

T H E
NEW YORKER

B O O K O F

WAR
PIECES

MOLLIE PANTER-DOWNES
PRINCESS PAUL SAPIEHA
JANET FLANNER
A. J. LIEBLING
REBECCA WEST
E. J. KAHN, JR.
ST. CLAIR McKELWAY
MARK MURPHY
GEORGE SESSIONS PERRY
WALTER BERNSTEIN
JOHN LARDNER
BRENDAN GILL
JOHN HERSEY
GUY REMINGTON
DANIEL LANG
DAVID LARDNER
EUGENE KINKEAD
ROBERT SHAPLEN
ROBERT LEWIS TAYLOR
S. N. BEHRMAN
JOEL SAYRE
PHILIP HAMBURGER



LONDON
1939
= TO =
HIROSHIMA
1945

THE NEW YORKER
BOOK OF

**WAR
PIECES**

LONDON, 1939,
TO HIROSHIMA, 1945

SCHOCKEN BOOKS
NEW YORK



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The New Yorker book of war pieces.

Reprint. Originally published: New York : Reynal &
Hitchcock, [1947].

1. World War, 1939-1945. 2. World War, 1939-1945—
Personal narratives. I. New Yorker (New York, 1925-
D743.9.N4 1988 940.53 88-42574

ISBN 0-8052-4049-7

ISBN 0-8052-0901-8 (pbk.)

Manufactured in the United States of America

THE NEW YORKER
BOOK OF

**WAR
PIECES**

To the Memory of
DAVID LARDNER
Killed at Aachen, October 18, 1944

Publishers' Note

The articles that make up this book first appeared in *The New Yorker*. They have been selected and arranged with the assistance of *The New Yorker's* editors. The dates printed in brackets above the titles are the magazine's dates of issue.

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THE NEW YORKER
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[September 9, 1939]

LETTER FROM LONDON

MOLLIE PANTER-DOWNES

September 3, 1939

FOR a week everybody in London had been saying every day that if there wasn't a war tomorrow there wouldn't be a war. Yesterday people were saying that if there wasn't a war today it would be a bloody shame. Now that there is a war, the English, slow to start, have already in spirit started and are comfortably two laps ahead of the official war machine, which had to await the drop of somebody's handkerchief. In the general opinion, Hitler has got it coming to him—or, in the local patois, "'E's fair copped it."

The London crowds are cool—cooler than they were in 1914—in spite of thundery weather that does its best to scare everybody by staging unofficial rehearsals for air raids at the end of breathlessly humid days. On the stretch of green turf by Knightsbridge Barracks, which used to be the scampering ground for the smartest terriers in London, has appeared a row of steam shovels that bite out mouthfuls of earth, hoist it aloft, and dump it into lorries; it is then carted away to fill sandbags. The eye has now become accustomed to sandbags everywhere, and to the balloon barrage, the trap for enemy planes, which one morning spread over the sky like some form of silvery dermatitis. Posting a letter has acquired a new interest, too, since His Majesty's tubby, scarlet pillar boxes have been done up in squares of yellow detector paint, which changes color if there is poison gas in the air and is said to be as sensitive as a chameleon.

Gas masks have suddenly become part of everyday civilian equipment and everybody is carrying the square cardboard cartons that look as though they might contain a pound of grapes for a sick friend. Bowlegged admirals stump jauntily up Whitehall with their gas masks slung neatly in knapsacks over their shoulders. Last night London was completely blacked out. A few cars crawled through the streets with one headlight out and the other hooded while Londoners, suddenly become homebodies, sat under their shaded lights listening to a Beethoven Promenade concert interspersed with the calm and cultured tones of the B.B.C. telling motorists what to do during air raids and giving instructions to what the B.B.C. referred to coyly as expectant mothers with pink cards, meaning mothers who are a good deal more than expectant.

The evacuation of London, which is to be spaced over three days, began yesterday and was apparently a triumph for all concerned. At seven o'clock in the morning all inward traffic was stopped and A.A. scouts raced through the suburbs whisking shrouds of sacking off imposing bulletin boards, which informed motorists that all the principal routes out of town were one-way streets for three days. Cars poured out pretty steadily all day yesterday and today, packed with people, luggage, children's perambulators, and domestic pets, but the congestion at busy points was no worse than it is at any other time in the holiday season. The railways, whose workers had been on the verge of going out on strike when the crisis came, played their part nobly and the London stations, accustomed to receiving trainloads of child refugees from the Third Reich, got down to the job of dispatching trainload after trainload of children the other way—this time, cheerful little cockneys who ordinarily get to the country perhaps once a year on the local church outing and could hardly believe the luck that was sending them now. Left behind, the mothers stood around rather listlessly at street corners waiting for the telegrams that were to be posted up at the various schools to tell them where their children were.

