Winston Churchill’s Stand Against Nazi Germany

Dante DiMartino-Hart
Junior Division
Historical Paper
Paper Length: 2,302 words
Winston Churchill was named Prime Minister of Great Britain on May 10th, 1940. On the same day, Germany began the invasion of Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France.\(^1\) In less than a month, the evacuation at Dunkirk would occur and France would surrender to Nazi Germany on June 22nd\(^2\) leaving Great Britain as the only Western European nation not to have surrendered, declared neutrality, negotiated peace terms, or joined with Nazi Germany. Only a few years earlier, Churchill would have seemed to the people of Great Britain as the last person to become Prime Minister because of his views on Germany.

From the time Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933 until Churchill was named Prime Minister, Churchill, who at this time was a member of the House of Commons, would speak about what he saw as the threat from Germany.\(^3\) This stand was not the popular view in Great Britain at the time. In fact, after the Munich settlement in September 1938, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did what he believed to be “the governing necessity of appeasing Hitler when and if possible,”\(^4\) Churchill gave a speech in Parliament opposing the settlement. Churchill was “nearly disavowed by the Conservative men and women of Epping, his own constituency.”\(^5\) However, when Hitler broke the Munich settlement in March 1939 by marching into Prague and taking the rest of Czechoslovakia, the opinions of a lot of people in Great Britain changed\(^6\) and by the beginning of May 1940 Chamberlain himself realized that “the

\(^3\) Lukacs. *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Dire Warning*, p.15
essential unity of Great Britain could be secured under another Prime Minister, but not himself.”

Churchill’s once unpopular view of Germany now made him the logical choice to be named Prime Minister when Chamberlain resigned.

It is against this backdrop that Churchill gave four of his most famous speeches between May 13th and June 22nd, 1940. These speeches became the foundation for British resistance to Nazi Germany throughout the rest of 1940 until, on December 18th, Hitler issued Directive Number 21. This directive, known as Operation Barbarossa, were the written orders for the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Churchill himself could not foresee the impact that the German invasion of the Soviet Union would have. He stated “Had we known what is set forth in this chapter, we should have been greatly relieved. The combination against us of Germany, Russia, and Japan was the worst of our fears. But who could tell?” Churchill did not know about the upcoming German invasion of the Soviet Union at the end of 1940 but he knew the prospects for Great Britain were bleak when he gave his first speech to the House of Commons on May 13th.

This speech is known for the phrase ‘blood, toil, tears and sweat’ and gives the politicians of Great Britain a strong look at their nation’s policy as the war in Europe is being waged. The citizens of Great Britain would only have newspaper accounts and transcripts of the speech, as it was not broadcast. The speech itself says, “I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act. I would say to the

---


9 Churchill. *Their Finest Hour*, p. 593.
House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.’” 10  The speech also gives the British position on Nazi Germany, “You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.” 11  What is missing from this speech is that there is no statement about needing allies. Churchill appears to be preparing the British people to be alone in the fight against Nazi Germany.  King George VI himself said, “Personally, I feel happier now that we have no allies to be polite to and pamper.” 12  Churchill’s radio address on May 19th begins to paint the difficulty Great Britain will face throughout 1940.

The radio address, known as the “Be Ye Men of Valour” speech, states “Now it would be foolish, however, to disguise the gravity of the hour.  It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage or to suppose that well-trained, well-equipped armies numbering three or four millions of men can be overcome in the space of a few weeks, or even months...” 13  Churchill is telling the British people to not lose hope and that standing up to Nazi Germany will take years of sacrifice.  Only eight days later, Great Britain would be leading the desperate evacuation at Dunkirk, France.

From May 27th until June 4th, 1940, nearly 650 ships crossed the English Channel to rescue British and French troops from the advancing Germans. 14  By the time the evacuation of

10 https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat.html

11 Ibid.


Dunkirk was over, nearly 233,000 British and 112,000 French soldiers had made it safely to Great Britain. Make no mistake, Dunkirk was a retreat. In fact, Churchill stated that a “Miracle of Deliverance” is not victory. However, Churchill used the largely successful evacuation as a way to inspire more hope to the people as he delivered his ‘We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches’ speech to the House of Commons on June 4th.

