

Mr Gibbs and Mr Goering

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Sir Philip Gibbs (1877-1962) was one of the major journalists of the Edwardian era. Closely associated with *The Daily Chronicle*, he was later noted for his work as an official war correspondent, one of only five on the western front. This brought him a knighthood, the Legion of Honour, and an international reputation. In 1920 he conducted the first ever interview with a Pope (Benedict XV) and thereafter operated at the stratospheric level enjoyed by acclaimed commentators, meeting world leaders, covering conferences, and writing accounts of international events.

Throughout this he also wrote fiction, turning out 50 middlebrow novels, 9 of which were adapted into films. His output was prominent and popular in inter-war lending libraries, though scarcely read now. Less popular, though of greater interest today, were his state of the nation surveys, *England Speaks: A Panorama of the English Scene in this Year of Grace 1935* (1936) and its sequel *Ordeal in England: England Speaks Again* (1937). Politically these showed he had abandoned his liberalism, and both were written as a riposte to the studies made by Orwell and Priestley of contemporary social conditions. *Ordeal* was particularly liked by the Right Book Club who published an edition in September 1938 with an additional 70 pages on 'The Jeopardy of War'.¹ Gibbs expanded his views on this topic in *This Nettle Danger* (1939) which concludes with the classic pro-appeasement argument:

While defending our liberties and those of other nations by all the strength and spirit we have, let us also work passionately for any chance of peace, because, as all of us know in our hearts, the next war, if it happens, will be a flaming hell in which all beauty of life will be destroyed, and 'victory' whoever wins, will be a hideous thing.²

His son, Anthony Gibbs (1902-1974), was also a popular novelist. Both father and son were drafted into uniform as war correspondents in September 1939,

¹ The Right Book Club, as its name suggests, was a rival to the Left Book Club. It was run by the proprietors of Foyle's Bookshop and functioned between 1937 and 1950.

² This can be read in full at <<https://shorturl.at/alHuO>> or <<https://jonathanspain.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/books-of-1939-3-this-nettle-danger-by-sir-philip-gibbs/>>.

and as a pre-TV, pre-Internet combination they are reminiscent of the Dimpleby dynasty, with overtones of Kingsley and Martin Amis: very well connected, very opinionated people. Like many who spend time as pundits, it appears they did not just report the news. They wanted to shape it too.

This is confirmed in Martin Kerby's 2016 book *Sir Philip Gibbs and English Journalism in War and Peace*³ which states on p. 195 that Gibbs befriended General Wenninger, the German air attaché in London 'in the summer of 1939 in the hope that he could exert some influence for peace' and that 'his son Tony attempted his own peace deal in 1940'. The latter point is confirmed by Andrew Roberts in *The Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (1991) which says on p. 247 'Mr A Gibbs brought back terms from The Hague in April 1940'.

Anthony Gibbs wrote a detailed account of this in his memoir *In My Own Good Time* (1969), which devoted 75 pages to the dealings he and his father had with various German figures between 1936 and 1940. However he opens his account with this disclaimer:

This book has been pieced together entirely from scraps of memory without the benefit of notes.

It may well be that, over the years, inaccuracies have crept in, and statements are made here which might unintentionally cause irritation or even pain to certain persons.

If this is so, it is to be greatly regretted, but the author has attempted to record events to the best of his recollection, and apologizes in advance if in doing so he has caused any offence.

This enabled him – and those who would have been in favour of what he and his father were working for – to take cover behind a defence of: it was all a long time ago + some of this may be a bit muddled + no offence is intended. Those named in his account could therefore disown it in advance. Some oddities in his text (misspellings, peculiar – and unlikely – lapses in memory) may also have been deliberately contrived to strengthen the idea that this is an unreliable narrative from a marginal individual. After all, in 1969, a lot of the people mentioned in his book were still alive. Had his account been more forthright it might have caused problems. Nevertheless, this is a rare thing, a detailed narrative from an appeaser of an attempt to bring about a compromise peace between the UK and Germany during the Second World War.

It begins in 1936, when events in Ethiopia and Spain caused Gibbs and his father to have increasingly pessimistic discussions about what the future might hold. After the annexation of Austria (March 1938) they decided to 'go and see

³ See <<http://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/12414/1/179.pdf>>.

for ourselves' the political position in Europe. This involved a motoring trip to Munich. After their return his father 'began to make friends with Germans' one of whom, Wenninger, was regarded as 'a civilised man'.

