

1 A WORLD UNDONE

For the first time in six years, floodlights cast shadows across London's streets, brightly illuminating Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, the great clock at Westminster and Buckingham Palace. The brilliance of the White Ensign, the Union Flag and the Blue Ensign on the Cenotaph contrasted with the grime-caked stones behind, a continuing reminder of Britain's industrial revolution. Despite the lateness of the hour, crowds still converged around the great monuments, and bonfires burned in many of London's open spaces, more than a few with effigies of Hitler sitting on top. The bells of churches across the capital continued to ring, competing with the sporadic fireworks and making sleep impossible, even if it were desired.¹

The eighth of May 1945 had been a full day for the Prime Minister, beginning in the early hours of the morning with his radio address to announce Germany's unconditional surrender. There had followed an attendance in Parliament for Question Time, a procession to the Church of St Margaret for an impromptu service of thanksgiving, further pronouncements in the House of Commons and then, at four o'clock, an audience with the King.² Some hours later, the Right Honourable Winston Churchill stepped onto the flag-draped balcony of the Ministry of Health, causing an enormous roar from the crowds who had been waiting expectantly for their leader to speak. Wearing his war-worn boiler suit, his polished top hat balanced incongruously on his head, Churchill addressed them through a loudspeaker: 'God bless you all. This is your victory!' At this, many voices in the crowd interrupted to correct him, 'No – it is *yours*'.³ The Prime Minister finished his

evening sometime after ten o'clock with a return appearance on the balcony to lead the crowd in a roaring rendition of 'Land of Hope and Glory'.⁴

VE Day was a celebration in Britain, but the elation of Germany's unconditional surrender could not last long. Europe lay in ruins, Japan remained undefeated and the empire that had sustained Britain throughout its long war was showing signs of fatigue and restlessness. Even those with the greatest reason to rejoice could find little energy to do so. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff and, as chairman of the Chief of Staffs' Committee, Churchill's foremost military advisor, wrote in his diary on 7 May that he simply couldn't 'feel thrilled', instead experiencing 'infinite mental weariness'. Despite the celebrations occurring throughout the country, Alanbrooke's 'most acute feeling' was 'one of deep depression' and he spent 9 May – a national holiday – at his home tending to his goats and chickens.⁵ Churchill himself warned the nation on 13 May that there was 'still a lot to do' and that Britons 'must be prepared for further efforts of mind and body and further sacrifices to great causes'.⁶ John Colville, Churchill's long-time private secretary, feared that 'Victory has brought no respite. The P.M. looks tired and has to fight for the energy to deal with the problems confronting him'. In the days following Germany's surrender, Colville found Churchill 'overpowered' and 'weighed down by the responsibility and uncertainty'.⁷

The problems facing Britain were grave indeed. Three quarters of a million homes that had been destroyed or severely damaged during the war had yet to be rebuilt and there was 'huge disruption to public services'. Britain's national debt sat at a record £3.5 billion yet the country was in desperate need of reinvestment after the austerity of war. Neville Chamberlain's social reforms of the 1930s had been left unfinished and, still in 1945, 7 million houses had no hot water supply, 6 million lacked an inside toilet of any kind and 5 million had no fixed bath.⁸ And putting aside the fact that Britain and its empire remained at war with Japan, the Prime Minister also had political problems. After five years of coalition government under a Conservative leader, the rank and file of the Labour Party was growing restless. Churchill, whilst not immune to party feelings, thought it best for the coalition to continue until after Japan's defeat, a sentiment shared by the leader of the Labour Party Clement Attlee and his closest colleague Ernest Bevin, both of whom sat in the wartime coalition government. Yet Attlee and Bevin

were overruled by the National Executive Committee at their party conference in Blackpool, which on 21 May put before its members a proposition that the coalition be dissolved by October whether or not Japan was defeated. After a near unanimous vote in favour, Churchill dissolved the coalition immediately, formed a Conservative ‘caretaker’ government and called for a General Election to be held on 5 July.⁹ The campaign quickly descended into partisan bickering and ‘business as usual’; the electorate as a whole was left ‘jaded and sceptical’ at such political posturing whilst so many Britons were still fighting overseas. As one Fulham resident put it early in the campaign, ‘The war’s got us down, what with the bombing and the blackout, and the worrying about coupons and queues, women like me haven’t the mind to take to politics’.¹⁰ By June, Colville sensed ‘the first intoxication of victory’ was ‘passing. The [political] parties are creating bitterness, largely artificial, in their vote-catching hysteria’.¹¹

If Britain had at least felt the ‘intoxication of victory’ without ever carrying the weight of Nazi occupation, the same could not be said of the European continent, across which dawn broke on 9 May not with a national holiday but with signs of devastation everywhere. Whether destroyed by bombers from the air or by the ground forces as they steadily advanced and retreated from Normandy and Sicily, bridges, housing, hospitals, schools and cultural monuments that had stood the test of time prior to the war were all reduced to rubble in what observers called ‘biblical annihilation’.¹² In Hamburg, Germany, for example, 3,000 aeroplanes had dropped 18,000 tons of bombs, destroying 40,383 houses and 263,000 flats – 48 per cent of all homes in the city – and causing 36,662 casualties.¹³ In Dresden, the damage was worse; on the night of 13–14 February 1945 alone, 85 per cent of the city was destroyed, including more than 70,000 residences, 640 shops, 200 factories, 64 warehouses, 24 banks, 19 hospitals, 39 schools, 31 hotels, 3 theatres, 18 cinemas, 11 churches and the Dresden Zoo.¹⁴ In Warsaw, 90 per cent of all buildings were razed by the retreating Germans, and in the small town of Wiener Neustadt near Vienna, just eighteen houses remained from a pre-war population of 45,000.¹⁵

