

“We Shall Go on to the End”: Winston Churchill and the Power of Communication in the
Darkest Hours of World War II

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“If you are going through hell, keep going.”¹

--Winston Churchill

Introduction

Winston Churchill’s speeches symbolized Britain’s resolve in World War II. His speech “We Shall Go on to the End” marked a turning point in world history by changing Britain’s stand against Hitler from negotiation to confrontation. His inspired communication led Britain to victory, but his approach was doubted at the beginning of the crisis as few listened to him. In contrast, the British public was hoping for an effective appeasement policy.

“Peace for our time,” British prime minister Neville Chamberlain confidently declared regarding the nonaggression pact signed between Germany and Britain on September 30, 1938.² Everyone was excited to hear the news of peace, as the British had anticipated more conflict because of the painful memories of World War I. Chamberlain held the contract with Hitler’s signature, stating “the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.”³ At this moment, seeing the jubilant crowds, Chamberlain had no idea that he would resign, unable to fulfill his promise to keep peace. Furthermore, he would not even realize that his negligence would put the entire country in danger. Someone else would emerge to lead Britain to overcome obstacles in the next five years.

On May 10, 1940, a new leader emerged, and Winston Churchill was inaugurated as prime minister. His repudiation of Chamberlain’s appeasement policy eventually turned Britain’s

¹ “The Best Winston Churchill Quotes,” Ranker, accessed January 2021 <https://www.ranker.com/list/a-list-of-famous-winston-churchill-quotes/reference>

² Klein, Christopher, “Chamberlain Declares ‘Peace for Our Time,’” History.com, last modified January 3, 2020, accessed January 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/chamberlain-declares-peace-for-our-time-75-years-ago>

³ Ibid

distinct deterrence measures into a series of debates. The result of this shift in communication decided Britain's future and whether it would be conquered by the Nazi's constant air-raids or maintain its sovereignty. The debate was about picking one solution among the two alternatives: negotiating peace or waging war. The discussion during the May War Cabinet Crisis of 1940 developed in multiple dimensions: it not only represented the divergence between Churchill and Conservative Party's leaders, but also symbolized the communication between Churchill and the rest of the world, ultimately spreading his message, "We shall go on to the end," to all who were ready to fight on June 4th.

Historical Background of Churchill's Appeal: The Peace Deal and the Global Atmosphere in the Darkest Hours

The impending crisis and massive armed conflict had already manifested before Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939. As early as March 1938, Adolf Hitler integrated Austria into greater Germany. On September 30th of the same year, the Munich Agreement was signed by Adolf Hitler of Germany, Neville Chamberlain of Britain, Édouard Daladier of France, and Benito Mussolini of Italy. This agreement violated the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia by ceding Sudetenland to Germany when none of the Czech delegations were present. The document specified details such as occupation dates: "German troops started the conquest on October 1, and that all evacuations should start on the same day."⁴ Hitler had previously used intimidating military attacks, inciting German descendants in Sudetenland by encouraging them to break apart from the Czech territory. Britain and France quickly became horrified and strategized against these aggressive tactics to avoid military conflicts with Germany, but their appeasement policy

⁴ "Munich Pact September 29, 1938." Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, accessed January 2021, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp>

completely condoned Germany's action and did not bring peace. In contrast, Germany's rampant spirit was dramatically bolstered by those concessions. On September 1, 1939, the Nazis began their major military campaign that aimed to take over Poland, destroying Britain and France's dream of peace. Germany's mobilized war machine of tanks, planes, and bombers overwhelmed the Polish, and the military strategy of Blitzkrieg completely shocked Europe. Chamberlain's original proposal of a negotiated peace went bankrupt, and he proclaimed Britain's stand against Nazi totalitarianism in his radio address on September 3, 1939: "We and France are today, in fulfillment of our obligations, going to the aid of Poland, who is so bravely resisting this wicked and unprovoked attack upon her people."⁵

At this moment, Britain's unprecedented crisis was driven by both external and internal factors. On April 9, 1940, Nazi Germany took the offensive on Denmark and Norway, and soon both countries fell under the heel of fascism. By May of 1940, panic and dread swept throughout Europe, and Britain especially, as an island country, feared it would soon suffer in isolation as Germany spread its control. As for British politics, in contrast to the confident attitude many people previously held toward Chamberlain, he was now facing criticism. On May 7, 1940, the discussion in the House of Commons revealed Chamberlain had lost his leadership of Britain. A motion of no confidence was conducted, and at least 25% of all Conservative Party members did not vote in favor of his administration, tremendously weakening Chamberlain's base and his solidarity.⁶ Under these pressures, Britain needed a capable leader to steer it through its darkest hours.

⁵ "Radio Address by Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister, September 3, 1939." Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Library, accessed January 2021, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/gb3.asp>

⁶ "Norway Debate," Alternate History, accessed January 2021, [https://althistory.fandom.com/wiki/Norway_debate_\(3_Strikes\)](https://althistory.fandom.com/wiki/Norway_debate_(3_Strikes))

Who was Winston Churchill?

