

FAILURE OF A MISSION

Berlin 1937-1939

BY THE RIGHT HON.

SIR NEVILLE HENDERSON

P.C. G.C.M.G.

LONDON

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.

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PROLOGUE

“I labour for peace, but when I speak unto them thereof they make them ready to battle.”—6th verse of Psalm CXX of Common Prayer Book.

It was the stationmaster at Grantham who finally overcame my scruples about the writing of this book. Mr. Gardner was kind enough to invite me into his office, where there was a fire, one cold morning when I was waiting for a train for London, which was late. We spoke of this and that, about the war and its origins, and his final remark to me was that he and people like him knew nothing of the facts of the case.

I have attempted in this volume, the main purpose of which is historical, to give the facts of the case, and to those who read it I would wish, first of all, to make it quite clear that, whereas all the observations, comments, and opinions expressed in this volume are purely personal, and therefore fallible and controversial, the sequence of events and the facts themselves are taken entirely from telegrams, despatches, and letters written at the time, and are in consequence, humanly speaking, strictly exact.

In a book of this nature, written so soon after the events recorded therein, there must necessarily be certain reticences. In the first place I occupied an official position at Berlin, and was then, and still am, in the service of His Majesty's Government.

In the second place, if circumstances had been normal, nothing would have induced me to write—at least at this early stage—about people who had so recently been uniformly courteous and hospitable to me personally.

Unfortunately, circumstances are not normal and, whatever my personal inclinations may be, I have felt that, having

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regard to the fact that it is British public opinion which ultimately determines the character of our foreign policy, it is my duty to give to the people of this country an account of my stewardship of the mission which was entrusted to me by the King in April 1937 as his Ambassador at Berlin.

The first commandment of a diplomatist is faithfully to interpret the views of his own Government to the Government to which he is accredited, and the second is like unto it—namely, to explain, no less accurately, the views and standpoint of the Government of the country in which he is stationed to the Government of his own country.

The first commandment is much easier to keep than the second, and its fulfilment can, or should, be taken for granted. The second is sometimes far more difficult of performance. I went to Berlin resolved, in spite of my own doubts and apprehensions and in spite of many of its detestable aspects, to do my utmost to see the good side of the Nazi régime as well as the bad, and to explain as objectively as I could its aspirations and viewpoint to His Majesty's Government. Hitler and the Nazi Party governed Germany, and with them it was my duty to work. But, above all, I was determined to labour for an honourable peace, and to follow the example of the Prime Minister in never wearying of that labour.

For two years I hoped against hope that the Nazi revolution, having run its course, would revert to a normal and civilised conduct of internal and international life, that there was a limit to Hitler's ambitions and a word of truth in some at least of his assurances and statements. Many may regard my persistence as convicting me of the lack of any intellectual understanding of Nazi, or even German, mentality. That may be true; but even to-day I do not regret having tried to believe in Germany's honour and good sense. Whatever happens, I shall always persist in thinking that it was right to make the attempt, that nothing was lost by making it,

but that, on the contrary, we should never have entered upon this war as a united Empire and nation, with the moral support of neutral opinion behind us, if the attempt had not been made. Anyway, the fact remains that up to the 15th of March, 1939, and in spite of the shocks of Godesberg and Munich in 1938, I refused to abandon that hope. After the occupation of Prague on the Ides of last March I still struggled on, though all hope, except in a miracle, was dead.

No miracle occurred, and on September 1st the German armies and air force invaded Poland. There was no declaration of war, and a clearer case of unprovoked aggression there can never be. Indeed, it is possible now to say that, in spite of all my hopes and efforts, for a year and a half before that date I had been obsessed with the idea that we were moving remorselessly through the pages of a Greek tragedy to its inevitably disastrous and sinister end. Those who take the trouble to read this book will realise what I mean. Hitler never intended the ultimate end to be other than war. It seems inconceivable that the will and lust for power of one man should plunge an unwilling Europe into war. But so it is, and hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have got to suffer and to die for it. So long as Germany, the home of the most numerous, disciplined, and hard-working race in Europe, is governed by Hitler and his secret police (Gestapo) and by all that Hitlerism stands for, there can be no confidence in international agreements, and no civilised conduct in national and international life.