Wenninger

General Rudolf Wenninger (1890-1945) began his career in the German Navy in 1908. He transferred to the Luftwaffe in 1934 and from April 1936 was air attaché at the German Embassies in The Hague and Brussels. Gibbs Jnr describes a social event at his father's house on 25 August 1939 at which Wenninger was present. Then, with just 'three more days of peace' left, meaning either 28 or 31 August, Anthony Gibbs saw Wenninger again, at a house in Chelsea. On this occasion Wenninger was accompanied by Prince Friedrich who was 'impossible to tell apart' from his cousin the Duke of Kent and had 'a job, curiously enough, in the Ford works at Dagenham'. We are obliged to surmise who this might have been. An obvious candidate is Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia (1907-1994), who was, apparently, intended by Henry Ford to become the Ford Motor Company's representative in Europe. He later worked for Lufthansa and in the mid-30s was an attaché at the German Embassy in London. In 1938 he married Grand Duchess Kira of Russia, the second daughter of Princess Victoria Melita of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, making him a cousin of the UK royals. There is no record, however, of Prince Louis Ferdinand being in London in late August 1939.⁴

It seems more likely this was his younger brother, Prince Friedrich of Prussia (1911-1966), who was resident in the UK at this point. There are many references to him in *Henry 'Chips' Channon: The Diaries 1938-1943*, edited by Simon Heffer (2021). With a striking physical resemblance to the Duke of Kent, with whom he was friendly, Channon records that Friedrich was used to convey messages between Crown Prince Wilhelm (his father) and Neville Chamberlain in November 1938 and had attended a July 1939 Royal Ball at Buckingham Palace.⁵

The discussion between Gibbs, Friedrich and Wenninger concluded when Wenninger advised that he would be in a neutral country if war broke out, and that he was a friend of Goering, underscoring that he was a person who could be approached with peace terms. When hostilities commenced, Wenninger duly left London and resumed his duties in The Hague and Brussels. He was also

⁴ See his obituary at <<https://shorturl.at/0pb4e>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-prince-louis-ferdinand-of-prussia-1440543.html>>.

⁵ Prince Friedrich remained in the UK after the outbreak of war, dining with Lord Beaverbrook (January 1940) and was only interned as an enemy alien as late as 13 May 1940. Deported to Canada he was eventually returned, and released, after a cabinet discussion in June 1941.

appointed 'Officer with Special Duties of the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe' with effect from 3 September 1939, indicating that he dealt personally with Goering.

Gibbs and his father became accredited war correspondents. According to his book, nothing very much happened until one day in March 1940 when Gibbs was told by 'Ourmousios' – whom we are told is the Secretary to the King of Greece – that 'he had heard from General Wenninger' who was at the Hague. This was a suggestion that Gibbs and Wenninger make contact, and Gibbs argued this was acceptable because Ourmousios 'as a Greek, was neutral in the phoney war'. This is nonsense, and Gibbs must have known that. The person who contacted him was Stelio Lucian Hourmouzios, born in Cyprus in 1914 and, therefore, a UK national. (He joined the Royal Artillery in 1940.) After studying at the London School of Economics, he became Private Secretary to King George II of Greece, who was then in exile, in 1934. The King was a cousin to Princes Louis Ferdinand and Friedrich and, like them, close to the Duke of Kent. He was also a friend of Sir Phillip Gibbs.

Deniability

Understandably, Gibbs Jnr decided to act on this. To clear the air, he went to the Foreign Office to announce his intention to visit The Hague and see if peace terms were available from Germany. He met two unnamed men, who, after carefully phrased exchanges, made it clear he could only pursue contact with Wenninger as a private individual; i.e. everything must be deniable, and not attributable to HM Government. Thus satisfied, Gibbs's mission was facilitated by Lord Kemsley, the owner of *The Daily Telegraph*, who 'fixed [him] up' on 'a tour of neutral capitals'.

In this context, we should note that Kemsley undertook a private mission to Germany in July 1939 at the behest of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Accounts of this are absent from the UK archives, but present in the German. Kemsley met with Alfred Rosenberg and advised that the UK didn't want a war, that their negotiations with the Soviet Union were a sham, that they would rather resolve matters with Germany, and that Chamberlain was strong enough politically to bring about a solution. The meeting, held over a leisurely lunch, was punctuated by antisemitic comments from Lady Kemsley, notably 'only the Jews wanted to bring about a war between Germany and England'.⁶

⁶ This is recorded in Karina Urbach, *Go-Betweens for Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) pp. 208-209. On the antisemitic remarks, we should note that in 1945 Kemsley funded the Britons Vigilante Action Committee, which campaigned against Jewish refugees. See Stephen Dorril, *Black Shirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (London: Viking, 2006) p. 549.

