

## William Tyler - The Conquest of Europe

- [Judi] William, we'll give it one more minute.

- Okay, thanks.

- [Judi] Well, it's one minute past the hour, so welcome to everybody who joined us at this new time. Just to let you know, we will be reverting back to the 5:00 PM UK time on the 28th of March when the UK clocks change. So William, over to you, and thank you very much.

- Thank you very much indeed. Thank you, and welcome, everyone, and especially welcome if anyone's joining us for the first time. This afternoon, it's afternoon here in Britain. It's four o'clock, and it's a very nice, bright sunny day, and my wife and I just had a stroll on the beach and I'm feeling grand, and my talk for today is about the conquest of Europe, and we're talking about the period between 1939 and 1941. In the talk that I gave last week, we mentioned the first three land acquisitions made by the Nazis, namely in March 1938, Austria, the so-called Anschluss, which was a peaceful, peaceful takeover of Austria where the German army were welcomed with Nazi salutes and flowers and screams of joy, something that Austria was very careful to downplay in the post-war years. Secondly, there was Czechoslovakia, which was cravenly handed on a plate to Hitler by British and French, just British and French doing nothing at all at Munich in September 1938, the very height of the appeasement.

France and Britain believed that by appeasing Hitler and saying, "Well, there were Germans in the Sudetenland and, well, it seems reasonable that Germany should take them," and made no stance, and between October '38 and March '39, the Germans took the whole of Czechoslovakia. Poland. Poland was cynically divided by Germany and Russia at the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Molotov is the Russian foreign secretary, Ribbentrop, the German. They came to an understanding in August '39 of a pact, and the pact was to divide Poland. Russia would invade from the east, Germany from the west, and this they did on the 1st of September, 1940, and Britain and France had warned Germany that this would be a bridge too far, and two days later, on Sunday, the 3rd of September, 1939, first Britain and then a few hours later France declared war on Germany, and the Second World War in Europe begins now in earnest. Now, I'm going to take this story through then from September '39 to June '41, June '41 because then it's the breakup of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Germans launch Operation Barbarossa against Stalin's Soviet Union.

By the 27th of September, 1939, the Nazis had taken Warsaw. In truth, there was nothing that either France or Britain could do to stop that, although the French had invaded the Saar in September 1939 in an attempt to distract or draw troops from the Polish invasion into the fight against France, but shortly the French were so overwhelmed they simply withdrew and there was no aid offered to Poland. Then we enter a phase between September '39 and April '40, which the British and the French called the Phoney War and Churchill called the Twilight War and the Germans called the Sitting War. In this period, the British people, ordinary people, felt

quite detached from events in Europe, and as Laurence Thompson writes in his book "1940," "The British people began to show such a detachment from what was variously called the Bore, B-O-R-E, or Phoney War that the British government came seriously worried.

The prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, recorded in his diary that with the government intent only on the prosecution of the war, MPs and newspapers were left free to exploit and publicise every grievance. Mass-Observation, which was a national survey commissioned by the government to carry out a survey of the effectiveness of government publicity, reported so alarmingly that they were told, not entirely humorously, 'If we're going to find out things as unpleasant as this, we better not find anything at all.' Ministers dutifully made speeches and radio broadcasts, but lacking the common touch," key phrase, lacking the common touch, "lowered rather than raised the temperature." Well, you might deduce from all of this that the British government was not at the top of its game, and I think you would be absolutely correct. Thompson goes on to tell us that at Easter in, "In Easter 1940, after long, harsh winter, Easter came at the end of March with an unusually welcome promise of spring and better times ahead. The war, such as it was, seemed no reason for abandoning the traditional four-day Easter holiday and seaside resorts were crowded.

Blackpool landladies had one of their best Easters in their history. 200 would-be visitors were turned away from Weston-super-Mare in one hotel. Traffic on the Brighton London Road was almost that of a peacetime Easter. The East Coast was particularly popular. Many holidaymakers announced they'd come to look for the war and they were on the look for sounds of explosion or gunfire at sea." Well, this is what's going to happen at the end of lockdowns across Europe. Everyone will want to go on holiday, and they thought, "The war, it's not anything, really. It's not reaching us, but it would be fun if we could see a German warship off the beach at Clapton or Southend," or wherever they might be, this extraordinary period, and there was no leadership. That is the problem. Of course, it was only phoney in one sense because there was things going on. I've already mentioned the French invasion of the Saar, but in November, in November of 1939, the Russians attacked Finland. Now, Finland had been part of the Russian Empire. It had been an archduchy up to the revolution of 1917, and this war, the Russian invasion of Finland, we call the Winter War. Britain and France debated sending troops in support of the Finns against the Russians, and so concerned was Germany, that they themselves invaded Denmark and Norway.

