

Britain Speaks

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I. Civilization Can Defend Itself as Fiercely as Barbarism Can Attack

May 30, 1940

I'VE BEEN spending the last few days in my house in the country, only a few miles from the south coast. At odd times we've heard a sound like the distant banging of doors, which was, of course, the noise of bombs and anti-aircraft guns. It hasn't worried anybody very much. At the Star Inn just down the road, the regular customers in the taproom, sitting over their half pints of bitter, have been telling each other that we've all to set about stopping this Hitler. We've formed a local detachment of local defence volunteers or parashots, and I've joined them myself, but so far I've not been called on to take a turn at nightwatching on the downs. It's not the first time men have kept guard on these downs, for they did it in Queen Elizabeth's time and then in Napoleon's. And everybody's as cool as a cucumber. The Italians are saying, I read, that we're in a terrible panic, but all I can reply to that is that I've seen and heard more fuss and excitement just landing my luggage in Naples than I've seen and heard here since the war started. Not that we don't see anything.

Today I saw a train load of our troops just back from Flanders. They were unshaven; their faces were drawn and sunken-eyed; they had just been fighting one of the

BRITAIN SPEAKS

greatest rear-guard actions in modern history; they had been bombed day and night; but they were still giving us the thumbs-up sign. They looked what they were, undefeated, pushed back for a while by an overwhelming superiority of machines and armaments, but with no respect whatever for the hordes of robots using those machines and armaments.

Later today I had a long talk with an officer who had just returned from the northern battlefield. He was a man of my own generation, who like myself had been all through the last war, and so I was especially interested in what he had to say. The unit he commanded was not really a fighting unit at all, being composed of searchlights. Nevertheless his men, being asked to hold a bridge near a coast town, found themselves attacked by a motorised German detachment including three tanks, fought them there for five solid hours, and then beat them off. This officer, though admitting the ferocity of the attack of the German air force, which hardly ever stayed to fight our own airmen, but of course greatly outnumbered them, had nothing but a cold contempt for these Nazi troops, who, he said, were far worse types than the German soldiers of the last war.

Of all the things that have happened so far in this war, this deliberate harrying and destruction of refugees must rank as the greatest and foulest crime, and our own soldiers, who are if anything too easy-going and very hard to rouse, grow white with anger when they remember these atrocities. It has been, of course, a deliber-

BRITAIN SPEAKS

ate policy, just as much part of the planned invasion as the movements of airplanes and tanks. Just as the Red Indians often used to stampede herds of wild buffalo before they attacked, in order to disturb and hamper their enemies, so the Nazi strategists have deliberately stampeded and slaughtered refugees simply in order to create confusion, havoc and panic.

I don't want to dwell upon the horror of all this. The world gets plenty of that. But I do want to point out the significance of this vast crime. For it means that the Nazis have abandoned their last pretence of being a more or less civilised European power that had entered into a conflict with other European powers. If they imagined for a moment that they could be a member of the commonwealth of powers, they would never have dared to adopt such hellish tactics. The fact that they adopted them shows that the mask is off, that no compromise is possible with civilisation, that now either they will be destroyed or they will dominate the world. They themselves have furnished the best proof to everybody that this cannot possibly be regarded as just another quarrel among European powers; that now it is a fight to the death between the old civilisation of Christendom and this new evil empire of machines and robots.

There is a good letter from an American living in England that appeared in this morning's *Daily Telegraph*. He says that he refused to take his Embassy's advice to leave this country, and then goes on to add:

"Americans leaving England at this critical time are

BRITAIN SPEAKS

deserting their own cause—Freedom and Liberty. The American frontier is the English Channel.”

