

Europe

Battle of Oran Is Challenge of War to Bitter End

By ANNE O'HARE McCORMICK

The transcendent tragedy underlying the Battle of Oran for the moment overshadows its other aspects. That the first great naval engagement of the war should be fought between the French and British fleets touches the heights of secular drama and plumbs the depths of those emotional loyalties which determine, when all is said, the shape and destiny of nations.

Winston Churchill was conscious that he stood at the bar of history when he told his somber and eloquent story to the House of Commons. He rested his case on the judgment of history; and only history will decide whether the loss of her fleet means the final victory of the France whose mind and spirit have been for all of us the first rampart of human liberty.

France Still Tied to Britain

The painful and unanimous decision of the British Cabinet to prevent the use of the French Navy by the Germans is the climax of a series of choices made over a period of years by the Allied Governments, separately or in concert. History, colder and more impartial than the day-by-day reporter—who thinks also with his heart—will record them all, and will apportion praise and blame for the break in the Entente according to its effects on the future relations of France and Britain and therefore on the future of Europe. For in this future, willing or not, bound or free, these two nations are as inexorably bound together as they had to be when this war started. Behind the tragic encounter at Oran lies the clear fact that the victory or defeat of Britain affects the fate of France even more than does her own surrender.

The verdict of history is not yet written, but certain immediate questions are plainly answered by the British action. The British risked the active enmity of the present French Government by deciding to seize the fleet because they are resolved to save the empire at any cost. The action off the Algerian coast gives point to the passage in Mr. Churchill's speech in which he taunted the Italian Navy for "prudently" keeping out of the way during the naval battle. "We trust their turn will come," he said, "during the operations we shall pursue to secure effectual command of the Mediterranean."

Italy's Fleet Menaced

This is a direct challenge to Italy, which is in this struggle primarily to dispute that mastery. It gives notice that England intends to wage her aggressive war in the Mediterranean, and this is extremely significant as an indication, not only that the Italians are due to bear the brunt of the British offensive, but that in crippling the French fleet Britain clears the decks for this attack, and also that she means to weaken and if possible to destroy the Italian fleet, the one remaining obstacle to her supremacy over the sea routes to Asia and Africa—the roads of empire.

In other words, the British have at last taken a bold initiative to prove that the chief weapon in their armory, the weapon of sea power, can prevail over land power. They can defend the British Isles by air power or by employing their maritime strength to blockade the enemy or fight an enemy blockade. But they cannot take the offensive against Germany by sea. They can attack in the Mediterranean. It is only by saving and using the fleet, moreover, that they can save the empire, and Mr. Churchill's words clearly proclaim that they are ready to fight on two fronts. These words imply, indeed, that in the last desperate resort Britain will hold the empire even if she should be driven from the islands.

Britain Fights Alone

This is the underlying importance of the grave events and decisions of the past few days. We are watching Britain taking the field alone, and in her isolation taking the heroic step of deliberately extending the battlefield. At the same time she gives unmistakable evidence that she means to fight to the finish. Words to this effect might not be wholly convincing. On the eve of capitulation the French Government was broadcasting assurances of invincible determination. But if the order to fire on the ships of its former ally portended nothing else, it would remove the last doubt of Britain's determination to fight on. It would never have cut the last tie with the French except as grim prelude to a battle to the death.

"Mare Nostrum" a Battleground

The British action is so interpreted in Rome and Berlin. It is evident that the Italians have taken in the implications of the seizure of the French fleet. They realize today that their part in the war is not to be merely a matter of more or less passive aid in support of Germany. The Mediterranean is staked out as a battleground; as far as Italy is concerned it may be the decisive battleground. Much hangs now on whether the traditional dependence of Britain on sea power, based on the hitherto unchallenged theory that in the end navies always overcome armies, is still valid. We are facing what may be the ultimate test of British power—"the supreme hour to which we are called," says Mr. Churchill—as well as the test of all former theories of war and all the proverbial values of civilization.