After giving a detailed description of events at Dunkirk, Churchill ends his speech with these words, “We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.” The interesting part of this section is an appeal for allies within the appeal for Great Britain to continue to stand up to Germany. Only a month earlier, Churchill appeared to be preparing Great Britain to go it alone. It appears after Dunkirk that Churchill realizes it will take an ally like the United States to defeat Nazi Germany. Mr. Timothy Riley, Director of the National Churchill Museum in Fulton, Missouri said that it was “very clever for Churchill to weave words and phrases into his speeches

15 Bailey, p.42.
16 “Mr. Churchill Surveys The War” The Times (London, England), Wednesday, June 5, 1940; p. 6; Issue 48634.
to catch the attention of the United States and get more support.”18 Churchill himself said “I
ended in a passage which was to prove, as will be seen, a timely and important factor in United
States decisions.”19 Even The Times correspondent in New York City reported that “Everywhere
this afternoon high praise for Mr. Churchill’s speech could be heard,” and that “People have been
even stopping each other in the streets to talk about it.”20 This clearly proves that Churchill’s
speeches were having an impact in America. Mr. Riley stated that “the United States
government, while not ready to declare war against Germany, were willing to provide supplies
and materials to Great Britain without widespread opposition from the American people.”21
Churchill’s speeches remained key to Great Britain’s call for international support. On June
18th, France falls to Nazi Germany and on the same day Churchill gives a speech to Parliament.

This speech is known for the final words “this was their finest hour.” The Times wrote
that after Churchill said these now famous words there was loud and prolonged applause. He
commended the British divisions who fought with the French: “They had suffered severely, but
they had fought well.”22 The speech then mentions military aid coming from the United States.
Mr. Riley stated that by this point Churchill knew a relationship with the United States was
“important for England’s survival.”23 Churchill also makes it clear he has support from the
leaders of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Churchill then states what losing

19 Churchill, p.118.
20 “The ‘True British Spirit’” The Times (London, England), Wednesday, Jun 05, 1940; pg. 6; Issue 48634.
22 “Mr. Churchill’s Speech” The Times (London, England), Wednesday, Jun 19, 1940; pg. 2; Issue 48646.
to Hitler would mean, “Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.”

This dark view of the situation was confirmed when Hitler gave a “triumphant speech in the Reichstag” on July 19th. Hitler’s speech included a prediction that Churchill would be taking refuge in Canada and gave Great Britain a Peace Offer. Not only did Churchill not accept the Peace Offer, but Hitler’s confidence in a British surrender delayed him from ordering the air raids that started the Battle of Britain until August 13th.

Churchill’s speeches inspired many across Great Britain. After Churchill’s ‘Fight Them on the Beaches’ speech, the government asked for volunteers to join the Homeland Security Force; 250,000 joined. The British government even displayed phrases from Churchill’s speeches on war posters as propaganda. One poster showed a soldier holding a rifle with the line “and they will say THIS was our finest hour.” As Churchill watched the Royal Air Force and troops on the ground defend Great Britain against the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, he realized the incredible sacrifice being made by the pilots. Royal Air Force pilots were going up to fight the


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.


Luftwaffe as many as six times a day. The sacrifice led Churchill to remark on August 20th “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.” The Battle of Britain took a terrible turn in early September when Germany bombed London itself and led to a radio address by Churchill on September 11th in which he describes Hitler as, “the repository and embodiment of many forms of soul-destroying hatred, this monstrous product of former wrongs and shame.” The attacks on London proved disastrous for Germany with heavy losses of aircraft and perhaps more importantly, a decline in morale among German bomber crews. These losses caused Hitler to postpone Operation Sea Lion, the landing of Nazi troops on the British Isles and suspending the Battle of Britain. Hitler now turned his attention towards the fighting in North Africa and the invasion of the Soviet Union. While the actual invasion of the Soviet Union did not begin until June 22, 1941, the written orders from Hitler were issued on December 18, 1940. Nazi Germany now had to divide resources. Their navy stayed focused on Great Britain but their army now turned their attention to the Soviet Union. Great Britain had been successful in standing up to Nazi Germany even if by this point Great Britain was not sure of victory. Churchill’s speeches played a role in the success, but were they really effective?

30 Bailey, p.47.
31 Ibid.
32 Bailey, p.51.
34 Ibid.
37 Churchill, p.590.
One good way to gauge interest in today’s mass and social media is to look at ratings or views. Back in 1940, the British Broadcasting Corporation had recently begun using audience research to see how many people were turning on the radio to listen to different programs. Their research showed that 51 percent of the adult population of Great Britain listened to Churchill’s ‘Be Ye Men of Valour’ speech on May 19th and that number increased to 59 percent for the ‘Finest Hour’ speech on June 18th. The increase shows the people of Great Britain were impressed by what Churchill had to say, even if the news from France was not good. An increase in listeners also meant people had confidence in how Churchill was handling his difficult first six weeks as Prime Minister.

