

TWO HEADACHES FOR HITLER

Holland and Belgium Capable of Fierce Defence

SINCE that taut week-end (the second in November) when actual attack threatened, the menace of a German thrust through Holland and/or Belgium seems to have receded, until one wonders if the repeated stories since then of new concentrations on the frontiers are not a mere extension of the "war of nerves."

But the risk of such an attack remains real. Prominent German strategists are believed to favour it, and more are likely to be converted to it, willy-nilly, as the German sea campaign becomes less effective and the comparative inaction between the two fortified lines more wearing.

The greatest deterrent, one which has sufficed until now to keep the Germans at bay, is the known strength of the two Lowland monarchies, so republican in structure, so tenacious of liberty at heart. My impression of them, when I was there several months before the war broke out, was that each would be a headache for Hitler should he try any "monkey business" with such courageous little States. All that I have read of their preparations since September confirms that view.

The only difference between the two is that Belgium has bitter memories of the World War not shared by Holland. But that they are agreed on united action to-day scarcely admits doubt, for Holland dares not hope this time to escape whatever fate may be Belgium's. Indeed, one interpretation of November's events is that a march on Holland was prevented in the last hour by Belgium's plain threat to give passage to French and British troops if her neighbour (with air bases nearer England) were invaded.

If the Devil Drives

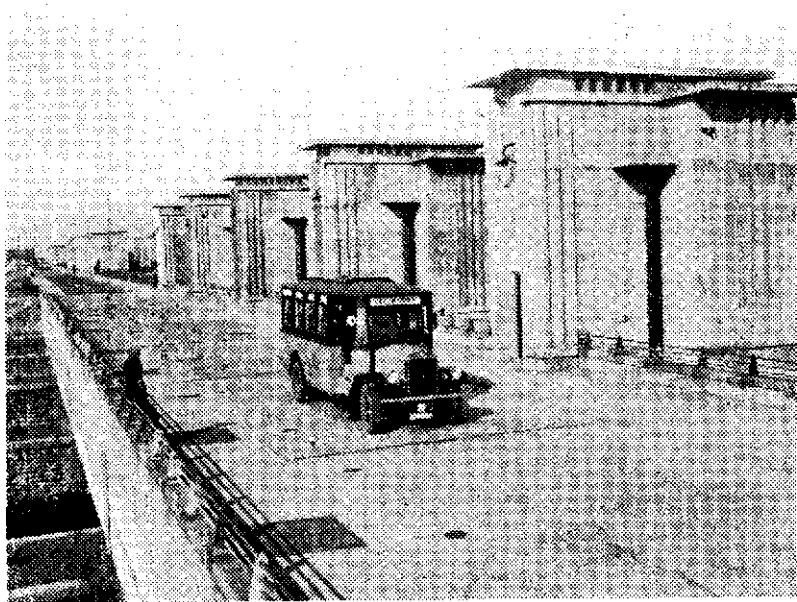
If quickening desperation should still drive the Nazis to make such an attempt, their first soldier to cross a Dutch or Belgium frontier will add to the enemies of the Reich more than fifty million souls, the third richest empire in the world, two armies which have over 1,000,000 men already standing to arms, a small but effective navy, and an air force of approximately 1,000 machines.

That should be enough to make Hitler think twice before moving.

Holland's determination to defend herself by flooding is well known. In a final extrem-

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ity, she would flood the whole of the north-eastern provinces and a broad strip of the south-eastern, leaving "stronghold Holland," consisting of most of Utrecht province, a corner of Guelderland, and the maritime provinces of North Holland and South Holland, to succour her people and defy the enemy.



Enclosing the former Zuyder Zee in a vast scheme to increase Holland's productivity, this 26-mile dyke is now heavily fortified against German invasion

Bridges First

But this resource to the dykes would be reserved to the very last. Holland believes she has other means of immobilising the German mechanised forces should they attempt a surprise *blitzkrieg*. Notoriously dissected with waterways, she is prepared to blow sky high every bridge in the eastern provinces should the Germans break through. "Literally in the first five minutes," Dr. Colijn, until recently Prime Minister, has said, "we could destroy from a central control every bridge vital to the enemy."

This much I know. When we were in Holland at Easter time last year, every bridge within thirty miles of the German frontier was mined ready to be set off. The new dyke which triumphantly encloses the IJssel Meer (formerly the Zuyder Zee), the very pride of Holland, is strongly fortified. At Nijmegen, an old-world, frontier city, we stood one night and watched the erection of new anti-tank traps by the glare of floodlights, while every car

crossing the Waal river from the east was searched. Holland that week bristled with military activity, and the partial mobilisation which occurred owing to some now forgotten crisis was a revelation in alacrity.

Arms from Sweden

Deprived of the Czechoslovakian product, Holland has recently bought from Sweden large supplies of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, spending millions of guilders on the purchases. Her own aircraft factories are technically among the most advanced in the world, and her force of bombers and fighters totals more than 600, rather more than the Belgian. Though her navy has a total tonnage of only 70,000, and is stationed largely in the East, she has a fleet of swift small vessels admirably adapted to the dangerous Dutch coasts.

Belgium's Front Line

Years ago, Holland decided against a "Meginot Line" for her frontiers, her experts saying she had neither the men to hold it nor the money to build it. Belgium's principal line of defence is now the Albert Canal, which I inspected in May at the time when the Liege Exhibition was opened to mark its virtual completion. From Liege, on the flank of the Ardennes, it runs northward, parallel with the German frontier until at one point it is only a few metres from Dutch soil. Then it swings west to Antwerp, so affording protection to nearly all Belgium. On the eastern bank, all growth has been cleared, leaving a minimum of cover; the western bank is studded with light and heavy forts. Opened to foster Belgian sea-going commerce, the canal is at the same time a national lifeline of water and steel, closing what was known as the Limberg Gap.

Liege itself, and the whole industrial region of the Meuse, are intensively fortified. "There will never be another 1914 for us," they said in Liege. Certainly Belgian preparedness is beyond comparison with what it was a quarter of a century ago. Based on heavy forts at Eupen and Malmedy, at Liege and at Ebn Emael, near the southern tongue of Holland, there is a first line of defence, east of the canal, which effectively commands most of the 55 miles of frontier common with Germany.

Like Holland, Belgium is keyed for war. Her industry is being increasingly diverted to it, her people more reconciled to its imminence. The two countries, the one remembering the last onslaught, the other spared it then but with dwindling hopes to-day of escaping the wrath to come, stand side by side in their determination to make good the vow, "They Shall Not Pass."

Devoted to Peace

But the two peoples, let it be said yet again and never be doubted, are passionately devoted to peace and all its arts. Their courage, individually and nationally, is beyond question. It is not for dread that the Dutch soldier dislikes his uniform as much as ever. It is from instinctive distaste. The zeal of the Lowlanders for peace and a quiet life is if possible greater than our own.

That is why, for his sake as well as theirs, I hope Hitler, contemplating this further aggression, remains a total abstainer.