It was not only the physical damage in Europe’s great cities that presented a problem. Observers estimated that as much as 10 per cent of Europe’s population – some 60 million people – had been displaced from their homes, creating the largest refugee crisis in world history.¹⁶ Reginald Roy, a Canadian soldier serving with the Cape Breton

highlanders, wrote in his diary of travelling through Holland during the first two weeks of May 1945 and seeing ‘thousands of people swarming in all directions’, as if a ‘big stick had been poked into an anthill’.¹⁷ Robert Reid, a BBC war correspondent attached to Patton’s army, told his listeners that the 40,000 refugees who moved along the roads of the Moselle valley in Germany reminded him ‘of those coloured plates you remembered seeing as a child in the family bible at home’, of the Israelites searching for the Promised Land. The displaced peoples he saw were, he believed, ‘one of the most serious problems now facing Europe’.¹⁸

Whereas for Britain the blackouts and Blitz had helped foster a myth of national defiance, the tragedy of Dunkirk transformed into a triumph and Churchill’s ‘the Few’ coming to symbolise British greatness after the Battle of Britain, there was no such silver lining for the continent. For Britons, the war had demonstrated the virtues of a strong patriotism and confirmed their status as an ‘island race’ set apart. For Europeans on the continent, the war had shown only the dangers of unchecked nationalism and the folly of drawing lines on a map.¹⁹ Many Britons nevertheless shared a commonality with their fellow Europeans over the tragedy of the war and a desire to prevent such destruction in the future. In the General Election campaign, Churchill told supporters in Woodford that European interests were ‘an essential part of our interests’.²⁰

It was not the first time the Prime Minister had characterised British interests as European interests, nor would it be the last. Churchill saw in Europe a continent which, whilst given to competition and internal strife throughout its history, nevertheless shared with Britain a comparable imperial outlook and a wider Christian heritage that had through the ages combined to form, shape and enhance Western civilisation. It was no secret to his friends and admirers that Churchill had been throughout his career both a staunch imperialist and a statesman with an intense interest in the European continent. His many public letters and commentaries throughout the 1920s and ’30s had demonstrated as much.²¹ Yet it was not until 1938 that Churchill spelled out in clear terms his vision for Europe and the Empire. On 28 May of that year, Churchill penned an article for the *News of the World* that would forever associate his name with the European continent, asking, ‘Why not “The United States of Europe”?’ He lamented that ‘Never before have three hundred and eighty millions of the strongest, most

educated, and most civilised parent races of mankind done themselves so much harm'. It was not only the ancient and irrational hatreds that dismayed him but the 'tangled growth and network of tariff barriers designed to restrict trade and production', which contrasted so greatly with the United States of America where 'free interchange of goods and services over the widest possible area' had led to its 'rapid accretion of material wealth'. Churchill's solution to these problems was a United States of Europe, drawing from the historical examples of past times when 'Rumanians lived on the Tyne and Spaniards on the Danube as equal citizens of a single State'. Churchill argued that a unified European empire, where a person could 'realise himself as French, German, Dutch, or Hungarian, and simultaneously as a European', would 'once united, once federalised, or partially federalised, once continentally self-conscious – Europe with its African and Asiatic possessions and plantations – constitute an organism beyond compare'.

Churchill was ambivalent about Britain's role in this newly created United States of Europe. He recognised the inherent European-ness of British history with his reference to Rumanians on the Tyne, yet also suggested that British policy had to be 'determined by her dominant conception of a united British Empire'. The British people were European, of this Churchill had no doubt, yet Britain also had unique extra-European responsibilities as Europe's largest imperial power. European interests were British interests – 'Everything that tends to make Europe more prosperous and more peaceful is conducive to British interests' – yet British interests went beyond purely European interests. Churchill therefore concluded that Britain was 'with Europe, but not of it. We are linked, but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed'. Britain must 'further every honest and practical step which the nations of Europe may make to reduce the barriers which divide them' but must also work for a 'proportionate growth of solidarity throughout the British Empire', so that Britain – both European and sitting outside Europe – could safeguard its unique island history whilst recognising its common European heritage.²²

Five months after Churchill wrote his essay, the then-Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich having met the German Fuhrer Adolf Hitler to forge 'peace in our time'. Churchill publicly warned against the dangers of allowing Hitler to annex the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and called for Western European unity, arguing that 'If the French Republic and the British Empire were