That is my profound conviction after living in the Germany of Hitler for over two years. I like and admire the German people; I feel myself very much at home among them, and find them less strangers than almost any other foreign people. A prosperous, contented, and happy Germany is a vital British interest. But to-day the Germans are serving a false god, and their many good and great qualities are being

✓ debauched for ends which are evil. Germany can neither be prosperous nor happy till she recovers her individual and personal freedom of life and thought and has learnt that the true responsibility of strength is to protect and not to oppress the weak.

I have lived abroad for a third of a century. The last year in which I spent as much as six months in England was 1905. In December of that year I was sent to my first post at St. Petersburg. Since then I have never spent more than four months in England in any one year, generally much less, and in the course of some years I have not returned to England at all. Yet whenever I do so I am always struck by the fundamental common sense, sound judgment, and critical faculty of the great mass of the British people, of John Citizen and Jane Citizeness in their simplest form. Never was I more impressed by this than in September of this year and in the months which preceded the declaration of war. I may tell of my personal experiences at Berlin during the past two years, but nothing in such a record can add to or detract from the instinctive appreciation by the British public of the realities of the struggle upon which we have now entered.

There is no material gain in it for ourselves. True to our own spirit of freedom, we are fighting for the moral standards of civilised life, in the full realisation of our responsibilities and of the cost which we must pay for shouldering them. All that is best in this generation of the British nation, and particularly of its youth, has dedicated itself to the higher cause of humanity in the future, and it is in humble recognition of that marvellous fact that I myself dare to dedicate this book to the people of the British Isles, to the men and women of its streets and factories, shores, and countrysides.

Rauceby Hall, Sleaford,

October 1939.

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PART I
THE BACKGROUND OF THE
STORY

CHAPTER I

BUENOS AIRES TO BERLIN

In January 1937, when I had been just over a year at Buenos Aires as His Majesty's Ambassador to the Argentine Republic, I received a telegram from Mr. Eden, then Foreign Secretary in Mr. Baldwin's Cabinet, offering me the post of Ambassador at Berlin in succession to Sir Eric Phipps, who was being transferred to Paris in April. As the telegram was marked "personal", I asked my secretary, Mr. Pennefather, to help me decode it, and I can still vividly recall my first reactions on ascertaining its contents. They were threefold. In the first place, a sense of my own inadequacy for what was obviously the most difficult and most important post in the whole of the diplomatic service. Secondly, and deriving from the first, that it could only mean that I had been specially selected by Providence for the definite mission of, as I trusted, helping to preserve the peace of the world. And thirdly, there flashed across my mind the Latin tag about failure and success which ominously observes that the Tarpeian rock, from which failures were thrown to their doom, is next to the Capitol, where the triumph of success was celebrated. I might have hesitated more than I did about accepting Mr. Eden's offer if I had not been persuaded of the reality of my second reaction, which seemed to me to outweigh every other consideration.

I left Buenos Aires in the middle of March. Though I had had a German governess as a small boy and had spent the best part of two years in Germany while preparing for the

diplomatic examination, I had never, during my thirty-two years' service abroad, been in a post where German was the spoken language, so that my knowledge of it was extremely rusty. It was partly for this reason that I took my passage back to England on the German liner *Cap Arcona* and provided myself with two copies of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to study on the way. The one had been given me by the German Ambassador at Buenos Aires, the other was an unexpurgated edition which I obtained privately. Though it was in parts turgid and prolix and would have been more readable if it had been condensed to a third of its length, it struck me at the time as a remarkable production on the part of a man whose education and political experience appeared to have been as slight, on his own showing, as Herr Hitler's.