Arriving in Brussels, Gibbs stayed for a week with the US naval attaché Captain John Gade, whom he confusingly calls Capitaine du Vaisseau Gade. A friend of President Roosevelt, Gade was a US-Norwegian; his brother, Fredrik Gade, was a retired Norwegian diplomat. From here he headed to the Hague where he set about trying to find Wenninger. Presumably it was judged too dangerous and indiscreet to visit the German legation in person. He eventually found Wenninger's home address in a telephone directory. (This seems implausible. Surely, he would have been given Wenninger's home address in advance, rather than it being a matter of luck whether, or not, they managed to meet?)

The following day Gibbs visited Wenninger. He said the UK wanted to get out of the war. He asked if ways to facilitate this could be put to Goering. Wenninger told him they only had a little bit of time to do this. He also said he would need to call Goering to check that this was possible. The following day Gibbs visited Wenninger again. Wenninger said he had spoken with Goering, who had confirmed their discussions should proceed. They were to be draft proposals. Gibbs would take them back to Chamberlain, Wenninger would show them to Goering. Wenninger confirmed 'We have three days.'

They spent the rest of the meeting drawing up a draft Treaty. There is an interesting exchange between them on p. 183 of Gibbs's book:

Wenninger: 'We need a free hand in the East.'

Gibbs: 'My dear fellow, it's yours. Take it.'

Wenninger: 'You mean that?'

Gibbs: 'After the Stalin-Ribbentrop pact, nobody gives a damn what you do in the East.'

After some further dialogue, Gibbs notes (p. 186) his agreement 'to call off the Blockade of the British Fleet' in exchange for security in western Europe. This clause would have allowed merchant shipping to freely pass to and from Germany, in exchange for no attack by Germany on the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Specifically, German imports of Swedish iron ore via Narvik would have proceeded, unimpeded by British naval action. It is inconceivable that such a clause, as well as the earlier remarks about 'a free hand in the East', would have been casually agreed by someone as junior as Gibbs. The only rational conclusion one could reach is that, prior to starting his mission, he had been briefed that these were things the UK was prepared to concede.

Finally, on the third day, the document is typed out. It appears on pp. 191-192 of the book and is shown below.

THE HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES, by this signed instrument, do solemnly pledge each of their respective governments to all the conditions and clauses comprised below to which they have set their hands.

AND WHEREAS The High Contracting Parties do hereby avow their desire to revoke the formal declarations of war entered into in September of last year and to live in peace each with the other, then the following conditions shall be binding upon both parties to this instrument.

AND WHEREAS the two Governments realize that, as a first step to a peace treaty between the Sovereign states of Germany, Great Britain, and France, the neutralization of the Western Front and the Freedom of the Seas must take precedence over all other disputed matters, the Governments of Germany and Great Britain do now agree that within five days of the signature of this agreement the following decisions shall be put into absolute effect.

I. The German Government will order all forces of men and military materiel to withdraw not less than ten miles from the frontiers of France, Switzerland, Holland, and Belgium.

II. The German Air Force will be ordered not to fly over a corridor ten miles in width within German territory outlining the frontiers of the Sovereign states mentioned in Clause I.

III. The British Government will order all forces of men and military materiel to withdraw not less than ten miles from the frontier between France and Belgium, and will use their best offices with the French Government to require that their military forces remain passive within the fortifications of the so-called "Maginot Line."

IV. The Government of Great Britain will undertake to allow free passage of the ships of all nations into and out of all German ports, and will not molest on the open sea any ship, under whatever flag, which is proceeding to or from those ports upon its lawful occasions.

V. Immediately upon the implementation of these clauses, the British and German Governments will confer together to agree speedy arrangements for the negotiation of a full Treaty of Peace which shall be honourable to both parties, and will undertake to do everything which in their power lies to include the Sovereign Government of France into the deliberations and signature of such a treaty.

Given under our hands this day of in the year one thousand nine hundred and forty:

For the German Government _____

For His Majesty's Government of Great Britain _____

There is something morbid and fascinating about seeing such a document. Gibbs tells us he has 'a plane ticket booked to fly from Schipol to UK on Wednesday'. This would be Wednesday 3 April 1940. He records (pp. 202-203) that he went straight from the airport (possibly Croydon) to 10 Downing Street where he was met by Lord Dunglass (Sir Alec Douglas-Home) who, according to Gibbs, 'really seemed extremely amused'.

At this point his narrative collides with the account provided by Sir John Colville in *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-1955* (1985). On p. 96, in an entry for 5 April Colville states:

A young man called Anthony Gibbs (son of the writer Sir Philip Gibbs) came to see me and tell me of his discussions in Holland with the German General Wenninger about possible peace terms. The General said that the Nazi Party felt themselves hemmed in and would welcome a face-saving peace.