necessary to each other in days of war and in days of success, they are still more necessary in these times when conditions are so different'.²³ Churchill's warning did little good, however, and Chamberlain's appeasement was unable to prevent a German invasion of Poland and the start of the Second World War in September 1939. When Churchill became Prime Minister on 10 May 1940, he proposed an Anglo–French Union to combat the menace they both faced, telling his war cabinet on 16 June that he had seen the French General Charles de Gaulle the previous day, who had impressed upon him that 'some very dramatic move' was necessary to ensure that the French government did not succumb to National Socialist overtures.²⁴ The Prime Minister put before his cabinet a draft proclamation to be delivered to the French government proposing an 'indissoluble union' between Britain and France, whereby France and Great Britain would 'no longer be two nations, but one Franco–British Union' with a 'common citizenship' and 'joint organs of defence, foreign, financial and economic policies'. For the duration of the war, there would be a single Franco–British war cabinet, and the two parliaments would be 'formally associated' until such time that the constitutional details of the merger could be completed. The cabinet made clear that 'the Union included the whole British Commonwealth of Nations and the French Empire'²⁵ and unanimously approved Churchill's proclamation after only a very brief discussion. Unfortunately, with one eye to appeasing the Third Reich and the other to the possible spoils of Nazi occupation, the French cabinet rejected the proposal, Marshall Philippe Pétain icily asking why France should want to 'fuse with a corpse'.²⁶ Within a week, the French government had surrendered to Germany and the fascist French Vichy Regime soon governed France on Germany's behalf.²⁷

That France and Britain would take two very different paths for the subsequent five years of war was inevitable, given that one was living under occupation and one was not. For Britain, this was a time when a strong national unity had by necessity to overshadow all other identities and loyalties and when the very survival of the nation was dependent on a heightened sense of patriotism; for France and the Low Countries, the rise of Germany's National Socialist government and its occupation of their lands taught only the dangers of nationalism.²⁸ Even so, a young Harold Macmillan, in response to a question on war aims in October 1939, wrote, 'if western civilisation is to survive, we must look forward to an organisation, economic, cultural, and perhaps

even political, comprising all the countries of western Europe'.²⁹ In late 1940 – as Britain stood alone under continual German bombardment – the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden suggested that after the war it might be necessary to construct 'some form of European federation', which would 'comprise a European defence scheme, a European customs union and [a] common currency'.³⁰

Consequently, although Churchill turned increasingly to the United States for alliance in the face of the European collapse, he did not ignore the exiled European governments. In the autumn of 1942, he wrote to Anthony Eden that his 'thoughts rest[ed] primarily in Europe – the revival of the glory of Europe, the parent continent of the modern nations and of civilisation. . . . Hard as it is to say now, I trust that the European family may act unitedly as one under a Council of Europe'. He acknowledged that Britain would 'have to work with the Americans in many ways, and in the greatest ways', but that 'Europe is our prime care'.³¹ He also listened to the pleas of Norway's Trygve Lie and Holland's Eelco van Kleffens who asked for Britain to establish a post-war European security system that would prevent the rise of future autocratic governments, and he met with Belgium's Paul-Henri Spaak who argued that Britain should lead Western Europe towards greater political and economic unity once Germany was defeated.³² And, as important as Norway, Holland and Belgium were to Churchill, France loomed even larger. Not only was France the greatest of the Western European powers and thus likely to hold a commanding position in any post-war European system, France was also a colonial power which, like Britain, understood the imperial mission of European states. The *Entente Cordiale* that had brought France and the United Kingdom together after centuries of animosity was, after all, a colonial understanding, and, unlike Britain's American ally, France understood that equality and freedom were not always best manifested in immediate national self-determination. In a post-war world in which the United States would inevitably hold more power than ever before, it was essential for Britain to develop partners within Europe who would stand firm against any American anti-imperial impulses.

This message was reinforced following the appointment of Duff Cooper as British Representative to the French Committee of National Liberation in Algiers in late 1943. Cooper, at times a civil servant, Guards officer and parliamentarian, had made his name in 1938 when, on the day after Chamberlain's Munich declaration, he had

resigned his position as First Lord of the Admiralty, telling Parliament that ‘I have ruined, perhaps, my political career. But that is a little matter; I have retained something which is to me of great value – I can still walk about the world with my head erect’.³³ Churchill immediately passed Cooper a note from the backbenches congratulating him on a speech that was ‘one of the finest Parliamentary performances I have ever heard’.³⁴ It was the first of more than 4,000 letters Cooper received following his resignation.³⁵ When Churchill became prime minister two years later, he immediately brought Cooper back into the cabinet as Minister of Information, Resident Cabinet Minister in Singapore and then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

When the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden offered him the position in Algiers, it was with the rank of ambassador and the expectation that he would continue as British Ambassador in Paris upon the liberation of France. Eden selected Cooper because of his close links to General Charles de Gaulle and because he shared his view that de Gaulle was the future of France, the man to whom ‘the whole people of France would turn’.³⁶ For this same reason, however, Churchill was unconvinced that Cooper was the right man for the job, having developed distrust and hostility towards de Gaulle over the past three years. Consequently, before Churchill would confirm his appointment, he wrote to Cooper, laying out his vision for post-war Anglo–French relations: ‘The help of Britain and the United States is essential to the building up again of a strong France which we both agree is a prime British interest’. However, de Gaulle had ‘contracted a deep antipathy to both these countries’. The general was ‘Fascist-minded, opportunist, unscrupulous, ambitious to the last degree’, whose coming to power in a liberated France could only lead to ‘a considerable estrangement between France and the Western Democracies’. Churchill feared that de Gaulle would do his utmost to split Great Britain from the United States and, failing that, to ‘split them both from Russia’. This would result in a Europe more fragmented after the war than before. Consequently, de Gaulle could not become France, and France could not become de Gaulle. The future of France was too important to British interests to allow it to become severed from the United Kingdom and its allies.³⁷ Cooper replied that he would ‘do all in his power to strengthen the [French] Committee [in Algiers] with a view to rendering it independent of any individual’. He added, rather cheekily, that ‘an individual who had the reputation of being pro de Gaulle and no longer deserved it

might prove a very suitable British envoy to the French Committee'.³⁸ Churchill was persuaded that Eden's judgment was correct and on 11 November 1943 he announced that Cooper would be appointed, to arrive in Algiers immediately in the New Year.