The Captain of the *Cap Arcona* was a certain Niejahr, who was afterwards promoted to be Commodore of the North German Lloyd. He was a great favourite with all the British passengers on board, of whom there were a number, including the late Lord Mount Temple, who was at that time President of the Anglo-German Fellowship, but who resigned from that position after the Jewish persecutions in November 1938. I had several talks with Captain Niejahr, and on one occasion, pointing to his own high cheek-bones, he drew my attention to the considerable admixture of Slav blood in many of the Germans, and particularly of the Prussians. It is no coincidence that in the last war it was the Prussians rather than the Germans whom we regarded as our real enemies, and that in the present one it is the Nazis or followers of Hitler, and again not the Germans as a race. Though but few of the actual leaders of the National-Socialist Party are Prussians by origin, it is the Prussian ideology, and particularly their methods, which are no less dominant to-day in Germany than they were in 1914 or in 1870.

In a Democracy the State is subordinated to the service of its citizens. In National-Socialism, as interpreted by Hitler, the State is all in all, whereas the citizen has no individual personality and is but the obedient servant and slave of the State as personified in its leader whose will is absolute (the Führerprinzip). The 'Leader' principle is derived directly from Fascism, but otherwise this conception of National philosophy is based entirely on the old Prussian theory of service to the State and obedience to command as preached in the writings of its apostle, Immanuel Kant. In what proportion militant Prussianism is due to its Slavonic blood mixture, to the harsh north-eastern German climate, or to the militarism imposed on it by its old indefensible eastern frontiers is an open question. But the fact remains that the Prussians, of whom even Goethe spoke as barbarians, are a distinctive European type, which has imposed itself and its characteristics upon the rest of Germany and, from the point of view of the Western world, has prostituted, or is prostituting, the great qualities of order and efficiency, probity and kindliness of the purer German of the north-west, west, and south Germany, with whom an Englishman on his travels abroad finds himself in such natural sympathy.

Among the German passengers on board the *Cap Arcona* were Count and Countess Dohna, with whom, as I shall relate, I afterwards stayed at their castle of Finckenstein in East Prussia, and Princess Frederick Leopold of Prussia, a sister of the late Empress, who was travelling with her only surviving son, destined later to be imprisoned by the Nazi Government.

Apart, however, from having occasion to make my first attempt at a speech in German at a small dinner given to the Captain, by far the most interesting incident of the journey was our meeting with the new German airship *Hindenburg*,

which, in the following May, was to become a total casualty, with considerable loss of life, at Lakehurst in the U.S.A. She caught us up on her return journey from South America to Germany, and setting her engines as she reached us to the same speed as those of the *Cap Arcona*, she hung above our heads at about 150 feet, a most impressive spectacle, for fully five or ten minutes, while wireless messages were exchanged between the two craft. When she started her engines at full speed again, it was almost incredible how quickly she disappeared once more from view.

I reached Southampton on one of the last days of March, and spent a hectic month in London seeing as many people as possible and occupied in all the numerous preparations which are necessary before one takes over a new post. My most important interview was, of course, with Mr. Neville Chamberlain, who was at that time Chancellor of the Exchequer, but who was already Prime Minister designate, as Mr. Baldwin had some time previously announced his intention of retiring immediately after the Coronation, which was to take place on May 12th. Both Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Baldwin, whom I had seen earlier, agreed that I should do my utmost to work with Hitler and the Nazi Party as the existing Government in Germany. In democratic England the Nazis, with their disregard of personal freedom and their persecution of religion, Jews, and trade unions alike, were naturally far from popular. But they were the Government of the country, and an ambassador is not sent abroad to criticise in that country the government which it chooses or to whom it submits. It was just as much my duty honourably to try to co-operate with the Nazi Government to the best of my ability as it would be for a foreign ambassador in London to work with a Conservative Government, if it happened to be in power, rather than with the Liberal or Labour opposition,