19 The Swing Back

On 10 July German planes carried out the first large-scale daylight raid of the war on Britain. It ushered in the series of such attacks which came to be known as the Battle of Britain.

At half-past five that afternoon, the House of Commons embarked on its first large-scale debate on the question of the refugees. Members spent six long hours discussing the rights and wrongs of government internment policy.

The mere fact that such a debate was held at such a time is itself indicative of the changed attitude towards internment and the strength of the feelings aroused by previous policy. There was, it would appear, a growing recognition that injustices had occurred, that skilled manpower was being wasted, that administrative muddle had caused unnecessary hardship and that wrong criteria had been employed.

That general internment was essential for national security was argued only by a few lone voices. ‘I know that I am speaking against the sympathy of the majority of the House’, admitted Mrs Mavis Tate, MP for Frome, Somerset, questioning whether ‘so-called victims of Nazi and Fascist aggression’ had not in the past been useful tools in other countries. ‘I took up the view’, said Maurice Petherick (Penryn and Falmouth, Cornwall), ‘that all enemy aliens should at once be interned in concentration camps from the moment war broke out.’ ‘Why should we trouble if one or two, or a thousand, suspects are interned,’ thundered David Logan (Scotland, Liverpool), ‘if this land of ours is safe?’ Sir Edward Grigg, Joint Under Secretary of State for War, tended to agree with him.

That general internment was positively damaging the nation’s war-effort was a view more frequently expressed – and not only by the acknowledged friends of the refugees, Major Cazalet and Eleanor Rathbone, who opened the debate. On an ideological plane, it was first and foremost harmful to Britain’s reputation, in
the eyes of the world, as a haven for the persecuted and oppressed. It was supplying the German propaganda machine with valuable ammunition if it could claim that Britain was pursuing the Nazi policy of interning Jews. Most important was a point raised by Sidney Silverman: ‘Our main hope of bringing this war to a successful issue’, he reasoned, ‘depends on convincing those countries which are still neutral that we realise that this is a war of ideas and that we are fighting for the right idea. It depends also . . . on winning and retaining support for our cause inside the enemy countries themselves, some portion of whose population . . . are as much anti-Nazi as we are.’ It should be borne in mind that America at this juncture was still neutral.

The concept of the war as a war of ideas, crucial to understanding the problem of the refugees, was spelt out several times during the course of the debate. Osbert Peake put it succinctly: ‘labels of nationality in Europe in the last twenty years have meant very little. They are no guide . . . to the sympathies of the individual or to his reliability.’ That repetition of this definition was necessary, is shown, for example, by Logan’s comment in relation to the disaster of the Arandora Star: ‘What sympathy has been extended to the refugee boat by the country which torpedoed it? If that country can do this to its own people, why should we waste time with the problems of aliens instead of dealing with the protection of our own land?’

On a practical level, general internment of enemy aliens was positively detrimental to the war-effort, in that it was immobilising a source of invaluable labour-power. Skilled scientists and engineers, medical men and writers were languishing behind barbed wire in idleness when they could – and indeed wanted – to use their abilities to defeat Nazism. Able-bodied men were lounging in boredom in the camps when they could – and wanted to – fight on the battlefields or till the soil. Business-men had had to close down factories, throwing British workmen out of jobs and cutting national production. And the majority of these men had passed through at least one tribunal and been graded ‘C’, as refugees from Nazi oppression.

These were the major themes aired, but the sense of muddle running through the execution of internment policy, attributed partly to the apportionment of responsibility between two ministries (the War Office and the Home Office), partly to the scope left for the police to exercise their discretion, was never far from the surface –