

W. Macmahon Ball in Sachsenhausen¹

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Coming weeks after the signing of the Munich Agreement, W. Macmahon Ball's day trip to the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp outside Berlin provides a remarkable episode in Australian public broadcasting. It reveals much about Macmahon Ball and much about the Third Reich at the time of Ball's visit. Accessible in the form of draft scripts Ball submitted to the ABC during his 1938 European trip, Ball's account of his experiences of October 20 offers a detailed portrayal of the camp and an insightful analysis of the psychology of both its inmates and its guards.

Using Macmahon Ball's papers held in the National Library of Australia, this paper draws on the material Ball submitted to the ABC for broadcast as he travelled in Britain and continental Europe. His writings reflect the changing political situation in Europe over the four-month period of his travels, during which significant shifts in Ball's attitudes occurred. Set against the backdrop of the British public's jubilation following the Munich Agreement and its promise of 'Peace in our Time', Ball's broadcasts are a study in contrasts. They set the British public's relief against Czech demoralisation and German indifference; they pit Ball's liberal views against the totalitarianism of Hitler's Germany. Not only do Ball's European broadcasts highlight the pressure on Europe and its citizens at a crucial time, they also illustrate the tension in Ball himself, caught as he was between his long developed academic and intellectual interest in liberal affairs and what he saw around him. A long time academic observer of German and European politics, his three weeks of travel in

¹ This article has been peer-reviewed.

continental Europe challenged Ball's conception of European affairs, the Munich Agreement and the psychology of Nazi Germany, with his internal tension reaching an obvious zenith with his remarkable day trip to Sachsenhausen.

Macmahon Ball was a prominent liberal Australian academic in the 1930s, well known for his support of the Book Censorship Abolition League as well as frequent public lectures broadcast on the ABC. To define his academic work narrowly as focusing on European and international affairs and domestic political institutions would be somewhat unfair, given his strong understanding and interest in psychology and the media. Of particular interest to Ball was the nexus between public psychology, media and political systems, with broadcasts across the decade focusing to some degree on the interactivity of these elements.² To this end, Germany provided Ball with an interesting case study, with the three elements implicitly drawn together by Nazi propaganda and the political control that was the aim of *Gleichschaltung*, the process of coordination imposed under Nazi rule. Indeed, Ball's abhorrence at German attempts at social control through manipulation of the media and the application of the psychology of power underscore his own liberal views, forming an important grounding to further study of Ball's career in the 1930s.

² Ball broadcast academic discussion for the ABC on the position of media in Germany in W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC, 'The Watchman: The Ramparts of Liberty,' August 23, 1937; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 15. Series of three: Ball, 'Psychology of Power'; and also submitted more general discussion of corporate and national psychologies, media relations and the role of the wireless in political systems in W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC 'On Thin Ice,' 1936, undated; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 12; W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC 'Where are they Taking Us? – The Wireless,' 1936, undated; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 12

The Sudeten Crisis arose from German claims over the German-speaking territories of the state of Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland. Hitler's claims stem from the Treaty of Versailles and the perceived injustice of that peace for the defeated Germans and the apparent disjuncture in the application of the principle of national self-determination.³ Hitler saw the three million Sudeten-Germans should be returned to the fold the Third Reich, and following *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938, took increasingly belligerent steps to provoke the Crisis, threatening war with Czechoslovakia to achieve his aims. The situation was complicated by the diplomatic position of Czechoslovakia, allied to both Russia and France, and tacitly supported by the British – any war threatened with Czechoslovakia was likely to escalate into a European-wide conflict. The Munich Conference of September 1938, attended by the leaders of Germany, France and Britain, was aimed to achieve a settlement that avoided war, The outcome was the Munich Agreement, which dismembered the Czechoslovak state and brought the Sudeten territories under German control in exchange for a cessation of aggressive moves by Germany on the continent. For Britain and France, the Agreement was a triumph of the policy of appeasement, triggering public jubilation at the aversion of war with Germany.⁴ On the other hand, for Czechoslovakia, the Agreement was a particularly bitter pill to swallow, for her territory and sovereignty were cut following months of diplomatic assurances from the British and French that they would support Czechoslovakia if conflict with Germany were to eventuate – ‘in the case of Britain a moral betrayal, and in the

³ Townson, Duncan, *The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern History: 1789-1945*, London: Penguin Books 2001, 131.

