War came home to Britain after the fall of France. MOI Parliamentary Secretary Harold Nicolson was narrowly missed by a bomb which hit Senate House on a night when he slept in his office. Nevertheless he was one of many in the Ministry and in the country at large who were relieved and even exhilarated that the long waiting and uncertainties of the Phoney War were ended. The country was truly engaged after June 1940, and however bleak the immediate prospects, the propagandists were more determined than ever to win the war of words in neutral Europe. They would now preach resistance with greater feeling – though against greater odds – than in the past, insist even more strongly that there was hope for a future free of German domination, and assure neutrals that Britain remained viable as a nation at war.

Unfortunately, with German armies occupying Norway, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Luxembourg and part of France, and with Italy now a belligerent siding with Germany, the propagandists, like Britain itself, had their backs to the wall. Some neutrals – Spain, Hungary and Rumania – overtly sympathized with the Axis, and the rest, from fear or resignation, were inclined to be cooperative, at least with Germany. Meanwhile internal problems continued to plague the machinery, their root cause fitting the sense of Campbell Stuart’s observation that ‘in all organizations which deal with opinions, there inevitably arise great problems with the staff and personalities loom very large’. It was a time for the propagandists to retrench, reorganize and strike back hard – if they could.

In May 1940 a new prime minister was at 10 Downing Street. Winston Churchill was an almost perfect manifestation of John Bull (and of an English bulldog, which he soon became in a propaganda poster), providing a lift for the beleaguered nation well beyond what Neville Chamberlain could achieve. Churchill brought in Alfred Duff Cooper as Minister of Information, a man...
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‘choleric in argument and pugnacious in debate’. Duff Cooper had wide government experience, none of which prepared him adequately for the post he would leave after little more than a year ‘with a sigh of relief’. His tenure was plagued by internal squabbles, the pains of reorganization, and the indifferent support of the prime minister for whom propaganda held only secondary interest. Yet Churchill’s alleged lack of interest in the subject notwithstanding, propaganda was among the first war activities effected by him in office. With Churchill’s approval Department EH returned to the MOI in early June and remained until 16 July, when he approved creation of the Special Operations Executive at the Ministry of Economic Warfare under Hugh Dalton. The SOE took over covert propaganda from Department EH and added a sabotage and subversion section. The terms of reference were, in Churchill’s own words, ‘to set Europe ablaze’. The ungentlemanly implications were too much for Department EH Director Campbell Stuart, who resigned in August. Unfortunately the exact administrative relationship between SOE and the MOI was left unclarified and enormous difficulties soon arose.

Duff Cooper’s first task as Minister was to reform the propaganda machine. Every ranking officer, division, committee and agency connected with propaganda was scrutinized in hopes of enhancing efficiency, quality and, of necessity, economy. The effort was Ministry-wide and affected the FPD as well as other MOI parts. The Anti-Lies Bureau expanded, Rowland Kenney returned to oversee work in Scandinavia, and the Overseas Planning Committee was established with responsibility for reviewing and coordinating present and future propaganda policy for neutral, enemy and enemy-occupied territories. The OPC was meant to supersede all other committees concerned with overseas, and to answer criticism that ‘large and ill-considered funds’ were being spent overseas, such as the roughly £385 000 annual expenditure on news excluding broadcasting, which it was claimed was to the detriment of home propaganda.

The Overseas Division was created including a branch for neutral countries other than the United States, and Maurice Peterson, former ambassador to Spain, was named Overseas Controller. When the Foreign Office reclaimed Ivone Kirkpatrick, Anthony Leigh Ashton took over as FPD Director. The FPD was now responsible for neutral Europe, the Middle and Far East. It divided Europe as regarded neutral countries between the Balkans,