Now, the British and French troops that had been gathering, slowly, one has to say, for a possible help to the Finns were now diverted to Norway. Denmark fell immediately, but they diverted to Norway. So let's unpack this story of Scandinavia a little more. Now, the Russians saw an opportunity to regain Finland. They'd only lost it, just to repeat myself, in 1917, and they thought that no one would interfere. They didn't think the Germans would interfere, after all, they had the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and they didn't think that France and Britain were in any position to interfere, and so they went in. If you want a modern example, this is like Putin going into the Crimea, judging that the West would not intervene, which, of course, it didn't. We were in one sense appeasing Putin, and here, Stalin had judged the situation correctly. No one would

interfere. What he had not calculated was the Finns gave stubborn resistance, an incredible resistance for a small nation under Marshal Mannerheim. Antony Beevor in his book on the Second World War, a magisterial, big tome, incidentally, all the books I've mentioned are on my blog if you want to look up some of the names of the books in more detail, and he writes this, says Antony Beevor, "The negotiations in Moscow between Finland and Russia continued until the 13th November without a final agreement.

Stalin, convinced that the Finns lacked international support and the will to fight, had decided to invade. The Finns turned to Germany for help and the Nazis refused any support and advised them to concede." Well, because of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The losses were enormous on both sides. This was a dreadful war. The Russians lost 85,000 dead and missing, 248,000 wounded and sick, but the Russians would just draw upon millions of the peasant class, as they always had done. The Finns lost 25,000 killed and unknown numbers of wounded. Finally, on the 13th of March, 1940, the Finns and the Russians signed a peace treaty which was entirely in Russia's favour, and Finland is to suffer again before the end of the war with a German invasion, and the only good part for Finland is it managed to escape the clutches of Soviet Russia after the end of the war in '45. That's another story for another time. I said that the Germans had attacked Denmark and Norway.

The attack on Denmark was quick and total. On the 9th of April, 1940, the Germans landed in Copenhagen before Denmark shore batteries could even open fire, and the government surrendered in the face of overwhelming odds to save lives, but the king stayed throughout the course of the war. That same day, the 9th of April, 1940, the Germans attacked Norway. Norway held out longer despite having a Nazi traitor in their midst, Quisling. The king and the royal family fled ever northwards. The British and French arrive but to no avail. The Allied support fails. In the end, the king and the royal family, on a British warship, seek wartime exile here in Britain. It was an example of how unprepared the British Army was for a modern war. This is a rather depressing statement by Laurence Thompson in terms of what was going on, and he writes this. If I get the right page. I will read it to you. "Preparations were made for mine laying, and five battalions of British territorial troops were put under orders.

One of these, the king's own Yorkshire light infantry, understood it was going for garrison duties to Bergen in Norway, and though lacking artillery, armour, or transport, had its full compliment of office equipment, quartermasters' ledgers and peacetime accounting forms." Oh my God. Unprepared? Unprepared indeed. The whole Norway expedition was a disaster, and one of those who must bear some responsibility is Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, and he of course had the cloud hanging over him of the failure at Gallipoli in the First World War. He was very fortunate, very fortunate that the public didn't blame him, although his rival for any possible bid for the premiership, Halifax, did blame him, and we read this about Halifax, the foreign secretary's view of Churchill's responsibility for the failure of the Norwegian campaign. In a postmortem entry in his diary for the 3rd of May, Lord Halifax recorded, quote, "Great efforts have been made to represent the Norwegian business as the result of timid colleagues, restraining the bold, courageous and dashing Winston.

As a matter of fact, the exact opposite would be at least as near the truth, and on Winston certainly rests the main responsibility for the abandonment of the naval attack on the Norwegian town of Trondheim. I don't blame him, for he had reached his opinion in concurrence with the chiefs of staff, and owing to necessities, the orders for the change were given in the middle of the night after the prime minister had been consulted by telephone and before the cabinet could be informed, but if some measure of blame for the Norwegian fiasco does rest on Churchill, it certainly does not rest on him alone." Well, the public did not see it as resting on him. They saw the problem as resting on the ineffectiveness of Neville Chamberlain's leadership of the country, of the government. The blame falls on Chamberlain. The evacuation of British troops from Norway began on the 26th of April, 1940, and unexplainably, Britain didn't even tell their ally France that we were withdrawing. Why? Because Chamberlain feared that France would interpret it as Britain was weak and half-hearted in pursuance of the war.

Well, that mightn't be a bad conclusion in the April of 1940. Public opinion now turned right against Chamberlain and the government, and the government were doing, of course it wasn't published at the time, but were doing surveys of public opinion, and public opinion swung in favour of the government to against the government, like, 2/3 in favour to 2/3 against in a matter of days. Leo Amery, a Conservative member of parliament, on the day that the British troops evacuated Norway, said to Sir Samuel Hoare, who was Secretary of State for the Air, "This government must go," and the government was a Conservative government. There was a debate which lasted two days on the fiasco, the debacle in Norway, and Amery was the one who put the knife in, put the knife into his own leader, his own prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, from the government benches in the House of Commons, and he did so by quoting the words that Oliver Cromwell had used 300 years or so before in the House of Commons, and Cromwell has said, "You have sat too long for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go."

It was disastrous, disastrous for Chamberlain. Chamberlain had shown himself a man who was ill-suited for the task of a wartime leader, and the debate in the House of Commons descended into what I think one has to describe as chaos. It just got really rather heated. Martin Gilbert, in his huge biography, one-volume biography of Churchill, writes, "Chamberlain and the Conservatives could count on a majority of more than 200 in the House of Commons. That night, they secured a majority of only 81. It was a hollow victory. As the vote was announced, many members, in a hostile demonstration against the prime minister, began to sing 'Rule, Britannia!' But even this unprecedented demonstration was drowned in cries of 'go, go, go.'" The words that Leo Amery had quoted of Oliver Cromwell's, and Chamberlain left the chamber of the House of Commons with that one word echoing in his ears, "go." In fact, the Tory Chief Whip, man called Margesson, felt that Chamberlain might actually be physically attacked as he left. This is a crisis. On the afternoon of the 9th of May, Chamberlain summoned the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, and Churchill, who was at the time, of course, First Lord of the Admiralty, to number 10. These were the only two candidates to succeed him. There was no one else. The Tories had won.