Hitler certainly made a fool of Chamberlain by breaking his promises. However, if Chamberlain would have listened to one man's advice, such desperation would have been avoided. It was Churchill who had foreseen and given warning of the situation, and he succeeded Chamberlain's post.

Chamberlain was a strong adherent of the appeasement policy, while Churchill was on the opposite side of the leadership spectrum. Contrary to Chamberlain's continuous concessions, Churchill had consistently warned that war would come. On March 24, 1938, in his speech to the House of Commons, Churchill called for imperative actions to extend alliances with other democracies and to apply pressure from the international community to restrain the furious Hitler and his colleagues:

“A country like ours, possessed of immense territory and wealth, whose defenses have been neglected, cannot avoid war by dilating upon its horrors, or even by a continuous display of pacific qualities, or by ignoring the fate of the victims of aggression elsewhere. War will be avoided, in present circumstances, only by the accumulation of deterrents against the aggressor.”⁷

In May 1940, Churchill replaced Chamberlain' and became the new Prime Minister. It was his vision that would guide Britain from this point.

Churchill had a diverse background. Before he was a politician, Churchill was a writer, journalist, and military officer. Over his forty year career as a politician, he had aligned himself

⁷ “1930-1938: The Wilderness,” International Churchill Society, accessed January 2021, <https://winstonchurchill.org/>

with different political parties, including both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. When Churchill was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he was highly criticized for making Britain return to the Gold Standard, and that decision proved to be disastrous to the nation's economy, leading to labor unrest.⁸ During WWI, Churchill's command of the Gallipoli Campaign was fatal to the British navy. Under Churchill, who was the First Lord of the Admiralty, Britain faced an enormous 213,980 casualties, with an addition of the sinking of several naval battleships.⁹ Critics claimed that he was not trusted, and therefore his ability to lead Britain during wartime was questionable. Facing this darkest hour, Churchill needed to convince Britain to support him, and did so the best way he knew how: through communication.

Communication in History: the Key to Understanding Peace

On May 10, 1940, after the establishment of a coalition government under Churchill's leadership, the urgent task at hand was to communicate with Churchill's opposing sides, the former-Prime Minister Chamberlain and Lord Halifax. Halifax had endeavored to implement Chamberlain's appeasement policy. Long before Churchill's inauguration, in 1937 Halifax visited the Nazis leader Hermann Goring. He again visited Benito Mussolini in 1939 as the Secretary of State. Unrestricted, the Nazis took the chance and brought more regions under its control. To Churchill, nothing offered more humiliation than being tolerant and indecisive toward Germany's actions because it suggested to Hitler that other democracies were weak and fragile. Concessions would bring nothing peaceful but more aggressions. Churchill's debate with

⁸ "Chancellor Winston-Churchill on Gold and the Exchequer." International Churchill Society, accessed January 2021, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-153/chancellor-winston-churchill-on-gold-and-the-exchequer/>

⁹ "Gallipoli Campaign," Britannica, Last modified February 9, 2021, accessed January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Gallipoli-Campaign>

Halifax and fellow antiwar officials, together with his speech presented to the House of Commons on June 4, were not only for safeguarding the independence of the British islands, but also for showing Britain's eventual resolution it offered to the common cause of the rest of the world.

Churchill's first attempt of communication was conducted in his speech on May 13 to the House of Commons, where he emphasized his utmost goal to fight for Britain's independence and its permanence peace was to "wage war."¹⁰ In his powerful speech, Churchill utilized figurative language in order to best arouse the stressful feelings of those Members of Parliament:

"You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy."¹¹

Through this application of hypophora, Churchill demonstrated he did not just know what the most pressing question of the day was, but he also knew the answer to that question. Churchill was not just speaking to the members present from other parties, but his true intended audience included the members still dreaming about the benefit of a negotiated peace. He was making a claim to those who stood against his tactic in the Conservative Party. The purpose of his words was to communicate and show the strength of his ideas to Chamberlain and Halifax and to defeat their approach of an appeasement policy. Churchill also addressed Chamberlain's concern by showing that Britain's war was inevitable. He said: "For without victory, there was no

¹⁰ "1940: The Finest Hour." International Churchill Society, accessed January 2021, <https://winstonchurchill.org/>

¹¹ Ibid

survival.”¹² In other words, although Britain dreaded another catastrophic world war, if they did not fight this time, Britain would lose everything.

Communication between the two sides continued. On May 27 at 4:30pm, Churchill had a meeting with his fellow colleagues, trying to finalize Britain’s strategy to fight for peace. The meeting included members from all different parties: Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax of the Conservative Party, Archibald Sinclair of the Liberal Party, and Clement Atlee of the Labour Party. Many from the Conservative Party stood in alliance with Lord Halifax, by stating that making negotiations with Hitler would prevent Britain from having another destructive war. Furthermore, they argued Mussolini was already offering a peace settlement to Britain, and was pleased to serve as the communication medium between Britain and Germany. This was the last chance to alleviate pressures. In addition, the current operation of Dunkirk would be jeopardized since the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) were completely surrounded by the more powerful German army. They held the perspective that the most feasible plan was to maximize the protection of British interests by following appeasement doctrine. On the other hand, Churchill argued that “Even if we were beaten, we should be no worse off than we should be if we were now to abandon the struggle...”¹³ His convincing argument about independence soon caused many to vacillate. Churchill’s words played a crucial role in convincing them using pathos, which made them resonate and empathize with their home country. What was worse than being enslaved by tyranny? Nothing. Lord Halifax later acknowledged that his negotiating position was no longer acceptable as Churchill’s pro-war assertion. Churchill was gaining the advantage.