⁴ Ball, W. Macmahon, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC ‘Ten Minute Talk #7: Peace and Mr Chamberlain,’ September 30, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16.

case of France a legal and moral betrayal.’⁵

It is in this context that Ball’s European trip should be seen – where Ball’s ABC broadcasts prior to the Munich Agreement highlighted his increasing fear at prospects for European War, his submissions immediately after were jubilant.⁶ Ball’s journey to Germany and Czechoslovakia began on October 30 with a trip across the English Channel aboard a cross-channel ferry, remarking that, as the only Englishmen aboard the boat, ‘it was rather like having a private yacht.’⁷ Indeed, his tone suggests the trip was somewhat an adventure, and reads more like the accounts of an excited traveller than the observations of a respected and experienced academic.

His recollections of his trip provide a strong contrast to the feelings of the Belgian troops with whom he shared a night train from Brussels to Cologne. Their feelings of the settlement were decidedly less optimistic: ‘Of course we would be glad if we thought this plan really meant peace, but none of us think that for a minute. Ever since March 1936 we have been incessantly on guard. There is no real rest in Belgium between anxiety and fear... We will never be cheerful while Hitler rules Germany.’⁸ Upon arriving in Germany, after a long wait at the frontier, Ball was amazed at the level of normalcy in Germany, remarking that the people were as ‘quiet, friendly and calm as I have always found them,’⁹ with no triumphalism at a ‘victory’ over Czechoslovakia,

⁵ Ball, W. Macmahon, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC ‘Five Minute Talk #11: The Munich Agreement and Czechoslovakia,’ November 10, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16, 4.

⁶ Ball, ‘Peace and Mr Chamberlain’.

⁷ Ball, W. Macmahon, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC ‘Ten Minute Talk #8: Eger-Sudetenland,’ October 3, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16, 1

⁸ Ball, ‘Eger – Sudetenland’, 2

⁹ Ball, ‘Eger – Sudetenland’, 2

Britain and France, and no signs of suspicion of the British. Rather, Ball notes a similar level of optimism for British-German relations at the outcome of the Munich settlement, and even a level of amazement at the unease the British had felt only weeks earlier: 'No, no, the English people must be quite crazy to think that war between us was possible.'¹⁰

In all, the attitude of the German people seemed to reinforce Ball's optimism, with, quite simply, their positive attitude reflecting his own. Even after potentially frightening interactions with a Gestapo chief in Leipzig¹¹ and illegally crossing the border on 3 October into the Sudetenland on a train with returning Sudeten refugees, 'women and children with their blankets and possessions,'¹² this attitude persisted. Once more the contrasts provided are stark, with Ball's broadcasts describing the differing attitudes of the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs. Describing the reactions of the citizens of Marienbad¹³ to the German troops, Ball writes, 'There was the friendliest spirit between the soldiers and the population. It looked more like a gigantic picnic at which everyone was enjoying himself hilariously than a military occupation.'¹⁴ The contrast to the mood he observed among the Czech soldiers after hiring a car and driver and 'gamely' crossing no-man's land to Mies (in Czech territory) was remarkable:

The Czechs, of course, made no attempt to shoot us. On the contrary they were very friendly and helpful. It was the contrast in the

¹⁰ Ball, 'Eger – Sudetenland', 3

¹¹ Whilst arranging to cross into Sudetenland, much to their agitation, Ball and his companion mistranslated a question of the guard's, 'Is there anything more I can do?' as 'have you a last wish?' Ball, 'Eger – Sudetenland', 4

¹² Ball, 'Eger – Sudetenland', 5

¹³ A Sudeten town ceded to Germany as part of the Munich Agreement.

¹⁴ W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC 'Five Minute Talk #6: Moving with a Frontier,' October 5, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16, 2

expression of the faces and demeanour of the people. In two miles we had left all the jubilation, all the “Heil Hitler,” all the triumphant demonstration of the German zone, and plunged into a place where the soldiers were dejected and anxious looking, and where the people, who were still at this point mainly German-speaking, sullen and silent. Then as we passed on towards Pilsen and Prague being stopped every few miles and meticulously examined, it was clear that we had passed from a country flamboyantly celebrating an intoxicating military triumph into a country that felt itself defeated, crushed and betrayed.’¹⁵

Without doubt, Ball’s personal position had also changed by the time he reached Prague. No longer jubilant at an apparent British policy success, the betrayal and dismay felt by the Czech population at British and French action had a profound effect on the way Ball perceived the Sudeten crisis and the justice of the Munich Agreement. In the words of a Czech national, ‘Why, if even three months ago France and Britain had told us that they would do nothing, we could at this late hour have made some sort of self-respecting peace with Germany. But no, they led us on, especially the French, to the last minute of the eleventh hour. And then – well, you know what happened.’¹⁶

It is important to note that during his time in Prague, Ball refers to himself as Australian,¹⁷ not only when speaking to locals and foreign press, but also in his ABC broadcasts – such was the feeling of humiliation he might have felt at identifying himself as a Briton while in Prague. The suggestion that ‘Chamberlain preferred the reactions of “the people”, the hysterical relief of millions,’¹⁸ at this point hit home. In responding to Czech feelings

¹⁵ Ball, ‘Moving with a Frontier’, 3

¹⁶ W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC ‘Five Minute Talk #7: Death of a Nation State,’ October 17, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16, 2.