The Conservatives had won the election before, the general election before the war, and unlike America, we don't hold general elections in time of war, and even if there is to be a national government, which is now the cry to bring the other political parties into government, it has to be led by the party that won the general election. So it has to be a Conservative, and the only two Conservatives are the foreign secretary and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Halifax, the foreign secretary, has the support of king and queen and of the, I suppose you might describe as the upper ranks of the Conservative Party. Churchill has the support of some in the Conservative Party, and more importantly, he has support in the Labour Party, but where his support really lies is in the country itself, is in the country itself. At the meeting called by Chamberlain on the 9th of May, Halifax really, I think the phrase, modern phrase would be wimped out. His excuse was that as a member of the House of Lords, it will be very difficult for him to lead the country, but in truth, Halifax knew he wasn't up to it, and I suppose that in itself is to his credit, really, because he was still thinking and was going on to think for another two to three weeks that we should, via Mussolini, try and do a deal with Hitler, and so Churchill now is the heir elect.

The following day, the 10th of May, incidentally, if you read Churchill's own account of this in his history of the Second World War, he gets the meeting confused. He puts the meeting onto the 10th. The decision really had been made on the 9th, and you'll see that mistake copied by lots and lots of historians. If in doubt, always refer to Sir Martin Gilbert. He's always right, and Churchill, well, anything Churchill writes is beautifully written. Sometimes its connection with the absolute truth is less than perfect, shall we say. He adjusts things. Okay, he's entitled to adjust things, but the crucial meeting was the 9th of May. Then comes the 10th of May, and now there's a real crisis because the message comes through in the early hours of the morning that the Wehrmacht has invaded the Netherlands and Belgium and the Battle of France is about to begin. There's chaos in London. The king is extremely annoyed that he's been woken up in the early hours of the morning to take a direct phone call from the Queen of the Netherlands. He said, "Well, why can't she wait till nine o'clock?"

However, Churchill had been up since six. Chamberlain now believed that he shouldn't go, that the crisis was too great. You can't go in the middle of the crisis. Chamberlain believed he should continue in office as prime minister, and Martin Gilbert writes this, "At eight o'clock that morning, when the war cabinet met at Downing Street, Chamberlain was in the chair as usual. When Sir Samuel Hoare went to see him an hour later, he found that Chamberlain's inclination was, quote, 'to withhold his resignation until the French battle was finished.' Slowly during the morning, Conservative MPs learnt that Chamberlain was staying on. Many of them were angry, some of them outraged. A senior Conservative, Lord Salisbury, on being asked his opinion, told the discontented members, as one of them noted, 'We must maintain our point of view, namely Winston must be made prime minister during the course of this day.' A third cabinet meeting was held at number 10 Downing Street at four o'clock on the 10th of May, and this is the critical moment. I mean, they've got all of this going on in Europe, and at the same time, we've got this major political crisis here.

They're meeting in cabinet and there's a knock on the door. "Come in," and a messenger comes in with a note for Chamberlain. Chamberlain took the note, read it, said nothing, and let the conversation in cabinet continue. Then he interrupted the session. He'd obviously been gathering his thoughts. He interrupted. He had received, he said, from Bournemouth the Labour Party's answer to his two questions the previous afternoon. The Labour Party had a party political conference on the south coast at Bournemouth, and Chamberlain had asked them who they were prepared to serve as prime minister in a national government. Martin Gilbert writes, "Chamberlain now received, he said, from Bournemouth the Labour Party's answer to his two questions of the previous afternoon. Their message was emphatic. No members of the Labour Party were prepared to serve under the present prime minister. The Labour leaders were prepared, however, to serve under a new prime minister," and as I said, it will be a Conservative. "With this brief but stark communication, Chamberlain's premiership was over. Within an hour, he was at Buckingham Palace tendering his resignation to the king.

That night, the king wrote in his diary, 'I asked Chamberlain his advice and he told me Winston was the man to send for.' In the early evening of the 10th of May, Churchill went to Buckingham Palace. The king said, with a smile, 'I suppose you don't know why I've sent for you.' Churchill, acting up, said, 'I simply can't imagine.' The king laughed and said to Churchill, 'I want to ask you to form a government.'" This is about six o'clock in the evening. So it's happened in the middle of this terrible crisis in Europe, the invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium and the battle for France. We've changed prime minister, and we've changed from a Conservative government to a national government or coalition government, and Churchill had already himself sent messages to Attlee saying these were the men of the Labour front bench that Churchill wanted in his government. Three days later, the 13th of May, 1940, Churchill is now prime minister, and he makes this important speech. He summoned all of the ministers, Tory, Labour, Liberal, all his ministers, not just cabinet ministers, all of them, about two dozen, to Admiralty House. He's still operating from Admiralty House, not number 10.