The relationship between Churchill and de Gaulle remained tense throughout the war. In the New Year (1944), the Prime Minister sent to de Gaulle an invitation for them to meet when Churchill passed through Algiers, which offended de Gaulle because the invitation was sent as if Churchill were 'in his own country and not in de Gaulle's'.³⁹ When they met on 12 January, 'Winston was in a bad mood . . . and not very welcoming'.⁴⁰ This only further aggravated de Gaulle, who believed that Churchill was treating him in a manner unbecoming a statesman. Nevertheless, the tone soon softened and the meeting 'throughout was friendly'.⁴¹ At its close, the General invited Churchill to review the French troops, during which there were cries of 'Vive Churchill' and 'Vive de Gaulle'. Once the Prime Minister departed, de Gaulle told those gathered that there had been a 'rebirth of the French army and [a] renewal of the Anglo-French alliance'.⁴² After an inauspicious beginning, Churchill's visit turned out to be a 'great success', and Cooper wrote in his diary that the Prime Minister was 'very much moved' by the review and left in a 'heavenly mood – very funny and very happy'.⁴³

Cooper was encouraged by this and set about his task of improving Anglo-French relations with renewed energy. He recognised as well as anybody that there were certain inherent differences between the French and the British⁴⁴ but was nevertheless convinced that following the end of the war the United Kingdom would have to give as much attention to the European continent as it gave to the Empire. On 30 May – just days before the Allied invasion of Normandy – he sent to Eden a long dispatch laying out his expectations for the post-war world and what he believed Europe's position within it would be. He cautioned against any British impulse towards isolation and warned that although the United States would undoubtedly continue as an important friend, 'the interests of the two countries were too divergent to render an [permanent] alliance between them expedient'. More importantly, Britain could not turn its back on Europe, given that 'our country, more than ever in the past, [is] a part of the Continent'. He predicted that security would be the foremost concern of most Europeans, and, for this, they could turn either to the Soviet Union or

to Britain. Given that ‘Russia, when Germany was eliminated, would present the gravest potential menace to the peace of the Continent’, it was crucial that Europe should turn to Britain for leadership rather than to the Soviet Union. Since many European countries would follow France’s lead, Anglo–French relations were of the utmost importance. The best way to ensure a European turn to Britain was to propose a ‘federation of the western seaboard of Europe’, including the United Kingdom, which – having practically ‘the whole continent of Africa . . . at their disposal’ – would become the ‘strongest’ of the three world powers: the United States, the Soviet Union and Europe.⁴⁵

Eden, with an eye to Britain’s wartime alliances with both the United States and Russia, thanked Cooper for the ‘masterly way in which [he] had dealt with an issue of profound significance’ but suggested that a federation of Western European countries would increase rather than decrease any danger from the Soviet Union, ‘if indeed such a danger existed’, and might offend the United States.⁴⁶ Exasperated, Cooper sent a second dispatch in August – five days after Paris was liberated – suggesting that as the United Kingdom would emerge from the war ‘with greater honours than any other country’, the ‘leadership of Europe will await us’. He repeated his belief that British leadership should involve, at a bare minimum, both a political agreement and a defence scheme between Western European powers and cautioned that the United Kingdom might ‘miss this opportunity’ if its government were to ‘hesitate to adopt a positive policy through fear of incurring the suspicion of Russia on the one hand or the disapproval of America on the other’. It was essential, he argued, that the British government not ‘allow the formation of our European policy to wait either upon the ukases of the Kremlin or the votes of the American Senate’.⁴⁷

In response to Cooper’s dispatches, Eden contacted Lord Halifax, the British ambassador in Washington DC, to ascertain what the American government’s response would be towards a Western European bloc including the United Kingdom. Halifax replied on 16 September 1944, assuring Eden that although the United States traditionally disliked ‘blocs’, a Western European bloc would be ‘formed of countries with similar political structure, namely Western democracies, and of a similar development of economic and social civilisation’. It was therefore unlikely that the United States would raise many objections, particularly if the United Kingdom was involved, since ‘Great Britain is regarded as

the natural leader of Western Europe'. If anything, the United States would 'welcome any radical departure from the past which would point towards a degree of unification in Europe and hence, to American eyes, away from the fragmentation of the Continent'. If British leadership of an integrated Europe could guarantee continental stability, thus ensuring that the United States need not enter another European war, so much the better.⁴⁸

Eden also sought advice from Oliver Stanley at the Colonial Office, Oliver Lyttelton at the Ministry of Production and Harold Macmillan, Minister Resident in the Mediterranean, all of whom supported Cooper's proposal. When the Foreign Secretary dug deeper into some of the issues Cooper had raised, he, too, began to see the reality of a post-war Soviet threat. He became particularly concerned after de Gaulle visited Moscow in December 1944, a visit that seemed to suggest that Cooper's fears of a split within Europe might come to pass, with the French drifting East rather than West. For this reason, he persuaded Churchill to lobby Stalin against a Franco-Soviet pact being signed, arguing that, following the war, he hoped the 1942 Anglo-Soviet alliance might be converted into a tripartite Franco-Anglo-Soviet pact. Stalin, however, was lukewarm about the British proposal and de Gaulle – accusing Churchill of meddling – immediately signed a Franco-Soviet pact that excluded Great Britain. Churchill instantly regretted his approach to Stalin, fearing that the Soviet rebuff had weakened Britain's hand against both the Soviet Union and France; consequently, he ordered Eden to make no more overtures for an Anglo-French post-war alliance.⁴⁹