¹⁷ ‘...they were very hospitable to the stray Australians.’ Ball, ‘Death of a Nation-State’, 3.

¹⁸ George, Margaret, *The Hollowmen: An Examination of British Foreign Policy Between*

of betrayal, Ball could only lament:

There was nothing I could say in response to this. Indeed I tried to say as little as possible in that city of dismay and disaster. English was not music to Czech ears. And as I saw the trains disgorging their loads of penniless bewildered half-starving refugees at the Masaryk Station, and heard reliable reports that the Germans among them would soon be driven back into Hitler's Sudetenland, I felt that I was watching one of the great revolting indecencies of history.¹⁹

What began as a short trip to Germany and Czechoslovakia full of enthusiasm, adventure and optimism had soon become a harrowing experience for Ball. The internal tension he was feeling is evident. Reflecting with some shame on his jubilation at the outcome of the agreement reached only days before, he remarks on October 8, 'We are leaving Prague tomorrow morning. And I will be glad to go. It is not a pleasant watching a nation die.'²⁰

On 20 October 1938 Macmahon Ball visited the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp near Berlin, submitting a draft for an ABC broadcast dedicated to the trip on October 22. Arranged by a proud friend who was influential in the Nazi Party, and anxious to demonstrate the achievements of National Socialism,²¹ Ball later remarked that he 'was tremendously impressed with the overwhelming horror of the camp.'²² However, what his day trip to Sachsenhausen proved to Macmahon Ball was the relevance and correctness of his political theorising over the past decade. Where previously his work on the 'psychology of power' and the political effect that the media could have over a population was abstract, his close observation of the rigidity that the camp imposed on all

the Years 1933 and 1939, London: Leslie Frewin 1965, 211.

¹⁹ Ball, 'Death of a Nation-State', 2.

²⁰ Ball, 'Death of a Nation-State', 4

²¹ Kersten, Lee, 'W. Macmahon Balls Bericht uber das KZ Sachsenhausen: Eine Reportage im Herbst 1938 im australischen Rundfunk,' *Dachauer Hefte* vol. 11, December 1995, 124-131, 126

²² Kersten, 'W. Macmahon Balls Bericht uber das KZ Sachsenhausen,' 125.

parties gave his thoughts tangible practical dimension. The very precise and careful language was without his customary contextualisation in a deliberate attempt at providing a balanced account, serving more to highlight Ball's unease than political contextualisation ever could. To this end, Ball's internal tension in writing his account is evident for a number of reasons – first, his understandable unease at spending time in the camp and writing a balanced account, masking his personal opinions on the camp; second, his background in psychology made it a challenging professional experience; third, his body of academic work on German psychology and social control was being demonstrated before his eyes; and finally, it is understandable that, at some level, Ball would have identified closely with the ideas many of the political prisoners of the camp due to his left-leaning liberal views.

Apart from discussion of the camp and its surrounds in a physical sense, the most striking aspect of the broadcast lies in his psychological analysis of both the prisoners and the guards – on one hand he paints the political prisoners as mentally bright and alert despite their obvious physical hardships, and on the other, he describes the SS guards as forming part of the physical dominance of the camp, whilst also being blind to the contradictions of the state. In short, 'Concentration Camp' is a dense account of three hours spent at Sachsenhausen that is by parts remarkable, chilling and insightful, and one that serves to highlight the very issues that Ball had spent the greater part of the 1930s analysing.

The first foreigner to visit the camp in some years,²³ Ball's visit 'was only made possible due to the personal consent of Herr Himmler; and then only because a German friend gave the fullest

²³ W. Macmahon Ball, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC 'Ten Minute Talk #10: Concentration Camp,' October 22, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 15, 1.

assurances that I could be relied upon to give a completely fair and unbiased account of what (he) saw; that in spite of my being a democrat I would set nought down in malice.'²⁴ That a German university associate accompanied Ball on this trip, in part to vouch for his credentials, but to serve mainly as an unofficial interpreter, can be seen as an important point of differentiation for Ball – rather than acting as a journalist in search of a story, he was an intellectual in search of understanding. In this context of enforced and academic impartiality, even Ball's express purpose for the visit is significant: 'It was mainly because I thought a Concentration Camp might throw some light on the world attitude, as distinct from the domestic policy, of the German government, that I wanted to see one. I was not in search of atrocities.'²⁵ Indeed, to this end, Ball's presentation of facts, with a paucity of rumour, context and innuendo, makes for a far less stimulating broadcast than was his custom, but one that is fundamentally compelling for the subject matter covered.