He summoned them all, and he said this to them, "I had nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." A few hours later, he appeared in the House of Commons, and he began his speech there. "I have nothing to offer but blood toil, tears and sweat. You ask, 'What is our policy?' I will 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 dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, 'What is our aim?' I can answer in one word: 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. Let that be realised. No survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge impulse of the ages that mankind will move forward towards its goal, but I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say come then.

Let us go forward together with our united strength." That's the first of many speeches made in the House of Commons, repeated on the radio, speeches on the radio, comments and

speeches made as he goes around the country. Three days after that speech, the Germans broke through the French defences of the Maginot Line, and two days after that, the French prime minister, Reynaud, telegraphed Churchill to say, "We've lost the battle." The battle for France is over almost before it's begun. The British expeditionary force in France was now at risk, and most importantly, so were the Spitfire squadrons that Churchill had sent. There's a terrible story of one Spitfire pilot, British, taking off from an airfield in the south of France in order to attack German bombers, and as he returned to his airfield, discovered that it was no longer in French hands but in German. The French criticise Churchill to this day for withdrawing the Spitfire squadrons, but had he not done so, Britain would not have had enough for the Battle of Britain, and had we lost the Battle of Britain, France might not have been liberated for a long, long time after 1944.

France is to fall, compromised and divided from within. Marshal Petain, the hero of the First World War, is to form Nazi puppet state at Vichy, and the Germans are to rule the rest of France directly. It is a humiliation for France, and had it not been for de Gaulle, the only French general to actually advance against the German invasion forces and a junior minister in the French government making his way from Britain and keeping the flame of French democracy alive, who knows what might have happened, but there's nothing for it. On the 24th of May, British, and indeed Allied troops, many French, begin the evacuation from Dunkirk, which continues until the 4th of June. Dunkirk. Dunkirk has entered British DNA. It's entered legend rather than fact. The story of the little ships, sometimes you might wonder whether that story is true or not. My wife's mother and aunt, her father was in the RAF and wasn't there, lived in Ramsgate, and they told us the story, that as those little ships came back with the survivors from Dunkirk, the women of Ramsgate turned up in the harbour with drinks and with clothes, because many of the men had lost their clothes, with blankets and just a friendly smile.

Everyone was in it together, and we're in it together really because of Churchill. Here is one firsthand account of Dunkirk that I will share with you. This is by a British private called Albert, Albert Dance. "When I arrived on the beach at Dunkirk, the order came along that there wouldn't be any more boats. Chaps were just sitting there waiting to be picked up by the Germans. I headed northeast towards De Panne. When I got there, I noticed a wooden jetty running out into the sea. It had been hit by a couple of shells, but it went out quite a way. I clambered onto it and got out to the end and fell asleep. When I woke, it was dark, and a boat was banging onto the jetty. I heard English voices, and I looked up and saw a little sailing yacht with two men aboard. One of them said, 'There's no one here. We've got to get back,' so I shouted out. I leapt down onto the yacht and I hit my head on the deck. I still had my steel helmet on and I must've banged myself in the back of my head and it knocked myself right out.

The next thing I remember was someone saying, 'Come on, chum, have a cuppa tea.' I had a mouthful of tea, and then he said, 'Do you want to see the white Cliffs of Dover?' And there they were, coming up." It was an incredible event, and although the honours should go to the Royal Navy for the event, the little ships did go, and the little ships entered the mythology that we were in it together. As a small child on holiday in the West Country in Torquay, we always went out on

a little fishing boat for a trip around the bay, and we always went on a boat called the Skylark. Why? Because the Skylark had been at Dunkirk, and so we always went on the Skylark. So the troops are out of Europe. France has fallen. Britain and its empire stands alone to face the real possibility of invasion and defeat, and on the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo in 1940, the 18th of June, Churchill speaks in the House of Commons, and he says, "The Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our empire.

The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. 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," a favourite phrase of Churchill's, "but if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States," this is Churchill making the bid for America to join the war because Churchill has made the judgement that we cannot win the war. America has to be brought in it by hook or by crook. "But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its commonwealth lasts for 1,000 years, men will still say this was their finest hour." Somehow, because of Churchill, Britain pulled together and pulled through that dreadful year of June 1940 to June 1941. Now, now, let's just pause there.

Not everyone is tremendously patriotic. The amount of thefts during the Blitz go up enormously, people rifling through burning homes, the black market. When I was a child, we never filled up with petrol in the local garage, and I remember saying, I suppose I was about eight, saying to my dad, "Why don't we fill up there? Why do we drive so far to fill up with petrol?" "Oh," said Dad. "They were involved in the black market in the War." When I was head of adult education for Warwickshire County here in Britain back in the 1980s, 1970s, actually, 1970s, a colleague of mine was going to run a course outside Stratford-on-Avon in a little village. So he called all the people together in the village hall to discuss what they might like, and he had a number of suggestions and people responded. He said, "Would you keep this?" And everyone said, "Yes, we'll do this, we'll do that," and then he suggested, because he was a historian, we'll do the Home Front in the Second World, and silence, and he said, "Well, look, someone say something," and he asked a friend afterwards, "Why did no one speak?" And they said, "Well, didn't you know? This village was the centre of the black market for Birmingham during the War, and it was run by the local doctor, and so no, they won't talk about it."

