

His Finest Hour B1

Winston Churchill is remembered as the Prime Minister who helped Britain and its Allies win World War Two. But a new film, *Darkest Hour*, focuses on May and June 1940, just after Churchill became Prime Minister, when victory seemed practically impossible.



Winston Churchill outside 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's residence.

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Winston Churchill was a military officer from 1895 to 1900 and was then elected to Parliament. In World War One, he was a government minister, the First Lord of the Admiralty. In 1915, he ordered the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in Turkey, in which more than forty thousand Allied soldiers died. He left the government and served as an officer on the Western Front, in France, for several months before returning to government in 1917 as Minister for Munitions.

World War Two

On 10 May, 1940, the King asked Churchill to replace Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Chamberlain supported negotiating with Hitler, as Britain's military situation was terrible. Most of the British Army was fighting in Northern France. The British soldiers, with their French and Belgian allies, were being pushed back by the German Army to the French coast at Dunkirk. Soon, more than 400,000 soldiers were on the beaches at Dunkirk. If they were killed or captured by the German army, an invasion seemed inevitable.

Help

First Lord of the Admiralty (n) minister for the Navy



In 1940, Britain and its Allies faced defeat in Europe.

Send the English Language into Battle

Objectively the situation was desperate. The military commanders estimated they could evacuate 20-30,000 men. Not enough to defend Britain. Certainly not enough to continue the war. Winston Churchill didn't have a solution – he could only try to inspire the military and the civilians to fight. As Edward Murrow, an American journalist, put it, “He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.”

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Nathan

On 13 May, Churchill made his first speech to Parliament as Prime Minister. It was short and energetic. He honestly admitted that all he could offer was his hard work: “blood, toil, tears and sweat”. But he enthusiastically declaimed:

“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.”

Six days later, he repeated his message on BBC radio in a speech to the nation:

“Wage war until victory is won, and never surrender ourselves to servitude and shame, whatever the cost and the agony may be.”

Help


toil (n) hard work

in spite of all terror (exp) even if brings terror

however long and hard the road may be (exp) even if the road is long and hard



Churchill making his famous “V” for Victory sign in Parliament.



Millions of people listened to Churchill's speeches on the radio.

Doubts and Fears

Churchill's tone was sure, but *Darkest Hour* shows that in fact he had many doubts. He knew that he was only offered the post of Prime Minister because everyone thought it was impossible. In the film, he tells his wife, Clemmie, *"I'm getting the job only because the ship is sinking."*

She tries to encourage him as he goes off to make that first speech to Parliament. "Let them see your true qualities, your courage," she says.

"My poor judgement," he replies.

Churchill faced many other politicians in the Cabinet who believed the only solution was to negotiate with Hitler. In the days before the Dunkirk evacuation, it was difficult to oppose that opinion.

Fighting on the Beaches

In fact, the evacuation, between 26 May and 4 June, was a much bigger success than imagined. Ten times more soldiers were evacuated than the commanders hoped, helped by civilian volunteer boats. Maybe it was Churchill's words that encouraged them to participate, who knows?

When he addressed Parliament again after the evacuation, he frankly admitted, "A week ago... I feared it would be



Winston Churchill (Gary Oldman) and his wife Clemmie (Kristin Scott Thomas). He said that she made, "My life and any work I have done possible."

my hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history." And he pointed out that victory was still a long way away, "Wars are not won by evacuations."

But history remembers the conclusion of his speech:

"We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France... 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."

Fighting words for a leader ready to lead his country into battle.