

CHURCHILL'S WARTIME SPEECHES: 1940-1941

I. INTRODUCTION

This lesson is intended for use in a unit on World War II. It will focus on the time period from May 10, 1940 to June 21, 1941 – the time period beginning with Winston Churchill becoming Prime Minister of Great Britain, encompassing the time period when France fell and Britain fought the Germans essentially alone, and ending just before the German invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941.

The lesson will provide students the opportunity to learn about this time period, to read several of Winston Churchill's speeches from this time period, to discuss the context of these speeches, and to analyze their importance in contributing to the formation of a national British consensus to continue to fight the Germans.

II. GUIDING QUESTION

How did Winston Churchill, through his speeches, contribute to the formation of a collective British resolve to continue fighting during the critical time period when Britain was alone in fighting Germany?

III. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Prior to beginning this lesson, students should be able to:

- A. Identify the *policies* by which the British Government attempted to pursue peace in the 1930's, the *leaders* who advocated these policies, and the reasons for the failure of these policies.
- B. Provide a basic history of both Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, including their goals in ruling Germany from 1933.
- C. Evaluate the role of Winston Churchill, a British Member of Parliament who held no position in the Government, in warning that the combination of British policies and German policies would be disastrous for the continent.
- D. Explain the events which led to a British declaration of war on Germany in September 1939.
- E. Define the term *blitzkrieg*; explain its uses; and list in chronological order the nations that fell to the Nazi *blitzkrieg* in 1939-1940.
- F. Analyze the factors that contributed to the resignation of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the accession of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister on May 10, 1940.

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

- A. Display a fundamental knowledge and understanding of the following events of 1940-1941: the evacuation of Dunkirk, the fall of France, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, and the Nazi conquest of the Balkans.
- B. Discuss the significance of these events, including their impact on British public opinion about their role in the war.
- C. Analyze selected speeches delivered by Winston Churchill from this time period.

- D. Explain how the impact of the subject, word choice, and tone of the speeches on listeners in the United Kingdom led to stronger British resolve and willingness to continue to fight.
- E. Explain the reasons why Britain's refusal to accommodate Hitler, either by surrender or armistice, was significant in the war.

IV. BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR THE TEACHER

Evacuation of Dunkirk and Fall of France: By early May 1940, Germany had conquered or absorbed Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, and Norway. Tremendous resources and entire populations had fallen under Hitler's control, the *blitzkrieg* was both tactically successful and intimidating, and it was apparent that the Germans had the advantage in preparation, armor, and will to fight. When Germany invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France in early May, the British assumed that the war would take on the appearance of the last war, with France and Belgium bearing the brunt of the fighting, aided by the British army in Europe and the British navy at sea.

However, the battle for France went poorly for the Allies. In late May Churchill made the decision to attempt to rescue the British Army trapped on the coast of France by the Germans. In what is known as the "Miracle of Dunkirk," the bulk of the British army (more than 338,000 soldiers) was evacuated from Dunkirk in late May, many of them transported by British civilians who volunteered their watercraft and carried out operations in the midst of German aerial bombardments. Thus, the British army was saved to fight the Germans at a later date.

In June, stunned by the speed of the German advance, the French government agreed to an armistice with the Germans, opening the northern part of France to German occupation and setting up a collaborationist government in the south in the city of Vichy. The Vichy government, led by Henri Philippe Pétain, ruled the southern part of France and all French colonies. The fall of France was a terrible blow to the British, because it meant that there were no other countries fighting Germany in Europe, and most French supplies, ships, and resources became German assets (to prevent this, the British actually attacked and sank several French naval vessels in the Mediterranean). The Germans then turned toward Britain.

Battle of the Atlantic: During the summer months, the British, seeing the "writing on the wall," realized that they needed to acquire food and war goods as quickly as possible. These were shipped from North America across the Atlantic Ocean to Britain. German submarine commanders determined to sink as many of these supply ships as possible. The ongoing struggle of Allied ships to reach Britain in the face of German U-boat activities is known as the Battle of the Atlantic.

Battle of Britain and the Blitz: Although the Germans hoped to achieve an armistice with the British, they also had a plan for the invasion of Britain. This plan was known as Operation Sea Lion. Tactically, an invasion had to be preceded by the achievement of air superiority, because of the risk that an invasion force could be wiped out from the air as it

landed on the shore. So in August, the Germans began massive bombing raids on Britain which attempted to destroy the Royal Air Force (RAF). Although they suffered losses, the British were able to make adjustments to protect their aircraft, pilots, and industry; and the RAF continued to meet German bombing raids. This led the Germans to change tactics. They began randomly bombing Britain in an attempt to destroy the British people's will to resist. This culminated in the Blitz – a series of bombing raids on London in late 1940 – which resulted in significant loss of life and property. Eventually, the Germans realized that invasion was ill-advised (since they never wiped out the RAF), and they turned their attention elsewhere, although they continued to bomb Britain throughout the war.

Nazi Conquest of the Balkans: Hitler then proceeded with plans for an invasion of the Soviet Union, which commenced on June 22, 1941. His goals were to gain resources in Eastern Europe and to acquire land for the “living space” (*Lebensraum*) of his German people in the future. Prior to this invasion, Hitler decided to secure his right flank; so, in the spring of 1941, he ordered his troops to conquer the Balkan Peninsula. This they did, and by the summer, Hitler dominated all nations in Europe except for the few that were neutral (and generally compliant). These German acquisitions also brought resources to Germany, most notably the Ploesti oil fields of Romania.

Significance for Britain: The months from May 1940 to June 1941 were the crucial months for the British in that they fought Germany alone, enduring continual struggle and difficulty while the German Empire grew in size and strength. The constant bad news was demoralizing, German aerial bombardments disrupted life in Britain, and the feeling of being without allies in Europe was both lonely and frightening. Based on this, it would have been understandable – even logical – for the British to work out some arrangement with the Germans that would take them out of the war. However, they did not do this. Knowing that they could not turn back the tide of Nazi aggression alone, the British nevertheless refused to surrender. They did what they could, held on, and hoped that one day soon the Americans would enter the war and help them to win it.

Churchill's Speeches: It is argued that the leadership Winston Churchill was essential in bringing out this British spirit. Not only did he direct the government's war effort, but he also made a series of speeches to the British people throughout the war. His primary communication with them was through direct broadcasts over the radio, although he also gave speeches in the House of Commons and other locations. He used his broadcasts to inform them of current events, to frame these events in a larger context, to appeal to their pride as Britons by explaining to the people what it meant to be British, and to encourage them to live up to the higher ideals that would make victory possible. In essence, he emboldened the British to stand firm in face of the fact that their nation stood alone against Hitler. In this lesson, we will look at examples of these speeches.

Importance of Britain's Refusal to Surrender: It is important for students to understand that the simple fact that the British stayed in the war was terribly significant. One reason it is significant is that, during that year, the British were the only country fighting the Germans. Even though they were not fighting on the ground in Europe, their

resistance in the Battle of Britain and on the seas was important in that it required the Germans to expend resources to fight them. Had the British gone “belly up,” so to speak, the Germans would have been able to use that year to focus entirely on armament and would have been much stronger. A second reason is that all later western Allied operations, including Operations Torch, Husky, Avalanche, and Overlord (D-Day) were launched from Britain. Had the British surrendered to the Germans, it would have eliminated Britain as a base for these operations, which would most likely have been launched from the United States. The added distance and increased risk would have made it much more difficult to open a second front against Germany, and the war would most likely have lasted longer. The fact that Churchill, through his leadership, was able to lead and inspire his nation through these difficult months is therefore of supreme importance.

V. PREPARATION FOR TEACHING THIS LESSON

- A. Review content for this lesson.
- B. Divide students into groups.
- C. Download speeches and photocopy speeches for distribution to the class. For book version, these speeches can be found in Never Give In! The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches, selected by his grandson, Winston S. Churchill, Hyperion, New York, 2003.
- D. The [complete texts and audio excerpts](#) of selected Churchill speeches may also be found on the website of [The Churchill Centre](#) through the links below. The list of suggested speeches:
 - A. [“Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat”](#) May 13, 1940 pp. 203-206 (Churchill is Prime Minister – first speech to House of Commons)
 - B. [“Be Ye Men of Valour”](#) May 19, 1940 pp. 206-210 (first broadcast to nation as Prime Minister)
 - C. [“We Shall Fight on the Beaches”](#) (“Wars Are Not Won By Evacuations”) June 4, 1940 pp. 210-218 (Dunkirk Evacuation)
 - D. “The News From France Is Very Bad” June 17, 1940 pp. 218-219 (Imminent fall of France)
 - E. [“Their Finest Hour”](#) June 18, 1940 pp. 219-229 (after fall of France) For an analysis of this speech see [His Speeches: How Churchill Did It](#)
 - F. [“The Few”](#) August 20, 1940 pp. 237-248 (Battle of Britain) [British lesson plan](#) using an excerpt from this speech
 - G. “These Cruel, Wanton, Indiscriminate Bombings of London” September 11, 1940 pp. 250-253 (Battle of Britain)