Having heard nothing from Eden, Cooper wrote again to the Foreign Secretary in March 1945. Now officially installed in Paris as the British Ambassador to France, he had become concerned following a telegram from Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, the British Ambassador to Belgium, which revealed the apprehension felt by some Belgians of a 'French penetration and domination' of Europe following Germany's defeat. Sensing that Europe's leaders were already beginning to turn towards considerations of the post-war peace, Cooper argued that the time was right to push for the 'formation of a group of Western European democracies' including France but led by Britain.⁵⁰ Referencing Belgium's fears, he wrote that 'throughout our history the Low Countries have been of greater importance to the life of England than any other portion of the globe's surface' and suggested that the

United Kingdom ought to 'go to war rather than allow them to fall into the hands of a great power who might harbour aggressive intentions'.

Knatchbull-Hugessen had made it clear that it was 'to Great Britain that Belgium looks for leadership and security'. Cooper was convinced that 'Holland will soon be looking in the same direction'. He closed his letter with a stark warning to Eden: 'If we again hesitate to give that leadership, as we hesitated between the two great wars, the Powers concerned will be compelled to look elsewhere. . . . [T]hey would prefer an alliance with Great Britain and France which would guarantee their independence and integrity rather than with France alone. . . . But we must beware lest reluctance on the part of Great Britain to take a decision, or delay in taking it, drive those who would be our friends into the arms of others and leave us in a position of dangerous isolation'.⁵¹

Cooper's fears were only heightened the next month, when the French government began to increase its troop numbers in Syria and Lebanon where the British Army also had a substantial garrison. Foreign Office representatives in the Levant feared that this could only lead to trouble and instructed Cooper to go at once to see de Gaulle to demand an explanation.⁵² He found de Gaulle in a 'most unyielding mood'. The General was convinced that British policy was to 'oust the French from the Levant' and Cooper was 'unable to dissuade him from this view'.⁵³ Consequently, he wrote to Eden on 4 May, expressing his 'considerable doubts about the wisdom of our present policy in the Levant' and reminding the Foreign Secretary that the British government had 'undertaken to recognise the pre-eminent position of France in the Levant and . . . also undertaken that Syria and Lebanon shall receive their independence'. He warned that the present situation of French and British troops existing side by side would in time 'lead to grave trouble' and that the governments needed to instead forge a common Anglo-French policy. Unless the British government was willing to 'adopt the policy which we have repeatedly denied to be ours, that of getting the French out [of the Levant]', the only path remaining was to 'get out ourselves'.⁵⁴

Within weeks, de Gaulle attempted to further reinforce French garrisons in Syria. When the Syrians objected, French forces bombarded Damascus, reducing much of it to rubble. Following protests from the Syrians, the British government unilaterally placed Syria under British martial law.⁵⁵ The government would go only so far to work with its

European ally; in the final analysis, British interests would always come first. For Cooper, the declaration was ‘most regrettable’, but he acknowledged that ‘de Gaulle has brought it upon himself’.⁵⁶ It was not until 1946 that the situation was eventually resolved, with a joint British and French withdrawal from the Levant and the granting of independence to Syria and Lebanon.⁵⁷

In the meantime, the war in Europe came to a close, although this left much unresolved. Despite himself, Duff Cooper’s eyes filled with tears at the sound of the church bells ringing out on VE Day, which he later confessed were tears of sadness as much as joy: ‘The Duke of Wellington was right when he said that a victory is the greatest tragedy in the world except a defeat’.⁵⁸ By that time, Churchill’s stance on Europe and its place in the post-war world had become clear. He recognised that Britain’s future lay as much in Europe as it did in the Empire, an assessment largely shared by Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. And whilst Churchill had gone further than other Britons in calling for a United States of Europe in 1938, his vision of a Britain that was at once imperial and European was not too far removed from the thinking of previous generations of Britons.

This view was only encouraged by the voluminous correspondence he received following the surrender of Germany, for example, from American President Harry S. Truman who declared that Britain had liberated ‘the oppressed people of Europe’,⁵⁹ and from King Haakon VII of Norway who conveyed to Churchill ‘and to the British people my admiration and sincere gratitude for the magnificent part played by Great Britain in the defeat of all enemy forces’.⁶⁰ He was encouraged, too, by British civil servants such as Orme Sargent (soon to be Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign office) who wrote in early July 1945 that Britain, as the weakest of the ‘Big Three’, had to lead Western Europe as well as the Commonwealth in order to ‘compel our two big partners to treat us as an equal’.⁶¹ Sargent’s influential memorandum laid out in clear terms an analysis that Churchill himself had developed over the past decade. Britain must lead Europe, yet such leadership could not undermine its concurrent role as head of the Empire and Commonwealth or its relationship with the United States. As Sargent wrote, ‘To be a leading influence in each of those areas – Washington, the Commonwealth, and Western Europe – depend[s] on retaining a leading influence in the other two’.⁶² Britain could not be either ‘in’ Europe or ‘out’ of Europe; it had to be both.