Well, that's what one American says. For my part, though I agree with him, I'd put it a bit differently. I'd say that this isn't a war in the old sense at all. It isn't a quarrel between certain nations. It isn't a matter of frontiers or possessions. It's a desperate battle, in which the whole future of the world is involved, between two ways of life. We don't say that one of them, ours, is perfect. We know very well it isn't. In fact some of us have spent a lot of our time these last few years criticising the sort of life we were leading. But at least it was worth criticising. Left to ourselves we could improve it, as we were improving it all the time, to give every man, woman and child a chance to lead a full, useful, and happy existence. But the other kind of life, which has spread like a foul stain over half Europe, is simply evil. It isn't German. There isn't a great German of the past who would not have indignantly refused to have any part in it, just as those great Germans of today have all turned their backs on it and are now in exile. It is simply a gigantic insane gangsterism, a vast power machine built for nothing but brutal conquest. You can't come to terms with it. There's no living peacefully alongside it, because it has no intention of living peacefully itself or of allowing you to live at peace. It is no more simply European than typhoid fever is simply European, and like a plague, if it is not stopped here, then it will spread all over the world.

[4]

Defining War differently

Says agrees ✓

Germans & enemy. Nazis different

BRITAIN SPEAKS

But of course it isn't going to be allowed to spread. What is the position at the moment? The battle of the north still continues. Further south and east, the French, along with the other section of the British Expeditionary Force, is holding the line of the Somme and strengthening their defence. Here at home we are at last—and of course as usual it is “at last”—going into strict training for the big fight.

In my opinion, for what it's worth, we've probably done more to make ourselves really fit and ready in the last three weeks than we did in the previous eight months. One reason for the delay is that you can't persuade a lot of the English that they don't live on a magic island. They believe, these nice comfortable stupid folk, that disasters and tragedies, fire and slaughter, treachery and invasion, are things that only happen over the sea, to those strange excitable beings called “foreigners.” It's only a month or two ago that the girl who works in our kitchen said quite solemnly, “Does this man Hitler realise what trouble and expense he's putting us to?” The answer is that he does, and likes it. But that was the attitude of mind of many of the English up to a few weeks ago. But now that's gone. Not only because the war has been brought nearer these shores, but also I think, because the people feel that this new government of ours means business, that its leaders are determined vital men. There's none of that sleepy complacency any more.

The temper of the ordinary easy-going English folk

[5]

BRITAIN SPEAKS

is rising. Any attempt at invasion will only send it up a few more degrees. I haven't met anybody yet who's particularly worried about it. Naturally when your whole world changes so rapidly, it isn't easy to make the necessary adjustments. I know it's tough going trying to be an author these days, for you can't settle down to write a book, the theatres are closing, not because people are afraid to go to them but partly because they want to listen to the news at night and also they like to get a bit of fresh air after a long day indoors, and even journalism has been cut down. But I for one am in better trim physically than I was a year ago, I'm no worse mentally, and it'll certainly do me no harm taking my turn on the downs watching the searchlights sweeping the sky and looking out for parachute troops. I only hope they don't come down in our part all dressed as clergymen, because I have a feeling our chaps are going to be very embarrassed chasing every clergyman they see. You know, all this business is the most tragic thing that's ever happened to us—it seems far more tragic to me than the last war, though I was only young then and a soldier—but in spite of it all, you find yourself laughing still, there's a lot of absurdity about, as there always will be in this absurd, beautiful and lovable island of ours. And that's something the Germans will never understand. They don't understand us when we laugh, they don't understand us when we're serious. And they won't learn. They'll never never learn. But there's a strong feeling about—I read it not in the newspapers but in the

BRITAIN SPEAKS

faces of all the folks I see—and I hear it in their voices—that very soon they'll be taught one or two things they haven't quite understood yet. One of them is that civilisation can defend itself as fiercely as barbarism can attack, and can continue to do it, can keep it up, with more patience, for patience, like truth-telling and kindness, are civilised virtues.