Not everyone, but enough. The vast majority of people trusted Churchill and stood by him. This year, 1940 to 1941, June to June, is the defining moment in Churchill's life and a defining moment for the British people. Some say that the problem with Britain in 2021 is we haven't quite got over 1940 to '41, and there's more than a grain of truth in there. Many Americans, including President Roosevelt himself, looked on in horror. Roosevelt knew that he could not declare war in support of Britain. The American people wouldn't take it, but he did send, and without him sending it under Lend-Lease, war materiel, let alone food in Atlantic convoys, Britain could not have survived. Many Canadians, and I know there are Canadians listening tonight,



many Canadians, mothers and wives, were in a much different position than Americans. They thought of their sons and their husbands so many miles away fighting what to them might have appeared a lost cause in 1940. Some American young men came too. Young men came to fight, and some from Europe. The Poles in particular came, and the Battle of Britain was not fought by Britons alone but by many people who believed that this was, well, possibly the final stand of democracy across the globe.

There's one story of a Dutchman who's given by the American historian, Lynne Olson, in this fantastic book, "Last Hope Island," and Lynne Olson quotes this. "For a young Dutch law student, hope took the shape of two Spitfires flashing over a beach near the Hague early in the war." So this is 1940, '41. "He stared up in wonder at the planes, their RAF markings bright in the sun. He later wrote, 'Occupation had descended upon us with such crushing finality that England, like freedom itself, had become a mere concept. To believe in it as something real, a chunk of land where free people bucked the Nazi tide, required a concrete manifestation like a sign from God. England exists.'" And Lynne Olson writes, "Less than a year later, he would escape to Britain, and he became an RAF pilot himself." We were a beacon in Britain for the rest of Europe. Churchill was a beacon, and across occupied Europe, people turned their radios on, illegally under Nazi regulations, to hear the BBC and give hope that while England lived, democracy lived and freedom lived. Dunkirk over, we face the Battle of Britain.

Had we lost command of the skies, then the Germans would've been free to invade across the channel. There's that. If you're a naval person, there's arguments that the Navy could have held the Germans back without air support. That's not borne out, either by the Norwegian campaign, where we lost capital ships to German bombs, or indeed worse which is to come with the sinking of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse in the Far East by Japanese bombers alone, even though the admiral in charge of the detachment felt that it was easy. They could simply shoot the Japanese aircraft out of the sky. They couldn't. I take the older view that had we lost the Battle of Britain, then invasion would've been imminent and undoubtedly successful. When I walk along the coast here in Sussex, just behind me, there's still evidence of pillboxes where we were going to fire on the beaches as the Germans landed, but my God, even Churchill realised that the home guard could not hold the beaches. All they were doing and all they were required to do was to die in delaying the German advance long enough for the army to reconfigure behind the beaches, and we had various lines of defence that were drawn up.

We also had lines drawn up of where the civilian population was to go to. In the case of Essex and other places Germans may have landed, the people of Essex were to walk or drive or however they could to Oxfordshire, and those plans dated back to the Armada of 1588, were drawn up by Cecil. They were the same plans in 1940. The Battle of Britain was fought over the skies here, over these skies, as I look out on my window, fought by Britons, Canadians, and then on Sunday the 15th of September, 1940, the Luftwaffe launched its largest and most concerted attack against London in the hope of drawing the RAF into the battle and annihilating the RAF, thus giving them command of the skies. It was the climax of the Battle of Britain, and today we celebrate in Britain the 15th of September as Battle of Britain Day, and Fighter

Command had to throw everything into the battle. Churchill himself realised through British intelligence that this was going to be the Germans' big thrust, and so Churchill travelled to the headquarters of the 11th Fighter Group, which was responsible for the air cover for London on the southeast, and he knew that almost all the German bombers based in France would fly against London on that day, and so he turns up to look and watch, and maybe this is the moment of defeat. He went down 50 feet into the bunker of the headquarters of the 11th Fighter Group, and there is Air Vice Marshal Keith Park in charge of the defences.

There's a giant board in the middle, and you've all seen pictures of that with the women pushing, pushing, like poker, as it were, pushing the various aircraft around, and then there's a big board on the wall with all of fighter groups, 25 squadrons, and a series of lights recording the state of each unit. Those who were standing by, those who were in the sky, those who'd sighted the enemy, and finally at the top, a red light shows those who were engaged in action against Luftwaffe. Light after light turned red as Churchill stood in that room. Park had thrown everything into the air, and Churchill couldn't contain himself any longer, and he asked Park, "How many more aircraft have you got?" To which Park replied, "I'm putting in my last." In a film adaptation, the conversation goes like this. Churchill says, "When are you going to send the reserves up?" And Park replies, "There are no reserves, Prime Minister," and there weren't. For nearly an hour, there were no other British aircraft available.