Colville was private secretary to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, to whom Dunglass was Parliamentary Private Secretary. Thus, it is possible that Gibbs saw Dunglass on the 3rd or 4th and came back to see Colville on the 5th. Colville, however, goes on to say:

He [it isn't clear if this is Wenninger or Gibbs] suggested terms including the reconstitution of Poland with the 1914 boundary [i.e. minus the corridor but with rights to Gdynia] and Czechoslovakia as at Munich.

As can be seen there is no mention of either in Gibbs's book. It seems very unlikely Colville would invent this – it was after all, an entry in his own diary – so either Gibbs chose to exclude these in 1969 (so as not to embarrass Douglas-Home?) or they weren't in the draft terms, but were suggested by Gibbs as negotiating points, for later talks, once the draft had been agreed. Colville concludes, dismissively:

I took these terms to the Foreign Office where there have been other similar schemes put forward by people of this sort – all of whom claim that Goering is a moderate and would favour such proposals. The F.O. rightly regarded Goering with the deepest suspicion.

After which . . . nothing further is heard.⁷

To decode this, and establish the context within which it occurred, we need to work out the dates for each step in Gibbs's narrative. We know he flew back to London on 3 April. Prior to that he had three consecutive days of talks with

⁷ In a further inaccuracy, Gibbs says Wenninger was killed during the German invasion of the Netherlands. He wasn't, he served through the war and died in a hospital in northern Italy in 1945.

Wenninger, say 31 March to 2 April. Prior to that, he spent a week with Gade in Brussels, say 24 to 30 March. He isn't specific about his preparations prior to this, but if we allow a further week for meeting Lord Kemsley, getting visas to travel and his visit to the Foreign Office, he would be starting on this odyssey sometime around March 17.

This means that Hourmouzios suggested Gibbs contact Wenninger in the immediate aftermath of the conclusion of the war between Finland and the Soviet Union (13 March 1940). It was known at this point that the UK had designs on northern Norway. Britain – and France – had been speaking to Norway and Sweden about allowing troops to transit both countries en route to Finland. It was also known that the UK was thinking about seizing Narvik to prevent shipments of Swedish iron ore reaching Germany from that port.

We need to be clear that when we use the term 'known' we mean 'known' within diplomatic, military, naval and political circles; and quite widely at that. Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, was tirelessly canvassing for a seizure of Narvik coupled with mining operations in Norwegian and Swedish waters. He did so in Cabinet and within the Admiralty. His ongoing correspondence with Roosevelt, by cable (which is documented) and telephone (which is mostly not) gave him an opportunity to sound out US opinion on these options.

The collapse of Finland was embarrassing for the UK and France. Both had pledged assistance. In France there was a change in government. In the UK Prime Minister Chamberlain was clear that the moment had arrived when it was necessary to be seen to be fighting the war, rather than just waiting on action from the aggressor. The Cabinet had agreed landings at Narvik and Trondheim just before the Finnish capitulation and it was agreed that these would now proceed. It was supplemented, on 28 March, when Gibbs was in Brussels, by a decision to mine Norwegian waters.

At this point it is necessary to note that the Roosevelt-Churchill correspondence was compromised by the actions of Tyler Kent, a clerk at the US embassy in London. A right-wing isolationist, Kent objected to the US involvement in Europe and considered that Roosevelt was dragging the country, unlawfully, into another conflict. He kept copies of most of the secret diplomatic cables that passed through the London embassy and made them available to those in the UK who wished to end the war.

One of these was Anna Wolkoff, a member of The Right Club, a virulently antisemitic, anti-communist, group led by Archibald Maule Ramsay MP.⁸ She

⁸ Right Club members and supporters included 12 MPs and 5 Lords. See Richard Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted: Captain Ramsay, the Right Club and British Anti-Semitism 1939-1940* (London: Constable, 1998).

and Kent were in contact from February 1940 and Wolkoff – who had been under surveillance by the security services since 1935 – was, on one occasion, seen passing papers to the Italian military attaché, Francesco Marigliano, at a London restaurant. These were then sent on to Germany in the Italian diplomatic bag.⁹ How precise these documents were regarding British intentions is not clear, but it seems likely they provided Germany with critical information regarding Norway, and Hitler ultimately decided to strike first, giving orders to proceed with a seizure of Denmark and Norway late on 5 April 1940. (Note Wenninger's comments on either 1st or 2nd April: 'We have three days.')