II. Never Have We Seen or Enjoyed So Lovely a Spring

June 5, 1940

THE SECOND great battle has begun, and this time in a far more orthodox fashion than the first, with waves of infantry instead of masses of tanks. It is extraordinary how the same old names, familiar during the last war and many a war before that, keep cropping up again—Abbéville, Peronne, Amiens. It was through a ruined Peronne that I travelled when I went up to the front line for the last time—I had been there twice before, in 1915 and 1916—through the dust and heat of early September, 1918, and when I returned, a casualty again, I was taken through Amiens, to be attended to afterwards, by the way, by an American doctor. We ought to have known that no matter where this war started it would soon return to the old front lines, to that terrible region of the Somme, where in July 1916 so many of my fellow townsmen perished that there was hardly left one man whom I had known as a boy. If there are ghosts, then millions of them must be watching this battle now. And we, who are not yet ghosts and indeed feel very much alive, are all watching it too. English troops are in action there, but here at home we are now making a tremendous effort to strengthen all defence against invasion, so that as soon as possible we

BRITAIN SPEAKS

can augment our forces in France, for a military defeat for the Germans there means the end of Hitler, just as it meant the end of the Kaiser and Ludendorff in 1918.

So we are rapidly turning this island of ours into the greatest fortress the world has ever known. We are working fast. Temperamentally we may be averse to making elaborate long-range plans, and therefore we always begin at a disadvantage when we are faced with an enemy like the cunning and methodical Germans, who set to work to dominate the world years in advance of their first open move, toiling like ants and termites. But on the other hand, we have the gift of rapid and effective improvisation, as we have just seen in the magnificent embarkation at Dunkirk. And now we are applying that gift to the defence of this island. More has been done during the last week than was done during the last hundred years. People who might turn out to be Fifth Columnists have been rounded up by the hundred. If parachute troops are landed here they're going to find themselves a bit lonely and not among friends. Children have been evacuated from towns on the east and south-east coast. Even the sheep and cattle are being moved from some coastal districts. Strategic areas have been mined. There are hundreds and hundreds of concrete and sandbagged machine-guns posts. All public buildings are guarded. Two men were shot by a sentry the other day when they refused to halt at his command. Large flat open spaces are now our danger points, because troop-carrying planes could be landed on them,

BRITAIN SPEAKS

and now they are being dug up and wired so that landing is impossible. Even race-courses—those hallowed stretches of turf—are being roughly handled in this fashion.

This of course is only the beginning, for I can hardly begin to suggest the thousand-and-one precautions that are being taken. The parashot corps, which is functioning everywhere, now numbers over four hundred thousand. In addition there are the various home defence services, and now we are to have the Ironsides, General Ironside's new creation, a corps of picked regular soldiers, very mobile and heavily armed. This corps will be specially trained to deal quickly with enemy troops suddenly landed by air or sea. They will, I prophesy here and now, be a tough crowd, and more than a match for any half-doped young fanatics that Goering shovels out of his airplanes. And England will prove a very awkward country for an enemy to manoeuvre in. It's a very different proposition from Northern France and Flanders, with their long straight roads, without hedges and ditches, along which motorised units can roar at full speed because they can see miles ahead. Here we have, as Chesterton said in his poem, "the rolling English road," which goes this way and then that, seems to turn back on itself, and meanders all over the place, with ditches and hedges everywhere for cover. I don't care how good the German maps of England are, how clever their staff work, they will soon find themselves lost and tangled if they ever do succeed in landing a force of

BRITAIN SPEAKS

any size, for every sign has been removed from these mazes of winding roads and lanes, and we're beginning to be lost ourselves if we travel too far from home. And God help anybody who asks the way in a thick German accent. This morning, coming up from the country, I passed half a dozen stout barricades within ten miles of my house.

As an example of what can happen to an enemy from the sky there is the adventure of my friend Ralph Richardson, the actor. He's a pilot now and not long ago he was compelled to make a forced landing on a village green not far from the South Coast. The villagers thought it must be a German plane masquerading as one of ours. But did they run away? They did not. They came charging on with scythes and shovels, and it was lucky for Ralph that he was a film star and so easily recognised. I like to think of those village men who, machine gun or no machine gun, were ready to take a crack at anybody who thought he could drop from the sky on them.

It takes an awful lot to rouse the ordinary English folk. They're apt to be an easy, sleepy, good-natured crowd, but once they are roused—and the terrible tales of mass murder brought back by the B.E.F. are doing that—they'll wade in and never stop. You know how it is with a bulldog—he'll let you tease him and maul him about perhaps for an hour or two, but go an inch too far and he'll sink his teeth into you and never let go. Well, that's the real English, the ordinary quiet folk. They

name for
English
perseverance/
resilience

BRITAIN SPEAKS

aren't saying much—the "chatterbug," as the defeatist gossip is called, is a special type, and there are very few of them among the ordinary working folk—but believe me, they're solidly behind every word that Mr. Churchill uttered in his great speech yesterday. And the nearer the Nazis get, the more that slow but dogged temper is going to rise.

