

A SAGA OF CHURCHILL, FAMILY,
AND DEFIANCE DURING THE BLITZ

THE
SPLENDID
AND THE
VILE



ERIK
LARSON

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THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY AND **DEAD WAKE**



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It is not given to human beings—happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable—to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL, EULOGY FOR NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, NOVEMBER 12,
1940

A Note to Readers

IT WAS ONLY WHEN I moved to Manhattan a few years ago that I came to understand, with sudden clarity, how different the experience of September 11, 2001, had been for New Yorkers than for those of us who watched the nightmare unfold at a distance. This was their home city under attack. Almost immediately I started thinking about London and the German aerial assault of 1940–41, and wondered how on earth anyone could have endured it: fifty-seven consecutive nights of bombing, followed by an intensifying series of nighttime raids over the next six months.

In particular I thought about Winston Churchill: How did he withstand it? And his family and friends? What was it like for him to have his city bombed for nights on end and to know full well that these air raids, however horrific, were likely only a preamble to far worse, a German invasion from the sea and sky, with parachutists dropping into his garden, panzer tanks clanking through Trafalgar Square, and poison gas wafting over the beach where once he painted the sea?

I decided to find out, and quickly came to realize that it is one thing to *say* “Carry on,” quite another to do it. I focused on Churchill’s first year as prime minister, May 10, 1940, to May 10, 1941, which coincided with the German air campaign as it evolved from sporadic, seemingly aimless raids to a full-on assault against the city of London. The year ended on a weekend of Vonnegutian violence, when the quotidian and the fantastic converged to mark what proved to be the first great victory of the war.

What follows is by no means a definitive account of Churchill’s life. Other authors have achieved that end, notably his indefatigable but alas not immortal biographer Martin Gilbert, whose eight-volume study should

satisfy any craving for the last detail. Mine is a more intimate account that delves into how Churchill and his circle went about surviving on a daily basis: the dark moments and the light, the romantic entanglements and debacles, the sorrows and laughter, and the odd little episodes that reveal how life was really lived under Hitler's tempest of steel. This was the year in which Churchill became *Churchill*, the cigar-smoking bulldog we all think we know, when he made his greatest speeches and showed the world what courage and leadership looked like.

Although at times it may appear to be otherwise, this is a work of nonfiction. Anything between quotation marks comes from some form of historical document, be it a diary, letter, memoir, or other artifact; any reference to a gesture, gaze, or smile, or any other facial reaction, comes from an account by one who witnessed it. If some of what follows challenges what you have come to believe about Churchill and this era, may I just say that history is a lively abode, full of surprises.

—ERIK LARSON

MANHATTAN, 2020

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Bleak Expectations

NO ONE HAD ANY DOUBT that the bombers would come. Defense planning began well before the war, though the planners had no specific threat in mind. Europe was Europe. If past experience was any sort of guide, a war could break out anywhere, anytime. Britain's military leaders saw the world through the lens of the empire's experience in the previous war, the Great War, with its mass slaughter of soldiers and civilians alike and the first systematic air raids of history, conducted over England and Scotland using bombs dropped from German zeppelins. The first of these occurred on the night of January 19, 1915, and was followed by more than fifty others, during which giant dirigibles drifting quietly over the English landscape dropped 162 tons of bombs that killed 557 people.

Since then, the bombs had grown bigger and deadlier, and more cunning, with time delays and modifications that made them shriek as they descended. One immense German bomb, a thirteen-foot, four-thousand-pounder named Satan, could destroy an entire city block. The aircraft that carried these bombs had grown larger as well, and faster, and flew higher, and were thus better able to evade home-front defenses. On November 10, 1932, Stanley Baldwin, then deputy prime minister, gave the House of Commons a forecast of what was to come: "I think it is well for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through." The only effective defense lay in offense, he said, "which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves."

Britain's civil defense experts, fearing a "knock-out blow," predicted that the first aerial attack on London would destroy much if not all of the

city and kill two hundred thousand civilians. “It was widely believed that London would be reduced to rubble within minutes of war being declared,” wrote one junior official. Raids would cause such terror among the survivors that millions would go insane. “London for several days will be one vast raving bedlam,” wrote J.F.C. Fuller, a military theorist, in 1923. “The hospitals will be stormed, traffic will cease, the homeless will shriek for help, the city will be a pandemonium.”