Two kinds of appeasers

The Gibbs mission, and activities surrounding it, point to the emergence in the UK of two distinct strands of appeasement. One of these used the argument that appeasement was justified as a tactic to buy time to rearm (in the mistaken view that the UK wasn't equipped to fight a war in the late 30s) or that appeasement, meaning the avoidance of war, was justified on moral grounds, as it avoided the massive slaughter that had taken place between 1914 and 1918. We might call these the 'respectable' appeasers, and in the late 30s this group included a substantial multi-party bloc within Parliament and a majority of the UK electorate.

But, by the time Gibbs undertook his mission, many of these had changed their minds. The tipping point seems to have been Hitler's dismembering of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. For them, this demonstrated that he could not be trusted and, short of a regime change, they would not treat with Germany in the future. Underlying this was considerable chagrin at the mockery Hitler's later actions made of the Munich Agreement, and a determination to repair British prestige on the international stage.

This is what US Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles found when he visited London, as part of a tour of European capitals, between 10 and 13 March 1940. Tasked by Roosevelt with taking soundings, to see if there were any basis for an international conference that might resolve matters, he interviewed the leaders of each of the UK's major political parties together with their deputies and foreign policy spokesmen. All of them (Conservative, Liberal National, Liberal and Labour) were open to the idea of peace talks; but, equally, all of them agreed that Hitler was untrustworthy and that there was no alternative other than to fight on. None of them could see any point in negotiating with Germany unless it were with a different regime. This accounts for the dismissive attitude of Dunglass and Colville to Gibbs when he arrived back from The

⁹ Marigliano was a cousin, by marriage, of Lt Col Howard Kerr, Equerry to the Duke of Gloucester, brother of the Duke of Kent and King George VI.

Hague.

The second strand of UK appeasement were those who believed in appeasement at any price, subject only to the maintenance of the Empire, on the grounds that what happened in Europe was no concern of the UK, and that the destruction of the Soviet Union, by a rearmed Germany, would be a good thing. There was Parliamentary support for this too, though at a lesser level than the tactical/moral appeasers. Gauging how much public support it had is difficult – opinion polls at the time didn't ask such detailed questions – but based on wartime by-election results it may have been as high as 30%-40%.

Among the ranks of the appeasers at any price were numerous business figures, Peers of the Realm, elder statesmen and newspaper owners. We should note that in March 1940 Lord Beaverbrook was meeting with the Independent Labour Party, and a Labour Party peace group led by Richard Stokes MP, offering to fund pro-peace candidates in every constituency on behalf of 'big money individuals'.¹⁰ This was known within the Foreign Office, but no action was taken against any of the individuals involved. It was anticipated that any terms obtained would need to contain 'some proposal in regard to Poland and Czechoslovakia'. Interestingly, on 18 March Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, met with R A Butler (Halifax's deputy) whom he advised 'it might be possible to make a bargain with Hitler whereby the German colonies were restored and in return a certain freedom given to the Poles and Czechs'.¹¹ Propelling all this activity was a sense of urgency that, after the collapse of Finland, it was important to get a peace deal into the public domain before the war was expanded to Norway, and the conflict became uncontrollable.

Gibbs was most likely acting on behalf of this group. His contact, Wenninger, was the third successive interlocutor – after Birger Dahlerus and Count Bonde – used by Goering in his intrigues to agree a 'compromise peace' with amenable UK figures. It is interesting to note the role played by European royalty in brokering meetings, often with the Duke of Kent somewhere in the background. Another intriguing detail is the involvement of Gade. Why did Gibbs stay with the US naval attaché for a week? Wasn't there somewhere inconspicuous in Brussels he could have waited? Bearing in mind Gade's Norwegian connections, and friendship with Roosevelt, this points to a desire by the US to try and prevent an extension of the war to Norway.

As we know, it was too little, too late. Germany was not prepared to wait on British deliberations. The Norwegian campaign began on the night of 8-9

¹⁰ Griffiths (see note 8) pp. 226-227.

¹¹ See Gabriel Gorodetsky (ed.) *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's* (Yale University Press, 2015) p. 260.

April 1940, with the British, everywhere, one step behind the German forces. What conclusion did the two UK appeaser factions draw from this? For the tactical/moral appeasers it was further evidence that Hitler could not be trusted. They were prepared to fight, and would not consider changing their minds whilst British and French forces remained undefeated on the western front. For the appeasers at any price, it was proof that they needed to try harder next time.

Simon Matthews' study of Winston Churchill during the phoney war –
A Study in Failure: Churchill at the Admiralty 1939-1940 –
will be published by Oldcastle Books this year.