All over the country the declaration of war has brought a new lease of life to retired army officers, who suddenly find themselves the commanders of battalions of willing ladies who have emerged from the herbaceous borders to answer the call of duty. Morris 10s, their windshields plastered with notices that they are engaged on business of the A.R.P. or W.V.S. (both volunteer services), rock down quiet country lanes propelled by firm-lipped spinsters who yesterday could hardly have said "Boo!" to an aster.

Although the summer holiday is still on, village schools have reopened as centers where the evacuated hordes from London can be rested, sorted out, medically examined, refreshed with tea and biscuits, and distributed to their new homes. The war has brought the great unwashed right into the bosoms of the great washed; while determined ladies in white V.A.D. overalls search the mothers' heads with a knitting needle for unwelcome signs of life, the babies are dandled and patted on their often grimy diapers by other ladies, who have been told to act as hostesses and keep the guests from pining for Shore-ditch. Guest rooms have been cleared of Crown Derby knickknacks and the best guest towels, and the big houses and cottages alike are trying to overcome the traditional British dislike of strangers, who may, for all anybody knows, be parked in them for a matter of years, not weeks.

Everybody is so busy that no one has time to look up at the airplanes that pass overhead all day. Today was a day of unprecedented activity in the air. Squadrons of bombers bustled in all directions and at midday an enormous number of vast planes, to which the knowing pointed as troop-carriers, droned overhead toward an unknown destination that was said by two sections of

opinion to be (a) France and (b) Poland. On the ground, motor buses full of troops in bursting good humor tore through the villages, the men waving at the girls and howling "Tipperary" and other ominously dated ditties that everybody has suddenly remembered and found to be as good for a war in 1939 as they were in 1914.

London and the country are buzzing with rumors, a favorite one being that Hitler carries a gun in his pocket and means to shoot himself if things don't go too well; another school of thought favors the version that he is now insane and Göring has taken over. It is felt that Mussolini was up to no good with his scheme for holding a peace conference and spoiling what has become everybody's war. The English were a peace-loving nation up to two days ago, but now it is pretty widely felt that the sooner we really get down to the job, the better.

[September 16, 1939]

LETTER FROM PARIS

JANET FLANNER

September 10, 1939

THIS is a queer war so far—thank God! Since it started a week ago today, Paris has been thrice visited by enemy planes, but not bombed. Most shops except food stores are closed, with their shutters pulled down, and behind these shutters families are still living. Paris is not empty. Were it not for the existence of war, the knowledge, for example, that it is against the law to go onto the street without your gas mask slung ready over your shoulder in its little khaki case, this Sunday would just be a beautiful Indian-summer day.

News does not arrive, or maybe it does not exist. What is going on along the eastern front you learn from the communiqués. As for what is going on along the western or Franco-German front, one can only say that the information all us journalists try to get and the comments we try to make are very soundly and strictly censored here. *Le Jour* has just appeared with nothing left of the last half of its leading editorial except the capital letters "P.S." of a postscript that was not printed. *Gringoire* has come out with a picture of a pair of scissors occupying a blank column on its front page.

All that can be truthfully and properly reported from France today is that what is going on in no man's land is strategically strange. It would seem, indeed, as if efforts are still being made to hold the war up, prevent its starting in earnest—efforts made, perhaps self-consciously, by government leaders reluctant to go down in history as having ordered the first inflaming shots, or efforts made as a general reflection of the various populations' courageous but confused states of mind. Certainly this must be the first war that millions of people on both sides continued to think could be avoided even after it had officially been declared. For months there has been a rumor here that at the last minute—a later last minute than history has even seen—something would be arranged, and that the arrangement would not be appeasement but a plan. The outline of the supposed plan was that war would be threatened or, as a desperate gamble, even entered upon as an aid to the anti-Nazis in Germany in their efforts to free their country from the present regime. After that, according to this theory, there would be a cessation of hostilities and the beginning