The Home Office estimated that if standard burial protocols were followed, casket makers would need twenty million square feet of “coffin wood,” an amount impossible to supply. They would have to build their coffins from heavy cardboard or papier-mâché, or simply bury people in shrouds. “For mass burial,” the Scottish Department of Health advised, “the most appropriate type of grave is the trench grave, dug deep enough to accommodate five layers of bodies.” Planners called for large pits to be excavated on the outskirts of London and other cities, the digging to be done with as much discretion as possible. Special training was to be provided to morticians to decontaminate the bodies and clothing of people killed by poison gas.

When Britain declared war against Germany, on September 3, 1939, in response to Hitler’s invasion of Poland, the government prepared in earnest for the bombing and invasion that was sure to follow. The code name for signaling that invasion was imminent or underway was “Cromwell.” The Ministry of Information issued a special flyer, *Beating the Invader*, which went out to millions of homes. It was not calculated to reassure. “Where the enemy lands,” it warned, “...there will be most violent fighting.” It instructed readers to heed any government advisory to evacuate. “When the attack begins, it will be too late to go...STAND FIRM.” Church belfries went silent throughout Britain. Their bells were now the designated alarm, to be rung only when “Cromwell” was invoked and the invaders were on their way. If you heard bells, it meant that parachute troops had been sighted nearby. At this, the pamphlet instructed, “disable and hide your bicycle and destroy your maps.” If you owned a car: “Remove distributor head and leads and either empty the tank or remove the carburetor. If you don’t know how to do this, find out now from your nearest garage.”

Towns and villages took down street signs and limited the sale of maps to people holding police-issued permits. Farmers left old cars and trucks in their fields as obstacles against gliders laden with soldiers. The government issued thirty-five million gas masks to civilians, who carried them to work and church, and kept them at their bedsides. London's mailboxes received a special coating of yellow paint that changed color in the presence of poison gas. Strict blackout rules so darkened the streets of the city that it became nearly impossible to recognize a visitor at a train station after dark. On moonless nights, pedestrians stepped in front of cars and buses and walked into light stanchions and fell off curbs and tripped over sandbags.

Suddenly everyone began paying attention to the phases of the moon. Bombers could attack by day, of course, but it was thought that after dark they would be able to find their targets only by moonlight. The full moon and its waxing and waning gibbous phases became known as the "bomber's moon." There was comfort in the fact that bombers and, more importantly, their fighter escorts would have to fly all the way from their bases in Germany, a distance so great as to sharply limit their reach and lethality. But this presumed that France, with its mighty army and Maginot Line and powerful navy, would stand firm and thereby hem in the Luftwaffe and block all German paths to invasion. French endurance was the cornerstone of British defensive strategy. That France might fall was beyond imagining.

"The atmosphere is something more than anxiety," wrote Harold Nicolson, soon to become parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Information, in his diary on May 7, 1940. "It is one of actual fear." He and his wife, the writer Vita Sackville-West, agreed to commit suicide rather than be captured by German invaders. "There must be something quick and painless and portable," she wrote to him on May 28. "Oh my dear, my dearest, that we should come to this!"

—

A CONFLUENCE OF UNANTICIPATED forces and circumstances finally did bring the bombers to London, foremost among them a singular event that occurred just before dusk on May 10, 1940, one of the loveliest evenings in one of the finest springs anyone could recall.

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Part One

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THE RISING THREAT

MAY-JUNE

CHAPTER 1

The Coroner Departs

THE CARS SPED ALONG THE Mall, the broad boulevard that runs between Whitehall, seat of Britain's government ministries, and Buckingham Palace, the 775-room home of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, its stone facade visible now at the far end of the roadway, dark with shadow. It was early evening, Friday, May 10. Everywhere bluebells and primroses bloomed. Delicate spring leaves misted the tops of trees. The pelicans in St. James's Park basked in the warmth and the adoration of visitors, as their less exotic cousins, the swans, drifted with their usual stern lack of interest. The beauty of the day made a shocking contrast to all that had happened since dawn, when German forces stormed into Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg, using armor, dive-bombers, and parachute troops with overwhelming effect.

In the rear of the first car sat Britain's topmost naval official, the first lord of the Admiralty, Winston S. Churchill, sixty-five years old. He had held the same post once before, during the previous war, and had been appointed anew by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain when the current war was declared. In the second car was Churchill's police guardian, Detective Inspector Walter Henry Thompson, of Scotland Yard's Special Branch, responsible for keeping Churchill alive. Tall and lean, with an angular nose, Thompson was omnipresent, often visible in press photographs but rarely mentioned—a "dogsbody," in the parlance of the time, like so many others who made the government work: the myriad private and parliamentary secretaries and assistants and typists who

constituted the Whitehall infantry. Unlike most, however, Thompson carried a pistol in the pocket of his overcoat at all times.