50 minutes on which the future of Britain and the world rested. Fortunately, the Germans did not, well, they didn't know that, of course, and they didn't take advantage of that, and after 50 minutes, some of the reserve squadrons or the squadrons which were getting ready, had flown once, come back and were getting ready to go up again, went up. The RAF lost 28 aircraft in that day, but they brought down 56 of Luftwaffe, a ratio of kill of 2:1. It was a success, and we don't face it again, but now we face the Blitz, the cities being targeted, the cities being targeted, but by the 22nd of June, '41, we have an ally. As the Germans launch Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, Russia becomes our ally, and Churchill makes the famous quip. "If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons." In other words, he prepared to sup with a long spoon with Stalin. Churchill was never under any misapprehension about the Soviet Union. In fact, in 1945, he was only restrained by his own senior military staff and by the Americans from trying to launch an immediate war against Russia now that Germany had been defeated. He knew that Russia was an enemy as much as Germany.

As it happens, we never had to fight the Russians, but we did have the Cold War. As I come to an end, I wondered how to end it, and I thought, well, I'll end with a story about Churchill because this is Churchill's war, June '40 to June '41. This is the year in which all Churchill's previous failings as a politician, an individual suddenly get transformed by some sort of British fairy godmother into great talents. His verboseness, his emotionality all get, with a wave of the wand, something that was so necessary. His willingness to make decisions, difficult decisions, and not worry if they were wrong is a wave of the wand. Churchill always believed if you fail and fail and fail, you still try again. You still go on. As he said in the speech, "you go on

to the end." In 1941, as Chancellor of the University of Bristol in the southwest, my home city, so this is a story that resonates with me, he was due to come down to the university for a degree-giving ceremony, and I pick up the story in a book which is by an American historian, only recently published here in paperback, last week, in fact, "The Splendid and the Vile" by Erik Larson. Again, it's on my book list on the blog. If you've read it, splendid, and you can recommend it to others. If you haven't, you might care to read it, and it says this.

This is Churchill on his way. "The train stopped for the night on a siding outside the city." They always did that for safety's sake. "A prudent measure given the recent intensification of German air raids and the fact that the night was clear, the moon at its fullest, and indeed, starting at 10:00 PM, 150 German bombers, guided both by navigation beams and by moonlight reckoning, began attacking Bristol, first with incendiaries, then with high explosives, in one of the most severe raids Bristol had suffered thus far. The raid subsequently dubbed the Good Friday Raid lasted six hours during which the bombers dropped nearly 200 tonnes of high explosives and 37,000 incendiary bombs, killing 180 civilians and wounding another 382. A single bomb killed 10 rescue workers. It blew three of the victims onto the adjacent tarmac road where they were partially absorbed into its suddenly molten surface. They were later discovered by an unlucky ambulance driver who had the unenviable task of prying their bodies loose."

I know two stories, one I was told, that a long way from Bristol at a small little town called Malmesbury in Wiltshire, the soldiers were in the pub, and suddenly the sergeant major comes in and says to the lads, "Come out and see this," and the lads come out, they're very young, and he points in the direction of Bristol, and one of the lads said, "Well, where are those fireworks?" And the sergeant major said, "They're not fireworks, lad. That's Bristol burning." You could see Bristol burning right across South Wales. You could see it burning from Exmoor. My grandfather, who was beyond military age, was working in his factory in part of Bristol, and a German bomber came over, and he ran, God knows how because he was in his sixties, he ran, oh, a good three miles, blowing his whistle the whole way, telling people the bombers were there.

A neighbour of ours always had a bad back, really bad, and the story is that she was pregnant and been thrown from the top of a double-decker bus and landed on her back, lost the baby, and for the rest of her life, suffered badly, and at the time, Bristolians blamed London for having the barrage balloons, because there weren't any barrage balloons in Bristol worth the name, but the truth is that they didn't know there was going to be an attack on Bristol like this, and Larson continues, "Aboard the train, Churchill and his party heard the distant guns and detonations. Ismay wrote, 'It was clear that Bristol was getting it hot.' The next morning, a Saturday, the train pulled into the Bristol station as fires still burned and smoke bloomed from demolished buildings. At least 100 bombs had failed to explode either because of malfunction by design, thereby hampering rescue crews and fire squads and making Churchill's choice of route through the city a risky and problematic manner." Mary, Churchill's daughter, was with him, and Mary recalled later that there was wreckage strewn everywhere. She said she saw men and women heading off to their jobs as on any other day but clearly worn out by the night's raid. "Rather strained, pale faces, weary, silent," she wrote.

Churchill went to the city's grand hotel at the bottom of the hill from the university where he was due, and he was going to have breakfast and recover, and he asked if he could have a bath, not realising that the hotel had no hot water and hadn't for days, and as he prepared with his entourage to have a discussion over breakfast, a whole phalanx of people was seen going up the stairs carrying hot water, even in a watering can to put into the prime minister's bath. Larson takes up the story. "Churchill's visit had been unannounced. As he drew through Bristol streets, people turned to watch. First came recognition, Mary saw, then surprise, then delight. Mary rode in the same car as Harriman." Harriman was Roosevelt's special representative in Europe. Later he was to marry the divorced wife of Randolph Churchill, Churchill's son. "Mary rode in the same car as Harriman. She liked him. 'He has the root of the matter in him,' she wrote. 'He feels and works for us so much.' The caravan moved past residents who stood in front of their newly ruined houses, examining the remains and retrieving belongings.