Ball begins his broadcast with careful contextualisation of his day at Sachsenhausen and a detailed explanation of the layout of the camp. The image he paints is surprisingly light, describing the camp as clean, tidy, organised and 'splendidly planned,'²⁶ rather than the contemporary image of the camps as being oppressive and dreary – though Ball does not make mention of the fact that 'every spot of the camp is continuously commanded by a machine gun.'²⁷ Ball ate the same lunch as the prisoners – whale and potatoes – and sat thoroughly on the fence in describing it as 'not exactly appetising, but well cooked and the whale was not at all

²⁴ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 1.

²⁵ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 1.

²⁶ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 2.

²⁷ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 2.

bad.²⁸ Further, his description of the self-discipline of the prisoners, the lending library and the time for prisoners' leisure, while not exactly glowing in its praise for the German system, is noteworthy for its lack of outright criticism. Indeed, Ball's stoic presentation of the layout and general details of Sachsenhausen serves as the only contextualisation provided for his account. Conspicuous by its absence was the political context of the policies of the National Socialist government that led to the camp's establishment, which was generally a hallmark of Ball's commentary on the ABC. It is clear that he took his pledge to provide an unbiased account of his experiences at the camp very seriously indeed.

However, Ball's discussion of the prisoners at Sachsenhausen is a tense one. While he was attempting an unbiased account, his abhorrence at the system and the offences for which prisoners were incarcerated rings clear; and indeed, despite not stressing his academic interest in psychology, his analysis of the prisoners' demeanour and psychology is important. Ball describes the appearance of many of the prisoners, remarking that some of them 'had the degenerate look...noticed in habitual criminals everywhere,'²⁹ but mixed with these men are those deemed 'work shy and anti-social,' whose crimes include 'well below average intelligence'.³⁰ Socialist and Marxist political prisoners were described as having 'more than average courage,' showing 'character, sensitiveness and intelligence.'³¹ Religious prisoners – Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses – are described as having committed

²⁸ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 2 A guard enthusiastically explained that the meal cost 62 pfennigs per prisoner on that day, compared with 65 pfennigs per day spent on feeding a German man in the Labour Service, to demonstrate how well they treat their prisoners.

²⁹ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

³⁰ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

³¹ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

crimes because their 'convictions prevent them from giving allegiance to the National Socialist State.'³² Indeed, the tone of Ball's language suggests that he understands that because they provide a level of opposition to the state these men are kept prisoner, but he cannot fathom their punishment as befitting their crimes – be they religious or political affiliation, or simply as they were not intelligent.

Recounting their fear, Ball remarks of the prisoners, 'In the eyes of most there was deep misery; when addressed by an officer the misery was mixed with fright, and at least in some cases terror is not too strong a word.'³³ Indeed, in analysing the prisoners as a whole, his remarks are as enlightening on Ball's bearing as on that of the prisoners: 'I have never seen before, and never believed it possible to see, a group of men so cowed, so completely deprived of the rudimentary personal dignities that I have always felt belong to human beings,' with reactions that 'showed the quick, shrinking nervousness of animals that have been utterly subdued.'³⁴ For Ball, the implication was clear – Sachsenhausen showed how effective the 'psychology of power' could be in controlling a group of men, the prisoners being controlled by their fear of the state, and the guards controlled by conditioning. That the prisoners' incarceration seems to be unjust in Ball's eyes is relevant to his demeanour and unease, but far less so than the fact that his ideas of social control by the state and the psychology of power were being demonstrated in such a brutal fashion. Fitting within the historiography of prisoners' psychologies, Ball's observations reflect later psychological analysis that, 'for the majority, there was not the slightest occasion to regard themselves

³² Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 2.