Churchill had been summoned by the king. To Thompson, at least, the reason seemed obvious. “I drove behind the Old Man with indescribable pride,” he wrote.

Churchill entered the palace. King George was at this point forty-four years old and well into the fourth year of his reign. Knock-kneed, fish-lipped, with very large ears, and saddled with a significant stammer, he seemed fragile, especially in contrast with his visitor, who, though three inches shorter, had much greater width. The king was leery of Churchill. Churchill’s sympathy for Edward VIII, the king’s older brother, whose romance with American divorcée Wallis Simpson sparked the abdication crisis of 1936, remained a point of abrasion between Churchill and the royal family. The king had also taken offense at Churchill’s prior criticism of Prime Minister Chamberlain over the Munich Agreement of 1938, which allowed Hitler to annex a portion of Czechoslovakia. The king harbored a general distrust of Churchill’s independence and shifting political loyalties.

He asked Churchill to sit down and looked at him steadily for a while, in what Churchill later described as a searching and quizzical manner.

The king said: “I suppose you don’t know why I have sent for you?”

“Sir, I simply couldn’t imagine why.”

—

THERE HAD BEEN A rebellion in the House of Commons that left Chamberlain’s government tottering. It erupted in the context of a debate over the failure of a British attempt to evict German forces from Norway, which Germany had invaded a month earlier. Churchill, as first lord of the Admiralty, had been responsible for the naval component of the effort. Now it was the British who faced eviction, in the face of an unexpectedly ferocious German onslaught. The debacle sparked calls for a change of government. In the view of the rebels, Chamberlain, seventy-one, variously nicknamed “the Coroner” and “the Old Umbrella,” was not up to the task of managing a fast-expanding war. In a speech on May 7, one member of Parliament, Leopold Amery, directed a blistering denunciation at

Chamberlain, borrowing words used by Oliver Cromwell in 1653: “You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing! Depart, I say, and let us have done with you! In the name of God, go!”

The House held a vote of confidence, by way of a “division,” in which members line up in the lobby in two rows, for yes and no, and file past tellers, who record their votes. At first glance, the tally seemed a victory for Chamberlain—281 ayes to 200 nays—but in fact, compared to prior votes, it underscored how much political ground he had lost.

Afterward, Chamberlain met with Churchill and told him that he planned to resign. Churchill, wishing to appear loyal, persuaded him otherwise. This heartened the king but prompted one rebel, appalled that Chamberlain might try to stay, to liken him to “a dirty old piece of chewing gum on the leg of a chair.”

By Thursday, May 9, the forces opposing Chamberlain had deepened their resolve. As the day advanced, his departure seemed more and more certain, and two men rapidly emerged as the candidates most likely to replace him: his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, and the first lord of the Admiralty, Churchill, whom much of the public adored.

But then came Friday, May 10, and Hitler’s blitzkrieg assaults on the Low Countries. The news cast gloom throughout Whitehall, although for Chamberlain it also brought a flicker of renewed hope that he might retain his post. Surely the House would agree that with such momentous events in play, it was foolhardy to change governments. The rebels, however, made it clear that they would not serve under Chamberlain, and pushed for the appointment of Churchill.

Chamberlain realized he had no choice but to resign. He urged Lord Halifax to take the job. Halifax seemed more stable than Churchill, less likely to lead Britain into some new catastrophe. Within Whitehall, Churchill was acknowledged to be a brilliant orator, albeit deemed by many to lack good judgment. Halifax himself referred to him as a “rogue elephant.” But Halifax, who doubted his own ability to lead in a time of war, did not want the job. He made this duly clear when an emissary dispatched to attempt to change his mind found that he had gone to the dentist.

It remained for the king to decide. He first summoned Chamberlain. “I accepted his resignation,” the king wrote in his diary, “& told him how grossly unfairly I thought he had been treated, & that I was terribly sorry that all this controversy had happened.”

The two men talked about successors. “I, of course, suggested Halifax,” the king wrote. He considered Halifax “the obvious man.”

But now Chamberlain surprised him: He recommended Churchill.

The king wrote, “I sent for Winston & asked him to form a Government. This he accepted & told me he had not thought this was the reason for my having sent for him”—though Churchill, according to the king’s account, did happen to have handy the names of a few men he was considering for his own cabinet.

