

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

An Outline

PHASE 2— Britain Alone

In 12 months the Battle of Britain is won, the Navy keeps the Atlantic open, we drive the Italians out of Egypt and East Africa and are driven back by the Germans into Egypt.

(June, 1940 — July, 1941)

WHY the Germans didn't invade England at once, on the heels of the disorganised fugitives from Dunkirk, nobody knows. Perhaps they wanted to make sure of the French or perhaps they had a time-table and in the stolid old German way felt bound to stick to something at which they had looked so hard. Perhaps their plans were upset by the very speed of their advance. At any rate they waited, and it was not until the middle of August that the full weight of their bombs was felt in England. By that time the R.A.F. was ready; it was a pretty close thing but they pulled it off. In one of the great decisive battles of history the young men of Britain went up in their Hurricanes and Spitfires to meet the new barbarians in the clouds. By the end of September it seemed clear that, however fearful were the wounds, London was not going to share the fate of Warsaw and Rotterdam. Many disastrous raids were still to come, but Englishmen now knew that they had better planes and better men; the Battle of Britain had been fought and won, and Hitler had received his first check.

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Desolation in Warsaw after the first Nazi air raids over Poland in the first week of war, September, 1939. A Polish boy sits amid the ruins of his home.

PHASE 1— Hitler Strikes

For 10 months the Germans carry all before them.

(September, 1939 — June, 1940)

THE second World War began on the first of September, 1939, when the Germans invaded Poland. The first campaign was a walk-over. Poland's allies, Britain and France, were far away and were unable to lift a finger in her defence; the Polish air force could do little against the might of the Luftwaffe; the summer was unusually hot and dry and long and suited to mechanised warfare, and the German columns swept forward from the north and the west and the south with all the ease of the usual summer manoeuvres. The Poles fought well, but in little more than a month all effective resistance had ceased. The first campaign of the second World War was over.

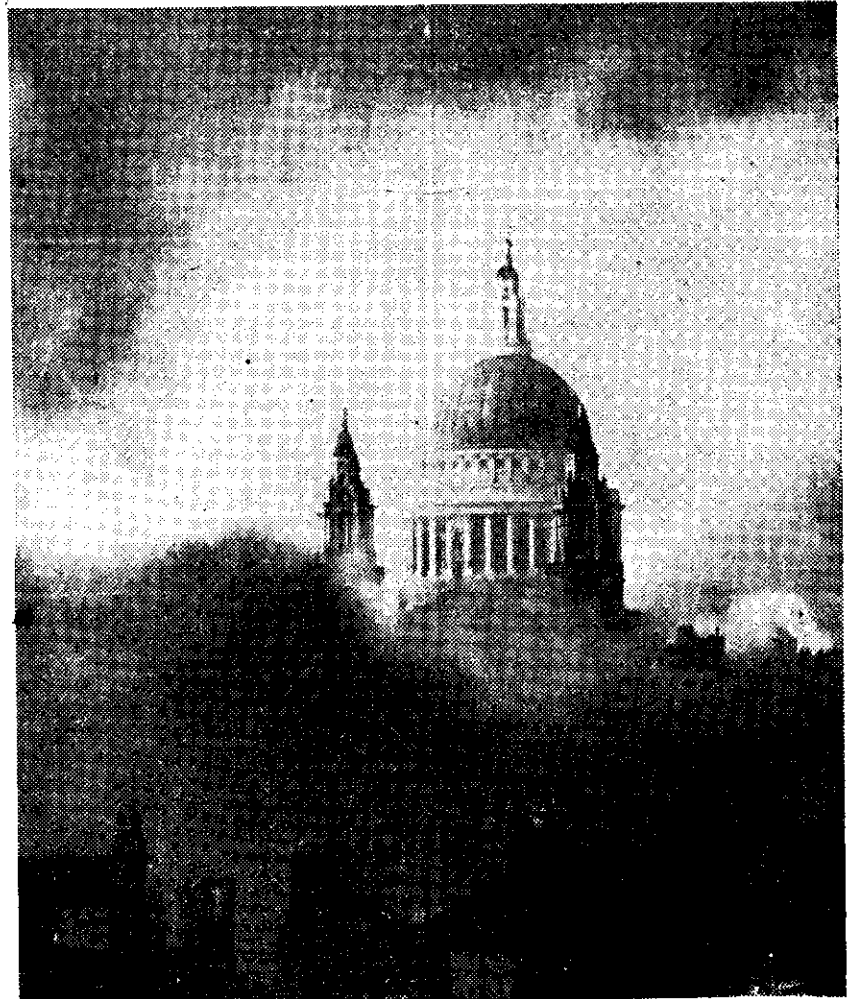
There followed a strange interval of about six months that was neither peace nor war, while the Germans prepared for bigger things in the West. This was the period of "the phoney war," when the democratic world waited and wondered and wrangled and the whole thing seemed a bit unreal. There were still people who hoped that pamphlets would do the trick; and the R.A.F. was busy dropping paper over Germany instead of high explosive. The munition factories were busy, and in December in a real old-fashioned fight the Exeter and the Ajax and the Achilles sent the Graf Spee to the bottom, but somehow it still didn't seem like a real war.

But at last in April, 1940, the Germans struck, and Denmark and Norway

and Holland and Belgium went down with a rush. There was nothing phoney about it now; it was total war. In the Low Country whole populations of towns and villages were set going in panic along the roads to the south; a diligent army of fifth columnists spread confusion by means of false reports; the German bombers destroyed communication centres far in advance of the armies; the mechanised forces poured through the gaps in the Allied lines made by the concentrated fire-power of the tanks and fanned out behind the Maginot Line and towards the Channel ports; it seemed as if nothing could stop them.

At any rate nothing did. In less than three weeks after the invasion of Holland, the Belgian army laid down its arms and the British divisions, cut off by the rapid German advance, escaped by sea from Dunkirk, leaving their magnificent equipment scattered along the canals and the beaches of Flanders. There was talk in the English and American papers of a desperate stand in Brittany; but the French Government had lost its stomach for a fight and went instead to Bordeaux. Thither flew the British Prime Minister in an endeavour to persuade the French Cabinet to continue the fight from North Africa, offering to weld France and England into a single political unit: but all in vain—the French were beaten and on June 17 Marshal Petain asked for an armistice.

This was the darkest hour of the war. Routed out of Norway, escaped by the skin of their teeth from Flanders, abandoned by the French, and threatened with annihilation by the German Air Force, the British people had every reason to be afraid. In America it looked as if the war was over. But the British people did not despair. They listened to the rousing eloquence of Mr. Churchill and settled down to the job in hand. They were now alone, but at any rate things could hardly get any worse.



St. Paul's, ringed by the fires of blitzed London.