It was with this strongly held belief in the future greatness of both the British Empire and Britain's role in Europe that Churchill campaigned during the 1945 General Election, which had been triggered by the dissolution of the coalition. It was because of the strength of his convictions that he felt all the more aggrieved when the electoral results came in on 26 July 1945. The Labour Party had secured 393 seats to the Conservatives' 197, and Winston Churchill was Prime Minister no more.

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One of the first to express his condolences to the Prime Minister on his defeat was Harold Macmillan, who was promoted Air Secretary following the collapse of the coalition government but lost his parliamentary seat in the face of the Labour landslide. He wrote to Churchill on 27 July, expressing that 'whatever may happen to me in the future will seem stale and shadowy compared to the pride of having played some part – however small – under your leadership'.⁶³ Others were not so gracious. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke wrote in his diary that 'It is probably all for the good of England in the long run' and mocked that 'If only Winston had followed my advice he would have been in at any rate till the end of the year! But what was my advice to him a mere soldier!!!'⁶⁴ Duff Cooper, likewise, remarked that 'the removal of Winston... will make my task [in France] easier' and noted his 'delight' at the defeat of fellow Conservatives Louis Spears and Alec Cunningham-Reid, each of whom had opposed his policy of Anglo-French cooperation in the Levant.⁶⁵ He also commented on Ernest Bevin, the most likely Labour candidate for Foreign Secretary, with whom he had 'always been on good terms' and who would thus have 'no personal reason for... wanting to get rid of me'.⁶⁶

In Ernest Bevin, the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee had selected a man who greatly contrasted with his predecessor as Foreign Secretary. Noted for his striking good looks and aristocratic pedigree (his mother was Sybil Francis Grey of the famous Northumberland Greys and his father a baronet), Anthony Eden was blessed with an education at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. Bevin, a full-framed, overweight man with increasing health problems, never knew his father and began work at the age of eleven as a labourer before becoming a lorry driver and eventually secretary of the Bristol branch of the Dockers' Union.⁶⁷ Throughout the First World War, Eden served as

a commissioned officer in the army and won the Military Cross at the Battle of the Somme; Bevin argued that his role as a Trade Union organiser was as essential to the war effort as if he had put on a uniform, and he made repeated calls for the government to give greater recognition to the importance of organised labour in any victory.⁶⁸ Shortly after the war's close, Bevin co-founded the Transport and General Workers Union; Eden opposed the General Strike of 1926.⁶⁹ Whilst Eden held an aristocratic reserve and deference for the existing social order, Bevin was described by his private secretary Roderick Barclay as a man who had 'obtained freedom from any social or other prejudices', was 'boyish' with a 'strong sense of humour', and who, when meeting George VI, would 'put a large hand on the King's back and lead him to a corner where he would tell him some story which usually evolved roars of laughter'.⁷⁰ Eden was first elected to Parliament as a Conservative MP in 1923 and progressed loyally and rapidly through the ranks; Bevin did not enter Parliament until he was offered ministerial office in Churchill's coalition government in 1940. To his death, Bevin 'felt stronger loyalty towards his old Trade Union colleagues than towards the Labour Party as a whole'.⁷¹

Yet, despite their differences, Eden was not dismayed by the change of power, writing to Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, that he was 'very glad that Bevin is to be my successor. He is the best man they have'.⁷² Others shared this assessment. Lord Woolton – who became Chairman of the Conservative Party in 1945 – wrote that Bevin was 'the Churchill of the Labour Party and people had confidence in his common sense'.⁷³ Nevertheless, July 1945 was a difficult time for a transition of power to occur, with the ongoing Potsdam conference in which Attlee and Bevin rushed to replace Churchill and Eden in their meetings with Stalin and Truman. There was little Bevin could do at the conference to influence the agreement, which had already largely been drawn up. Nevertheless, it proved to be a useful meeting. Bevin saw with his own eyes Soviet Red Army troops in the ruins of Hitler's Chancellery and heard Stalin say, 'In politics one should be guided by the calculation of power'.⁷⁴ This, combined with a cold reception from Truman, convinced Bevin that the strong Transatlantic relationship of the previous four years might not survive the end of the war in the Pacific and that Britain's chief threat came from the Soviet Union dominating Europe, directly threatening Britain's traditional foreign policy of balancing

continental power. Without an assurance of American aid, only a combination of states in Western Europe, under British leadership, could hope to arrest the expanding power of Russia.⁷⁵ His analysis was therefore remarkably similar to Duff Cooper's, whom he left in place at the British Embassy in Paris.