A lot of the stuff heard over the air or read in the press about the British public is based on what goes on in London West End clubs or Mayfair restaurants, where you'll often find plenty of dismal Jimmies and "chatterbugs." But if you want to know what the ordinary folk are thinking and feeling here, you've got to go into the workshops or the pubs, especially the little taverns in the small towns and villages, and when you find those men looking long-faced and repeating the rubbish invented by German propaganda, then it's time to begin worrying. And I haven't found a trace of it yet. The people are glad now to have a government that'll pile some responsibility on them and set them to work and to fight.

Since this war began many thoughtful and generous American friends have written to me offering to take the children in my family and look after them until the war was over. Others all the way from New York to San Francisco have told me how often they're thinking about us and feeling sorry for us here. While I thank them, I also want to say this. Now that the real blitzkrieg has begun, and all hell is let loose, I feel sorrier

BRITAIN SPEAKS

for these friends in their position than I do for us in ours. And I'll tell you exactly why. If my American friends lived in another world altogether, where they'd never even heard of what's happening here, then I might envy them. But they do not. They're three thousand miles away, but what does that mean in these days? All the news of these treacheries and mass murders, this hell-upon-earth that one maniac has created, reaches my American friends just as quickly as it reaches us here. And like us, they're pouncing on the latest editions of the newspapers, they're for ever turning on the radio to listen breathlessly to the very last reports from the front. Like us, these American friends of mine can't really think about anything else but these invasions and bombings and wholesale slaughter. Confronted by these disasters and threats to the whole civilised world, they can no more get on with their ordinary lives than we can get on with ours. Only there is this difference. Though my American friends feel all the horror and anguish of this time, just as we do, they are really worse off in mind and spirit now than we are, because they can only stare at the dreadful scene in terror and pity, like people on the seashore who watch a great ship struggling against a terrible storm. But we, who are on the ship and in the storm, are now so completely engrossed in action that there comes to us, as a compensation for all our effort, a certain feeling of expansion, a heightening of the spirit, a sense that somewhere in this struggle of free men against drilled and doped slaves

*presently U.S.
people in
pos. terror -
wants to
encourage U.S.
gov. to act.
U.S./U.K.
Goodwill*

BRITAIN SPEAKS

there is a moral grandeur. Soon, some of us may die, but nobody can say of us *now* that we are not alive, and it is a fact that while one disaster piles upon another many of us have told each other that never have we seen or enjoyed so lovely a Spring.

So I say, do not pity us.

After talking to our boys just back from Dunkirk I have been remembering the famous saying of Henry the Fourth of France, when he met the friend of his who had missed the great battle. He said: "Go hang yourself, brave Crillon. We fought at Arques, and you were not there." But now all of us here are fighting at Arques.

III. A Cross-section of Opinion

June 7, 1940

I'VE HAD to spend most of today going about central London on one errand and another. So I thought it would be interesting to ask various people of all types what they were thinking and feeling about the war, and I believe I've got a good and honest cross-section of London opinion.

For instance, this morning I had to visit my tailor, so I asked the chief cutter, who's a solemn ecclesiastical-looking fellow, what he felt about the war. He replied: "I have infinite faith, sir, in the ability of our French Allies to defend their native soil, and as for us, sir, we are unconquerable."

He always looks very earnest—a sort of high priest of men's wear—but when he made this reply he managed to look even ten times more earnest than ever, and nearly frightened me.

Then having to call on a friend in business, I asked his secretary, a fairly typical London bachelor girl, what she was feeling about it all. She said, very seriously: "In the end we shall win, but we shall have a hell of a time first."

This girl, by the way, after doing a long day's work in her office acts as an air-raid warden in her particular suburb, and so is liable to be called out at all hours of the night. No joke that.