Dr. Stephen Bungay gives a very good summary of how Churchill’s speeches were so effective. He lists five themes that occur over and over. They were:

“(1) We face a monstrous evil which is a threat to the whole world.

(2) If we can stand up to it, we will save not only ourselves, but the whole of mankind.

(3) Our ultimate goal must be victory, for this is an evil so virulent that it must be utterly extinguished.

(4) The road to victory will be long and hard, and involve much pain and sorrow...

(5) ...but if we support each other and stick together, we can do it.”

38 Lukacs, p.62.

What make Churchill’s speeches of 1940 so interesting is that they were needed. The people of Great Britain and the United States needed to hear someone who was going to take a stand against Nazi Germany. Churchill understood that he needed to bolster his people, that to prepare them for the hardships ahead he needed to give them hope and confidence. Dr. Bungay gives five themes that occur in Churchill’s speeches. One theme that does not come up is surrender or negotiation. As Churchill wrote, “As the end of the year approached both its lights and its shadows stood out harshly on the picture. We were alive. We had beaten the German Air Force. There had been no invasion of the island.”

Sometimes, when a person or a nation is taking a stand, victory needs to be measured by simply surviving, and words are often the first, most important defense, as Winston Churchill described them, in “all their pristine vital force.”

---

40 Churchill, p.626.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

   This book was great because it was written by Churchill himself, so I was able to understand how he remembered what happened. It was a hard source to use because so much of the book could be included in the paper. I had to work hard to make good choices from this book.

Churchill, Winston. Several speeches, located on the website of the National Churchill Museum located in Fulton, MO:  [www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org](http://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org)
   “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat, 1940”
   “Be Ye Men of Valour, 1940”
   “We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches, 1940”
   [https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches.html](https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches.html) accessed 1/21/17.
   “Their Finest Hour, 1940”
   [https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/their-finest-hour.html](https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/their-finest-hour.html) accessed 1/21/17.
   I was glad to learn there is a National Churchill Museum at Westminster College in Fulton, MO, because Churchill gave a speech there. I used the site to easily access Churchill’s most known speeches. You can listen to audios of Churchill presenting his some speeches on this site.

International Churchill Society, The:  [www.winstonchurchill.org](http://www.winstonchurchill.org)
   This is a great site for all sorts of information on Winston Churchill. It has both primary and secondary sources. I liked this quote because my paper is about Churchill’s speeches and he talks here about how words are important.

   This poster shows how Churchill’s speeches were used in propaganda for rallying the British people to support the war.

*The Times*, (London, England), May & June issues, 1940. accessed at the University of Connecticut Avery Point Campus Library, 3/30/17.
   It was important for me to use *The Times* of London because it showed me how the press and the people of England responded to Winston Churchill’s speeches. I was glad to also find an article on how the United States responded to Churchill’s speech was reported on in London. I
want to thank research librarian Beth Rumery at the University of Connecticut Avery Point library for her helping me to access this newspaper.

Secondary Sources

This biography of Churchill gives the basic information needed about Churchill’s life. It doesn’t go into a lot of detail but gave me good information on 1940.

This book was about how reporters in America covered the war and events in Europe and Great Britain. It came with an audio CD. The CD contained actual news broadcasts from World War II. This helped make the war more real for me.
*The book is a secondary source, but the CD with historic broadcasts is a primary source.

International Churchill Society, The: [www.winstonchurchill.org](http://www.winstonchurchill.org)
“His Speeches: How Churchill Did It” article by Dr. Stephen Bungay
I used the article portion of this site to learn more about how Churchill’s speeches have been viewed by historians. I liked how this historian, Dr. Bungay, looked at the different components to Churchill’s speeches.

History Channel: [www.history.com](http://www.history.com)
I used this site for short overview descriptions of these two battles.

This book focuses mostly on the 1940 speech and helped me understand what Churchill was trying to accomplish in his speeches.

I tried to contact Mr. Riley before our state competition but there were scheduling conflicts. He shared Churchill’s need for the United States to become a stronger ally for Great Britain. I want to thank Mr. Riley for taking the time to speak with me for this project.

Another biography with more details than the Bailey biography but not as much about what he was doing in 1940.