Immediately upon his return from Potsdam, Bevin convened a meeting with Foreign Office officials to discuss British policy towards Western Europe. He suggested that collaboration with Western European countries must form the 'cornerstone' of post-war British policy and revealed a 'grand design' to build economic, political and military cooperation. This design necessarily started with France, which, as the continent's largest democracy and a fellow colonial power, understood both Britain's role in Europe and its imperial interests. Once an agreement with France was secure, cooperation could be expanded to include the Low Countries, Scandinavia and, in time, Italy.⁷⁶ This did not mean that Bevin dismissed the centrality of empire to British interests, however. As his speech in the House of Commons on 20 August made clear, the British Empire was still 'central to Britain's position as a world power'.⁷⁷ Lord Halifax wrote to Bevin following his speech to say that his words had impressed American public opinion, which had feared a socialist revolution in Britain following the Labour victory, to the extent that many newspapers had declared that Bevin 'no more than Churchill would preside over the liquidation of the Empire'.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the new Foreign Secretary shared Churchill's belief that in the post-war world empire was not enough; Britain had to lead Europe also. This was a long-held conviction for Bevin, who had suggested in his union journal in 1938: 'The great colonial powers of Europe should pool their colonial territories and link them up with a European Commonwealth, instead of being limited to British, French, Dutch or Belgian concessions as is now the case. Such a European Commonwealth, established on an economic foundation, would give us greater security than we get by trying to maintain the old balance of Power'.⁷⁹ Like many of his contemporaries, Bevin was both an imperialist and a European.

Another European imperialist, Duff Cooper, was disappointed not to see greater movement towards European integration following the end of the war. In March 1946, he wrote to Bevin restating his earlier ideas and warning that 'Politicians and private people in this country

[France] are frankly puzzled as to the attitude of Great Britain. ... Members of my staff and I are plied with questions to which we find difficulty in replying. Do we want an alliance with France? Why do we do nothing about it? What is our view as to the future of Germany? Have we lost interest in Europe and do we believe that nothing matters but the United States?' There was, he suggested, only one solution. The time had come 'to count our friends, to fortify them and to bind them closely to our side'. Of these friends, 'France remains, despite her failures and perplexities, potentially the strongest and the richest on the continent. ... An Anglo-French alliance would form a potent magnet for others who are now looking round rather wildly in search of security and salvation'.⁸⁰

Bevin shared Cooper's basic belief in the necessity of an Anglo-French alliance, but the situation was not as simple as Cooper made out. This was because Bevin's 'grand design' for Western Europe had been derailed on 21 August 1945, less than two weeks after he had unveiled it at the Foreign Office, when American President Harry S. Truman announced without warning that Lend-Lease would end.⁸¹ Lend-Lease had been finalised in August 1941 at the Atlantic Conference in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, when Churchill and Roosevelt met to discuss the future course of the war. In addition to issuing the Atlantic Charter – a statement of combined war aims – the leaders launched talks aimed at assisting the British through their economic woes, Churchill having admitted to Roosevelt in late 1940 that the nation was close to bankruptcy.⁸² Lend-Lease was a program whereby the United States increased its own production and then lent or leased to the British government the surplus not needed in America. The United States government became, as one historian put it, 'both the treasury and the production facility for the Allied cause'.⁸³ By the close of the war, the United Kingdom was utterly dependent upon supplies from the United States for its national survival, its own industries entirely retooled from the export market to defence manufacturing.⁸⁴ The abrupt ending of Lend-Lease was a cruel blow indeed.⁸⁵

In addition to Lend-Lease, during the war, the British government had also requisitioned all overseas investments with any liquidity whatsoever and sold them in the United States and Canada, totalling £1,118 million over the course of the war (a quarter of Britain's pre-war wealth). For the balance still remaining after Lend-Lease and the off-loading of foreign investments, the government incurred debts of

£3,555 million, particularly to Commonwealth countries.⁸⁶ What was the world's greatest creditor nation prior to the war had become the world's greatest debtor at its close. There was little the United Kingdom could fall back on, since in the early years of the war the government had traded many of its overseas bases for aged destroyers from the then-neutral United States.⁸⁷ And the situation showed no signs of relief; in 1946, the United Kingdom's deficit ran at £750 million.⁸⁸

Following Truman's announcement of the ending of Lend-Lease, Attlee informed the House of Commons that Britain was now in a 'very serious financial position', and the famed economist John Maynard Keynes described it as 'without exaggeration a financial Dunkirk'.⁸⁹ In a memorandum to the cabinet, Keynes concluded that 'there is no source from which we can raise sufficient funds to enable us to live and spend on the scale we contemplate except the United States'. The alternative, he wrote, was 'a sudden and humiliating withdrawal from our onerous responsibilities with great loss of prestige and acceptance for the time being of the position of a second-class Power, rather like the present position of France'. He continued: 'From the Dominions and elsewhere we should seek that charity we could obtain. At home a greater degree of austerity would be necessary than we have experienced at any time during the war. And there would have to be an indefinite postponement of the realisation of the best hopes of the new Government'.⁹⁰ Britain would no longer be a great imperial power and the strongest European state, but would be turning to its former subordinates throughout the Commonwealth for whatever assistance they could give. Its only solution lay in the generosity of the American government.

Consequently, Keynes travelled to the United States with cap in hand to seek a grant-in-aid of \$6 billion to cover the debts Britain had incurred fighting the war. He returned instead with a loan of \$3.75 billion amortised over fifty years with an annual interest rate of 2 per cent.⁹¹ In return for these 'generous' terms, the British government supported the Bretton Woods Agreement and American plans for a world trading system with convertible currencies. The government promised to introduce sterling convertibility by mid-1947 at the latest.⁹² Brendan Bracken warned Paul Einzig, the *Financial Times* parliamentary lobby correspondent, that 'most Members of Parliament did not understand the implications of Bretton Woods', adding that 'nobody who has any knowledge of America will welcome such

a development'.⁹³ His cautionary words were prescient. Under the terms of the loan, sterling was initially set at a fixed exchange rate of \$4.03 to the pound. However, when in July 1947 it was made freely convertible against the dollar (as stipulated under the terms of the loan), there was a run on the pound; during the first twenty days of August alone the British Treasury lost \$650 million.⁹⁴ The American Loan simply transferred Britain's debts from the Commonwealth to the United States; it was not until December 2006 that the final payment of \$86 million was sent from the British Exchequer to the United States.⁹⁵ The costs of war bit deeply, indeed, paid for by generations.