—

THE CARS CARRYING CHURCHILL and Inspector Thompson returned to Admiralty House, the seat of naval command in London and, for the time being, Churchill’s home. The two men left their cars. As always, Thompson kept one hand in his overcoat pocket for quick access to his pistol. Sentries holding rifles with fixed bayonets stood watch, as did other soldiers armed with Lewis light machine guns, sheltered by sandbags. On the adjacent green of St. James’s Park, the long barrels of anti-aircraft guns jutted upward at stalagmitic angles.

Churchill turned to Thompson. “You know why I’ve been to Buckingham Palace,” he said.

Thompson did, and congratulated him, but added that he wished the appointment had come sooner, and in better times, because of the immensity of the task that lay ahead.

“God alone knows how great it is,” Churchill said.

The two men shook hands, as solemn as mourners at a funeral. “All I hope is that it is not too late,” Churchill said. “I am very much afraid that it is. But we can only do our best, and give the rest of what we have—whatever there may be left to us.”

These were sober words, although inwardly, Churchill was elated. He had lived his entire life for this moment. That it had come at such a dark time did not matter. If anything, it made his appointment all the more exquisite.

In the fading light, Inspector Thompson saw tears begin to slip down Churchill's cheeks. Thompson, too, found himself near tears.

LATE THAT NIGHT CHURCHILL lay in bed, alive with a thrilling sense of challenge and opportunity. "In my long political experience," he wrote, "I had held most of the great offices of State, but I readily admit that the post which had now fallen to me was the one I liked the best." Coveting power for power's sake was a "base" pursuit, he wrote, adding, "But power in a national crisis, when a man believes he knows what orders should be given, is a blessing."

He felt great relief. "At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial....Although impatient for the morning I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams."

Despite the doubts he had expressed to Inspector Thompson, Churchill brought to No. 10 Downing Street a naked confidence that under his leadership Britain would win the war, even though any objective appraisal would have said he did not have a chance. Churchill knew that his challenge now was to make everyone else believe it, too—his countrymen, his commanders, his cabinet ministers, and, most importantly, the American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. From the very start, Churchill understood a fundamental truth about the war: that he could not win it without the eventual participation of the United States. Left to itself, he believed, Britain could endure and hold Germany at bay, but only the industrial might and manpower of America would ensure the final eradication of Hitler and National Socialism.

What made this all the more daunting was that Churchill had to achieve these ends quickly, before Hitler focused his full attention on England and

unleashed his air force, the Luftwaffe, which British intelligence believed to be vastly superior to the Royal Air Force.

IN THE MIDST OF THIS, Churchill had to cope with all manner of other challenges. An immense personal debt payment was due at the end of the month, one he did not have the money to pay. His only son, Randolph, likewise was awash in debt, persistently demonstrating a gift not just for spending money but also for losing it gambling, at which his ineptitude was legendary; he also drank too much and had a propensity, once drunk, for making scenes and thereby posing what his mother, Clementine (pronounced *Clementeen*), saw as a continual risk that one day he would cause irrevocable embarrassment to the family. Churchill also had to deal with blackout rules and strict rationing and the mounting intrusion of officials seeking to keep him safe from assassination—as well as, not least, the everlasting offense of the army of workmen dispatched to buttress 10 Downing Street and the rest of Whitehall against aerial attack, with their endless hammering, which more than any other single irritant had the capacity to drive him to the point of fury.

Except maybe whistling.

His hatred of whistling, he once said, was the only thing he had in common with Hitler. It was more than merely an obsession. “It sets up an almost psychiatric disturbance in him—immense, immediate, and irrational,” wrote Inspector Thompson. Once, while walking together to 10 Downing Street, Thompson and the new prime minister encountered a newsboy, maybe thirteen years old, heading in their direction, “hands in pockets, newspapers under his arms, whistling loudly and cheerfully,” Thompson recalled.

As the boy came closer, Churchill’s anger soared. He hunched his shoulders and stalked over to the boy. “Stop that whistling,” he snarled.

The boy, utterly unruffled, replied, “Why should I?”

“Because I don’t like it and it’s a horrible noise.”

The boy moved on, then turned and shouted, “Well, you can shut your ears, can’t you?”

The boy kept walking.

Churchill was for the moment stunned. Anger flushed his face.

But one of Churchill's great strengths was perspective, which gave him the ability to place discrete events into boxes, so that bad humor could in a heartbeat turn to mirth. As Churchill and Thompson continued walking, Thompson saw Churchill begin to smile. Under his breath, Churchill repeated the boy's rejoinder: "You can shut your ears, can't you?"

And laughed out loud.

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CHURCHILL BENT AT ONCE to his new summons, heartening many, but confirming for others their most dire concerns.