Upon seeing Churchill, they came running to his car. Mary wrote, 'It was unbelievably moving.'" Ismay gives the story that as the open-top car went through Bristol's streets, one woman who was sitting on her doorstep and her house had gone and she's crying her eyes out. When the car is coming close, she looks up. She sees it's Churchill, and she takes the handkerchief from her eyes, and she waves it at Churchill, and she shouts, "Good old Winnie." Churchill toured the worst hit areas of Bristol on foot. "When engulfed by a crowd of men and women," says Larson, "Churchill took off his bowler hat and put it on top of his walking stick then held it aloft so those outside the immediate crush could see it and know he was there. 'Stand back then,' Harriman heard Churchill say. 'Let the others see.'" Churchill fixed people straight. He always looked people straight in the eyes, something he did.

He had this facility of making contact with people, and it was noted that he made contact with women, and Harriman said to Ismay, as Churchill was wandering around talking to people, Harriman said, "The prime minister seems popular with middle-aged women." Churchill heard the remark. He whirled round and said, "What did you say?! Not only with middle-aged women, with the young ones too!" said Churchill. That's very much Churchill, and then he goes on the train at Temple Meads Station in Bristol to go back to London, and as he does so, he stands at the window of the train, and he waves to the crowd outside as the train departed, and he kept waving until he could see people no more, and he sat down in an armchair. The train was specially adapted. He sat in an armchair, and he picked up the Bristol evening post, and he puts it in front of his face, and Ismay saw him do that. "What's the matter?" And then heard him behind the paper sobbing, not crying, sobbing says Ismay, and Ismay went over to him and said, "Sir, what ever is the matter?" And Churchill said, "They have such confidence in me. It is a grave responsibility." I can't imagine another leader like that, and all that we can do is thank God we had Churchill.

If you're British or you'd fled here to Britain and are Jewish, without Churchill, you would not be here in all likelihood. If like me, you're not Jewish, then my father might well have been killed in action because he was stationed in Britain before he was sent to India at the end of the war for

the invasion of Japan, and we owe Churchill so much in this year. I don't mind the criticisms of Churchill before the war or after the war. It doesn't matter. Churchill was ordinary, like all of us. He could be so annoying, bombastic, difficult, all the things that all of us are, but in that year of June to June, '40 to '41, he was all that stood between us, all of us, and the horror of the blackness and darkness of Nazism. Thank you all for listening. Thank you.

- [Judi] Thank you, William. Do you have time to take a look at some questions?

Q&A and Comments:

- Yes. Let me have a look. Thank you then, and people put nice comments on, so I missed those. Oh, now, that's very good.

Brian Conway has put up, I think it, no, no. Is it Brian? Think so. He says there was a propaganda film on the RAF called "The Lion Has Wings." The quip at the time was, "but the bear has fins."

Oh, I didn't know that. That's splendid. Thank you ever so much for that.

"There were quite a number of young Swedish men who went to Finland to fight on the side of the Finns. There were also many Swedish-speaking Finns, as Sweden had controlled Finland for almost 800 years."

Yes, indeed, that's true. In fact, Finland is one of the strangest of European countries with no native aristocracy. Its aristocracy was Finnish. Rather like the Slovaks only had a Hungarian aristocracy and not a Slovak, so did the Finns. Now, Sweden was not invaded because Sweden had done a deal with Germany, and Germany wanted Swedish iron ore and Swedish steel. I learned as an adult educator that was involved in a European project back in the '80s and '90s, when in Scandinavia, to be very careful to avoid talking about the war because you were likely to set up an argument and a division leaving the Swedes on one side and the rest of the Scandinavians on the other. I learned that very soon, but you're absolutely right. There were Swedes that went to fight for the Finns. Yes. Oh, that's a fantastic thing.

This is from Joan. "Only two words have made it from Norwegian into the English language. One is Quisling, traitor, and the other is skiing."

Oh, is that fantastic? Quisling and skiing. I didn't know that. Oh, and somebody's added "and also fjord."

Q: "Although Britain did nothing when Germany took over Czechoslovakia in attitudes of appeasement, isn't it true that Britain did not have enough weapons?"

A: Yes, yes, all of that is true. Yes, it is. We didn't, but we didn't have to go along with it. We

know that at the Rhineland, which I spoke about last week, if Britain and France had made a stand there, they could have stopped Germany. Then we made a stand over Poland, but there was no way that we could help Poland either.

It was a question of saying, "Who do we stand with? Who are our friends that we won't abandon?" At least morally abandon, I think is the answer.

Somebody said, oh, there's an argument, the greatest Briton between Churchill and Shakespeare.

Somebody's about Beaverbrook. Well, Beaverbrook is an example of the people that Churchill gathered around him, lots of them whom his wife, Clemmy, did not approve of, but he always selected people that had something very positive to offer, but he tended to go for, he tended to be drawn to, how shall I put it, to wheeler-dealers, really, and Clemmy used to have to watch him on this.

Q: "To what extent did Churchill write his own speeches?"

A: As far as we know, 100%.

Somebody's put, "Quite senseless, and that is war."