It was not only in the economic sphere that Bevin faced challenges beyond Western Europe. He had been cautiously optimistic after meeting Stalin at Potsdam, telling the House of Commons that free elections would be held in Poland before the end of the year and would soon follow in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. Yet, at the first Conference of Foreign Ministers held in London in September 1945, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov informed Bevin that Soviet troops would remain wherever they were currently stationed, including in Poland, with Russia regarding the Eastern part of Europe as its natural sphere of influence.⁹⁶ This placed the British government in an especially difficult position in Germany, where it had hoped to reunite the various occupation zones as soon as was practicable. A policy of quick reunification was particularly attractive because the British sector was costing the cash-strapped Treasury colossal amounts to administer, £80 million in the first year alone.⁹⁷ The Soviet stance in London ensured there would be no quick resolution to the problem of occupied Germany.

Further afield, in Palestine, the revolt launched by Menachem Begin and the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* on 1 February 1944 was renewed on 1 November 1945 when the Irgun severed the Palestinian railway line in 242 places, sank three police naval vessels and detonated bombs at the main railway station in Jerusalem, destroying the station-master's office and badly damaging seven locomotives.⁹⁸ Since the Labour Party's victory in July, the American administration had placed increasing pressure on Attlee and Bevin to lift the restrictions of the 1939 White Paper, which had placed caps on Jewish immigration into Palestine. This pressure had culminated in a press conference on 16 August 1945 when President Truman informed the world's media that he had 'asked Churchill and Attlee to allow as many Jews as possible into Palestine'.⁹⁹

Truman wrote to Attlee two weeks later, including with his letter a report from Earl G. Harrison, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School and a US Congressman, which suggested that to alleviate the refugee problem in Europe an additional 100,000 Jews ought to be allowed to settle in Palestine.¹⁰⁰ Attlee curtly replied that the British government had problems across its empire, that, on the whole, it 'endeavoured to avoid treating people on a racial basis' and that they had 'the Arabs to consider as well', especially those in British India, which contained 'ninety million Moslems, who are easily inflamed'.¹⁰¹

The Irgun, recognising that Britain's policy under Labour promised to be little different from that of the Coalition before it, relaunched its campaign of violence to force Britain to withdraw from Palestine so that a Jewish state could be declared. This campaign of violence only stiffened Bevin's resolve, both as an imperialist in defence of the Empire and in his search for a European third force that would prevent British reliance on the United States. As Moshe Shertok, head of Palestine's Jewish Agency wrote, 'Bevin's anger and fury against the United States are unimaginable'. According to Shertok, Bevin said, 'I cannot bear English Tommies being killed. They are innocent'. When Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organisation, reminded him of the millions of Jews who had been killed and were still dying in refugee camps, Bevin retorted, 'I do not want any Jews killed either, but I love the British soldiers. They belong to my class. They are working people'.¹⁰²

In India itself, where Attlee's 'ninety million Moslems' resided, the combination of the Congress Party's 'Quit India' movement and Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah's calls for a new Muslim state of Pakistan was also placing pressure on the British government. On 19 September 1945, the British Viceroy Sir Archibald Wavell announced in New Delhi that the government would soon convene a 'Constitution-making body' to resolve the issues raised during the war, but Jinnah responded that the Muslim population would settle for nothing less than the partition of India into separate Hindu and Muslim states.¹⁰³ The response from the Congress Party was equally cold, and Wavell warned the cabinet on 6 November that the government must be prepared for 'the use of considerable force of British troops . . . the declaration of martial law; the detention of a large number of persons without trial . . . and the suppression for an indefinite period of the Congress Party'.¹⁰⁴ As in Palestine, in India, the British Empire seemed to be coming apart at the

seams. It is little wonder that John Colville described Britain in late 1945 as entering a 'new terrifying era'.¹⁰⁵

When Duff Cooper wrote to Bevin in March 1946 to draw his attention back to Western Europe, the situation in the Empire, with the Soviet Union and in Anglo-American relations had little improved; if anything, it had deteriorated. On 13 March – six days before Cooper's memorandum arrived on Bevin's desk – the Foreign Secretary informed the cabinet defence committee that he now considered the Mediterranean and Middle East rather than Europe Britain's most immediate security interest, a marked change from his view just six months before. The Mediterranean, he explained, was the area 'through which we bring influence to bear on Southern Europe, the soft underbelly of France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey'. If the British government withdrew from the Mediterranean, 'Russia will move in, and the Mediterranean countries, from the point of view of commerce and trade, economy and democracy, will be finished'. He did not need to remind the committee that the United Kingdom remained the 'last bastion of social democracy', uniquely placed between 'the red tooth and claw of American capitalism and the Communist dictatorship of Soviet Russia'. If the British Empire fell, a moderate and ordered way of life would be lost forever, and, without that, there was little point in pursuing policies of further cooperation in Europe. It was the Empire and all that it stood for that gave Britain the right to lead Europe.¹⁰⁶ And in 1946, that empire was resting on very shaky ground indeed.