³³ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

³⁴ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

as criminals. The feeling of being innocent and yet having to suffer all this misery aroused self-pity and weakened the energy that was essential for survival.’³⁵

Even more significant to Ball’s intellectual development was his observation of and interaction with the guards at Sachsenhausen – educated and guided by the Nazi control of the media, these men served as the embodiment of the system of control that the State imposed on German society. To this point in his career, Ball had seen a disjuncture between the German state and society, but his interactions with the SS guards at Sachsenhausen served to show that these boundaries were not as clear cut as first thought. That which seemed normal and justified to the SS guards unnerved and frightened Ball, to some degree proving correct his notions that propaganda and media could cajole an entire nation to the state’s way of thinking. On this issue, Merkel advises that, ‘the atmospheric conditions of Weimar culture and politics were highly favourable to [an] eruption of revivalist nationalism... and ever widening circles of disoriented and discontented individuals were ready to be swept up in the self-accelerating motion of a great storm,’³⁶ suggesting that the people of Germany, in this case the SS guards, were more than willing to be swept along by the social control of the Nazi Party. Further, Merkel contends, ‘only people with a strong sense of other loyalties – such as Socialists and Catholics – were able to resist the suction of the brown hurricane,’³⁷ going some way to explaining the reason for their incarceration.

Describing the SS guards as fine young men ‘of outstanding

³⁵ Cohen, Elie. A., *Human Behaviours in the Concentration Camps*, New York: Grossets Universal Library 1953, 144.

³⁶ Merkel, Peter H., *The Making of a Stormtrooper*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1987, 218.

³⁷ Merkel, *The Making of a Stormtrooper*, 218.

physique, unquestionable loyalty and discipline,³⁸ and granting favourable comparisons to officers of the British Army or London Police Force,³⁹ Ball spoke of conversations with guards describing the psychological challenge of working at such a prison camp. For the guards, the concern was their own psychological wellbeing, 'not thinking it strange to call up, address, and dismiss prisoners in a manner more peremptory and impersonal than that usually adapted to animals.'⁴⁰ Indeed, even the SS leadership recognised this and decreed that officers spend no more than six months on guard duty.⁴¹ With the implication that the guards adopted the racist and impersonal mindset of the State, Ball saw his perception that German society was separate from the state challenged. This was an image reinforced with Ball's bemusement at his accompanying officer thinking that Ball 'would be, if not pleased, at least reassured by my visit to the camp,'⁴² as if the policies and morality behind the Nazi prison camp system were universal. However, the irony of this statement lies more in the reinforcement of Ball's faith in the tenets of liberalism as a result of his time in Nazi Germany.⁴³

Indeed, the recognition of the power of psychology is a point that must again be stressed in relation to Ball's visit to Sachsenhausen. Goebbels saw that 'Propaganda had to be accompanied by coercion to make it effective... a sharp sword must stand behind

³⁸ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 1.

³⁹ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

⁴⁰ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

⁴¹ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

⁴² Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 3.

⁴³ 'If your faith in liberal principles is wanting and needs renewing, then go for a holiday to Germany and you will bring it back to life with a shock.' Ball, W. Macmahon, Draft Submission of Speech to ABC 'Ten Minute Talk #2: Does Germany Want War?' August 26, 1938; National Library of Australia Archives, *Macmahon Ball Papers*, Series MS7851, Box 20, Folder 16, 7

propaganda if it is to be really effective,⁴⁴ with the system of concentration camps serving as one of the Third Reich's sharp swords. With this in mind, Ball's recollection of the camp's choir should be recounted in full to do justice to the tension of his account. Implicit within the account is a level of tension in Ball, aware of the cruel juxtaposition of politics upon men, machine guns trained upon defenceless prisoners. It was an evocation that illustrates Ball's understanding of the brutality of the Nazi regime and the power it had to coerce its subjects and captives alike, those who did not understand the way in which the state was manipulating them, and those who fully understood their position as enemies. To be forced to present what are songs of celebration and solidarity surrounded by ideologically opposed and hostile countrymen, the prisoners highlight for Ball his internal strain and his recognition that what was once abstract, an observation from distant Australia, had become real and tangible. Even with Ball's lip-service to some hope in the prisoners, their position, and their understanding, was clear.

My guide was anxious for me to hear the camp singing which takes place on the huge parade ground after midday roll call. We waited at the main gates while the prisoners marched in. As the last section entered, the gates were closed and armed guards formed in front of it, while the three machine guns were manned in the watch tower above. We stood in the centre of those 9000 prisoners on parade. Then the choir-master climbed up on to his wooden platform to conduct the singing. No political songs, but German folk songs. I walked among the ranks as they sang. Many did not sing at all; others moved their lips when I looked at them, but thousands lifted their voices loud and clear. And they sang as only Germans can. There were machine guns watching them, the barbed wire round them, and each man's future quite unknown; but I felt that so long as they could sing like that there must be somewhere deep inside them a faith and a courage that had not been killed.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Goebbels quoted in Bramsted, E.K., *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda: 1925-1945*, Michigan: Michigan State University Press 1965, 450.

⁴⁵ Ball, 'Concentration Camp', 4.