Well, we would all want to avoid war, but at the point where you face with somebody like Hitler, it doesn't become senseless. It becomes necessity. There are plenty of wars in history which are senseless. The war against Nazism is not, in my view, one of those. You can argue about World War I, that's different, but I think World War II is a very clear answer that we had to fight Hitler. The alternative, you see, if Britain had fallen in 1940 and the Germans had occupied Britain or had put up a Quisling government under the Duke of Windsor and Halifax, or when Halifax, perhaps not Halifax, perhaps Mosley, had we been conquered, it would've been impossible for the Americans to come to our aid. It was difficult enough to launch D-Day across this small amount of water in the channel. To have launched an attack from America or Canada, even via Greenland, onto Britain would've been I think beyond what we were capable of at the time, and had we not, had we fallen and the Americans remained in isolation, which they would've done, then there would've been no need for them to have entered the war against Germany but merely against Japan. Then the Germans would've developed the bomb. It doesn't bear thinking about, no. Yes, war is senseless, but not this one.

Q: Oh, what happened to Chamberlain?

A: No, he remained a member of parliament, and Churchill had him in the government. The cabinet consisted of five men, Churchill, Halifax, Attlee, and another Labour minister, and Chamberlain. Chamberlain actually died in November 1940 of cancer. Now, how fit Chamberlain was at the beginning of 1940 I think is an open question. Chamberlain, whole of his family were

great public servants. It was just that the conditions of this war were beyond anything that he could cope with. I think I'll leave it at that.

Q: What did I think of the film "Dunkirk"?

A: I was a bit bored by it, really. I didn't think it was very good. I don't like these films, and the one about Churchill was absolutely horrendous. It won Oscars and things. It was awful. It was terrible. I mean, that's an opinion and a half. Yes, every year, not 2020, of course, at least six little ships that took part in the Dunkirk evacuation are to be seen and visited at the annual Traditional Boat Festival at Henley. Pro-Nazi support in Britain, a lot before the war, a lot in the upper echelons of British society, if not pro-Nazi, pro-German. The king and queen, Halifax are pro-German. The Duke of Windsor and that woman whose name we dare not speak were pro-Nazi. Mosley, of course, is pro-Nazi, but they remained a small group. When war came, there's very few of them, and people like Mosley are put in prison. There was really very little. Post-war, that's a more complicated story about the rise of the far right, and in 2021, we see the rise of the far right from the United States, to Hungary, to Poland, and if you do a big, big broad far right and you call it populism at one end, you see Trump and you see Boris Johnson in Britain. So that's a much more difficult question to answer.

Yeah, somebody's mentioned the same book then said it's a splendid book. I'm glad somebody said that, "The Splendid and the Vile." Yes. Agreed.

Oh, great. "My father was in the South African Air Force and flew Spitfires in World War II," and you remember that the Rhodesian leader also fought in the Battle of Britain, the last white leader, who's Ian What's-his-name. I forgot the surname quickly.

Q: Why do I feel British people remember 1940 in a certain way?

A: It's rammed down our throats in terms of television, the media. If I see any reference to London in any situation again referring to the Dunkirk Spirit or the Blitz Spirit, I shall scream. We haven't got over it. We haven't moved on. It was such a defining moment that the generations that fought it never gave up talking about it. When I was a child and into my teens, when I was still living at home, every New Year's Eve, neighbours came in for the new year, and every time, the men spoke about the war and the wartime experiences and Churchill and all the rest of it. I grew up with that. We haven't moved on. The difficulty now is that it is being used by, well, it's being used by the populist right as a beacon called, Johnson wrote a book called "The Churchill Factor." Don't bother reading it unless you want to know about Boris Johnson, because it really is more about Boris than it's about Churchill, I think. The only answer I can give is the words of the American Secretary of State Dean Acheson. "Britain has lost an empire and failed to find a role," and unbelievably, all these decades on, now that we've left the European Union, we're back firmly in that position of having lost an empire and not found a role. We don't know who we are, and it's a worry. It's a great worry of mine for my grandchildren. We've got to answer that question, and we don't know the answer.

Q: Why was Britain the only European country capable of defeating the Germans?

A: Partly geography, of course, because we're an island. Partly Hitler. Sorry, partly Churchill, I mean. Partly Churchill, and that, in answer to an earlier question, because we didn't have a fascist, a large fascist presence in Britain itself. France, the Third Republic was a complete disaster, and fascism was rife or fellow travellers were rife in the senior sections of the French, of French politicians, of French parliament, as well as the French military. That is not, and the Germans always misinterpreted Britain. They misinterpreted us in the First World War, the Second World War, in Brexit. They keep thinking we're like them, and we're not. We're bloody minded, and all it needed was someone like Churchill to cash in on our bloody mindedness, and I don't know what would've happened if they'd landed, but I suspect that large numbers of us would've preferred to have died in the streets. After all, that's what Churchill asked us to do. We would fight in the streets. We'd fight in the fields, and we'd fight in the streets, and I think they would've done. That doesn't mean to say, I hasten to add, that had we been conquered, we would've given up our own lives rather than to have given the names of British Jews. The evidence from the Channel Islands was that Britain occupied would've handed Jews over. That's a terrible thing to say, but I think it has to be said, so it's difficult to say.

"I can still remember the wire on the beach at Brighton putting my fingers straight. I was only two." I know. Yeah. well, Brighton doesn't, I don't know that whether that person's living in England. I guess they are. How fantastic is that? Yeah, I mean the beaches were closed because, well, for obvious reasons.

Yes, and South Africa fought. