifist Labour MP tried to punch one of his more bellicose colleagues. Chamberlain went white. Well he might, thought the National Labour MP Harold Nicolson: ‘Here were the PM’s most ardent supporters cheering his opponent with all their lungs. The front bench looked as if they had been struck in the face.’¹⁷

In his seat below the gangway, one man remained silent.

No one had been more vindicated over the danger posed by Nazi Germany than Winston Churchill. In the longest and most desperate political battle of his life, he had campaigned noisily for rearmament and a firm stand against German aggression since 1932. Now, in this most critical moment, he was quiet. His dilemma lay in the fact that he had agreed, the previous day, to join the War Cabinet and, in one sense, considered himself already a member of the Government. On the other hand, he had heard nothing from Chamberlain since and it now appeared that Britain was vacillating over her commitment to Poland. Racked with emotion, he summoned like-minded parliamentarians for a meeting at his flat for 10.30 that evening. There, Anthony Eden, Bob Boothby, Brendan Bracken, Duff Cooper and Duncan Sandys contemplated full-blown insurrection. To Boothby's mind, Chamberlain had lost the Conservative Party for ever and it was Churchill's duty to go down to the House of Commons the next day and seize power for himself.

By this time, the storm had truly broken. As thunder cracked like cannon and the rain lashed its Gothic windows, twelve members of the Cabinet staged a mutiny in Sir John Simon's room in the Palace of Westminster. Earlier that afternoon, the Cabinet had agreed that the Italian proposal for a conference should be rejected and that an ultimatum, to expire no later than midnight, should be issued to Germany, regardless of the decision of the French. Now, the twelve Ministers – over half the Cabinet – felt that the Prime Minister had gone back on this decision and refused to leave the Chancellor's room until Chamberlain agreed to hold another Cabinet. It was unprecedented, recalled the Minister for Agriculture, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith: 'We were on strike.'¹⁸

Eventually, after much telephoning to Paris and a meeting with the French Ambassador, Chamberlain called another meeting for 11.30 p.m. Tired and grubby, the dissenting Ministers made their way through the deluge to 10 Downing Street, where they were disconcerted to discover that the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, had found time to dress for dinner. Coldly, Chamberlain apologised to the Cabinet for the misunderstanding and explained the problems he had been having with the French, who refused to contemplate an ultimatum before they had completed their mobilisation and evacuated their women and children. He was, however, prepared to accept his

colleagues' view that a British ultimatum should be issued and have expired before MPs reconvened at noon the next day. His Majesty's Ambassador to Berlin would be instructed to call upon the German Foreign Minister at nine o'clock the following morning and deliver an ultimatum to expire at 11 a.m. British Summer Time. Did anyone object to this? No answer. 'Right, gentlemen,' Chamberlain summarised, 'this means war.' 'Hardly had he said it', recalled Dorman-Smith, than 'there was a most enormous clap of thunder and the whole Cabinet Room was lit up by a blinding flash of lightning. It was the most deafening thunder-clap I've ever heard in my life. It really shook the building.'¹⁹

Eleven hours later, Chamberlain broadcast to the nation.