

PEOPLE AND THINGS

By HAROLD NICOLSON

I SPENT most of last week delivering lectures and making speeches. My audiences were numerous and varied. They included university professors, undergraduates, elderly Liberals, young Conservatives, left-wing intellectuals and, on one occasion, a gay phalanx of soldiers. What struck me most was that the attitudes of these audiences, and the questions they asked, showed little variation between London and the provinces, between the educated and the uneducated. The majority response, upon every occasion, was the same. I should interpret it as follows: "We did not want this war. We did everything—perhaps even too much—to get out of it. Yet after March 15th it was clear that this country would have to choose between resistance or surrender. Inevitably we had to choose resistance and we must now go on resisting to the end. We have only one war-aim, namely to win this war. We have only one peace aim, namely to prevent such a thing happening again. Now let us get on with the job."

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Such, I found, was the general response I met with, whether from a Regius Professor or from a young clerk in the Army Pay Department. It represents, I should suppose, some 70 per cent. of the opinion in the country in this winter of 1939. The initial mood of dismay, dislocation and depression, has been succeeded by a mood of grim fatalism. The emotions of fear, anger or hatred seem to be entirely absent; even perplexity has for the moment been numbed; I should describe the mood as one of resigned acceptance coupled with patient resolution. It is, I suppose, the sort of mood which at this stage of the war is most necessary and useful. It will be succeeded by other moods as the war progresses and becomes more intense.

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More interesting than the stolid acquiescence of the majority are the minority moods which flicker like fire-flies above a marsh. There was some evidence, of course, of a Communist alignment expressing itself, on one occasion, in a question addressed to me by a private soldier. Undeterred by the presence of his colonel, but much embarrassed by the hoots of his companions, he asked me in a loud but agitated voice whether I did not agree that we had been driven into this war by the fierce campaign launched against Germany by the capitalists of the great national newspapers. I replied that I had not myself observed any very marked anti-Nazi bias in *The Times* newspaper or other of our national journals, nor did I feel that either Lord Rothermere or Lord Beaverbrook had been intent upon driving us into a second European war. Such propulsion as there had been had come from the newspapers of the Left, and even that had been both moderate and polite. "Well," he said, "the bankers anyhow." The picture of poor Mr. Norman swung before my eyes.

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Others, again, asked me whether I did not agree that all this talk about freedom and democracy was mere eye-wash, and that what we were really fighting for was the maintenance of the old balance of power. This question (and it must figure largely in the circulars with which the Labour Party supply their rank and file) always depresses me. Our power is our freedom, and if we lose it we shall lose our independence. One gives this reply, and the questioner resumes his seat with a smile of knowing triumph—that smile of smug infallibility; of higher righteousness, which conceals an absence of knowledge and thought, and self-confidence. Such smiles make one sad.

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There was some slight evidence also that German propaganda regarding our past record and present intentions had produced some effect. What right had we, I was asked,

who had conquered half the world by violence, to take so high a moral tone when Germany attempted a necessary and even inevitable expansion towards the east? A clear and convincing answer to that question is contained in an article contributed by Mr. A. L. Rowse to the current issue of *The Political Quarterly*. Mr. Rowse (who is a historian of the Left Wing) makes all the right points rightly, but he adds a further point which is new. He contends that when any given country becomes too powerful, retribution in the shape of a coalition becomes inevitable. He illustrates this valuable doctrine by the example of Great Britain after the Seven Years War. During the thirteen years between 1763 and 1776 this country became more powerful than was good either for ourselves or for the world. A coalition was formed against us which ended in the salutary defeat of 1782. Since that date we have been wise enough to identify our power with the interests of the smaller nations of Europe, and all subsequent coalitions thus tended, sooner or later, to veer to our side. This doctrine is not only comforting but true.

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Finally I noticed some hang-over from nineteenth-century idealism, which has been so ably exposed by Professor E. H. Carr in his recent study of British Foreign Policy. There are many admirable people who still fail to realise that in this twentieth century we no longer possess the physical or economic power to act as the pacificators of the world. I was met by a whole range of questions, extending from Abyssinia to the Baltic, expressive of that unrealistic point of view. I fear also that I detect a tendency in our public opinion to escape from the thorns of our present perplexity into the lush meadow of wishful thinking. That meadow used to be called "collective security"; it is now called "federalism." Whenever I mentioned that word a sigh of relief and happiness spread through the hall. Lips which had been taut and tense throughout my discourse relaxed into a smile of contentment, and eyes which had been strained and anxious at the contemplation of our stark necessities became bedewed with thankful tears. "Federalism," "Union Now," "The United States of Europe"—what comforting pictures do these phrases evoke! The tiger and the cow will thereafter lie down together in blissful amity, the scorpion and the tarantula will become as winsome as the lady-bird. Even the young Gauleiter will drape his bronzed torso in grey flannel, and the lads and lassies of the Hitler Jugend will spend their summer afternoons reading together the Little Flowers of St. Francis.

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I have for long believed in some form of European federation. The very first article which I contributed to this ~~weekly~~ was in praise of Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's scheme of Pan-Europa. I could scarcely endure the prospect of this war did I not believe that our victory will in fact secure some surrender of sovereignty on the part of all European States and some pooling of resources and opportunities. Yet I am saddened when I reflect that this tremendous problem is regarded by so many people as an escape from difficulty, rather than as a confrontation of difficulties more vast than have ever yet been contemplated in the history of man. Consider the possibility of federation between ourselves and France. Here you have two countries whose interests are identical, whose territories are contiguous, whose economics are largely complementary, whose culture is not essentially dissimilar, whose standards of living and level of education are not extremely diverse. Will it be an easy thing, once the pressure of a common danger is relaxed, to pool our policies and resources? It will not be an easy thing. It will need for its achievement something more than an indolent hope that what we wish to happen is likely to occur.