¹²Ibid

¹³ “The May 1940 War Cabinet Crisis: Churchill’s darkest hour?” HistoryExtra, accessed January 2021, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/the-may-1940-war-cabinet-crisis-churchills-darkest-hour/>

Churchill's appeal successfully mobilized the nation. The most vital historical event that occurred as a result of his insistence on resistance was the evacuation of Dunkirk. Throughout the process of evacuation that started on May 26th and ended on June 4th, Britain mobilized any ships and vessels they could find along the British coast and sent them to rescue the desperate BEF. Even though the miracle of Dunkirk lasted only 10 days, with the effort of the British military and the courageous civilians, approximately 338,000 soldiers safely reached Britain, despite the fact that their heavy equipment was left behind.¹⁴ Those who had been saved included the British, the French, and the Belgians. No one could ever imagine that a nation like Britain could concentrate all the necessary resources to go on a rescue mission like this. It was so incredible that many who participated in the operation were civilians who volunteered their private boats to cross the English Channel. The Dunkirk evacuation, codenamed Operation Dynamo, proved to be effective in preserving the Allied forces for later counterattacks. If Churchill did not relentlessly press his viewpoint, expressing his opposition to Chamberlain and Halifax, the 338,000 troopers risked being captured and sent to prisoner of war camps.

Churchill communicated with the whole world on one day. On June 4th, he again gave a speech at the House of Commons as Operation Dynamo entered its final stage. To his fellow members of parliament who eagerly waited for his final address, Churchill began his famous speech by starting with the phrase "We shall...". He passionately exclaimed: "We shall not flag or fail. 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..."¹⁵ This was his final speech signaling the end of Britain's appeasement policy. At the same time, it was the first

¹⁴ "Dunkirk Evacuation," Britannica, last modified October 22, 2020, accessed January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Dunkirk-evacuation>

¹⁵ "We Shall Fight on the Beaches, 1940." America's National Churchill Museum, accessed January 2021, <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches.html>

speech he made to Parliament, to the British public, and to the entire world. It marked the end of one era, and the beginning of a new era of hope, linking Britain's struggle with the world's. The parallel structure of his speech "We Shall Go on to the End" symbolized Churchill's idea.

Through the power of communication between Churchill, the congressmen, the British public, and the international community, people came to a common understanding. With the inspiration of Churchill, more and more people recognized that the only pathway to real peace was to fight for themselves.

Conclusion

The power of Churchill's communication was bravery that went beyond the reach of visibility; it was the strength to challenge the impossible according to most of the world. Churchill's communication demonstrated a country's struggle to save itself from the edges of the precipitous cliff of being colonized and dominated by the Nazi's outrageous regime. As a result of this communication, Churchill's message showed the world that any hardships could be subjugated as long as perseverance exists. If a nearly-isolated island country has the capacity to defend itself, then other countries can also resist. Standing on the common defense of all anti-fascist and peace-loving nations, Britain was the first one to illustrate such hope, and there was hope within Churchill's lines. His words were like a lamp penetrating its light through the infinitive darkness and reminding all freedom-loving peoples that tenacity bonds nations, while indecisiveness when facing a humiliated peace against tyranny destroys nations. It was Churchill's exciting words that made Britain insist on fighting for five years. It was his doctrine of "never giving up" that boosted the entire national spirit amid thousands of bombs pouring down like raindrops on Britain's cities, villages, and fields. By understanding his emotional

words, people from around the globe recognized the truth, that peace is not what people should beg for, but instead is what they should fight for.

Guanqiao Huang is a junior at Pacific Academy in Irvine, California, drawing his passions from many personal interests in and outside of school. He enjoys learning history and social science as well as attending school activities and regional contests to broaden his horizons on global issues. He actively participates in his school's Model United Nations team that won the Award of Merit at the 2019 NHSMUN national contest. In addition, Guanqiao serves as the President of his school's Culture Club, developing his knowledge by learning the history and culture of different countries. As Vice-President of the Associated Student Body and the National Honor Society, Guanqiao has received high honors and top international student scholarship recognition for two years in a row.

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Appendix A:



This map shows the historical situation during the evacuation of Dunkirk. It was a very significant decision for Winston Churchill to make to rescue the BEFs in Dunkirk because they were being almost surrounded by the Nazi troops. Germany had marched toward inner France and Belgium. Operation Dynamo was an urgent mission.

“Dunkirk Evacuation” Britannica, Last modified October 22, 2020, accessed January 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Dunkirk-evacuation>