- H. “We Can Take It!” October 8, 1940 pp. 255-256 (Battle of Britain)
 - I. [“Give Us The Tools”](#) February 9, 1941 pp. 259-262 (war situation and appeal to America regarding aid)
 - J. “Westward Look, the Land Is Bright” April 27, 1941 pp. 266-274 (war situation and appeal to America)
 - K. Optional: [“Never Give In”](#) October 29, 1941 pp. 306-307
 - L. Optional: [“End of the War in Europe”](#) May 8, 1945 pp. 387-390
 - M. Optional: [“This Is Your Victory”](#) May 8, 1945 pp. 390-391
- E. It is important that the teacher study the speeches before assigning them. Some are only three or four pages, while others are about ten pages. The teacher may want to assign two of the shorter speeches to one group to make the length of the overall assignment equal, or to assign speeches by general subject, or to edit speeches and assign shorter versions, depending on available class time and students’ general ability to handle the text.
- F. In the [Audio Archive](#), find speeches by **date**. Speeches often have several “titles.” Many selections are excerpts only.

VI. SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- A. **Review** content prior to May 10, 1940 as necessary.
- B. **Lecture** on material covering the period May 10, 1940 through June 21, 1941. Focus on events from the sections titled “Background Information for the Teacher.” Teacher should ask questions to gauge student understanding.
- C. Inform students of their group assignment. **Assign each group a speech**, which should be read as homework.
- D. The next day in class, students will meet with the other members of their group. Each group will **complete the handout (below)** on speech content during class, and then report the relevant information to the class in chronological order of speech dates.
- E. Following student reports on the speeches, the teacher will hold a **general class discussion** of the speeches and their impact. The teacher can use this time to clarify students’ statements, ask questions to further student thinking, or provide more background information about a particular speech.
 - The overall goal of the discussion is to encourage students to think about how this speech would have been received by the British people at the time.
 - What effect would this speech have? What is important about it?
 - What words or subjects stand out here?
 - How did it contribute to the war effort?
 - What do you personally find inspiring?

Students should be encouraged to support their answers with direct quotes and references to speeches.

VII. ASSESSMENT

- A. Student groups will **turn in the handout** for credit.
- B. Each student will **write a short essay** (1-2 pages) on his or her particular speech, identifying what components of the speech contributed to a different “feeling” in Britain.

Topic: As we discussed, it is argued that the rhetoric of Winston Churchill was essential in bringing out a resolute British spirit, committed to continuing the fight against Hitler in the face of great odds. In an essay, explain how Churchill strove to promote this “spirit” in the speech you read. You may comment on the subject, word choice, and tone and should use specific lines from the speech in your essay. (You are also free to use your favorite quotes and explain why you like them!).

- C. Content from this assignment could be included on the **unit test**.
- D. **Extra credit** can be offered to those students who memorize selections from speeches.

VIII. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Suggestions for further study:

- A. At the appropriate time in the unit, distribute for reading the optional speeches from the attached list. Discuss.
- B. Discuss how Churchill wrote his speeches, and show an example of the “psalm” format he used when delivering his speeches.
 - For print examples, see: *Never Give In*, pp. 220, 238
 - Online examples:
 - “Psalm” format: *Defense of Freedom and Peace* speech, 1938. See [Documents for Lesson Plans](#)
 - “Psalm” format: speech accepting the *Freedom of Edinburgh*, 1942
- C. Locate audio recordings of selected Churchill speeches, and use in class.
 - The website of The Churchill Centre has an [Audio Archive](#)
 - To purchase a CD of Churchill’s speeches, go to www.amazon.com and search: audio speeches Churchill – the best CD is called “Sir Winston Churchill: His Finest Hour”
- D. Download pictures of the following as desired :
 - Winston Churchill www.google.com/images search: Winston Churchill
 - Churchill images on [Churchill the Evidence](#) , Library of Scotland
 - Bomb damage in Britain from the Battle of Britain www.google.com/images search: bomb damage London
 - Posters from the war www.google.com/images search: Battle of Britain
- E. Play popular songs from the time period. Discuss topics of songs.

CDs can be purchased from

 - www.amazon.com
 - www.cwr.iwm.org.uk
- F. The following websites have other educational information and links that may be useful for teachers and students:

- [“Churchill and the Great Republic”](#), a Library of Congress Exhibit
- [Churchill: The Evidence](#) National Library of Scotland
 - [Churchill Centre](#)
 - [Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms](#) , London
 - [Churchill Archive Center](#) – Churchill College, Cambridge

IX. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Grade Levels: 9-12

Subject Area: any History class that covers World War II in its curriculum

Time Required: In Class – Three class periods (this can be modified)

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1. When was this speech delivered?

3. What specific wartime events does this speech address? Provide details.

4. Summarize the major points of this speech.

5. List your favorite lines from this speech. Briefly explain what they mean and why you like them.

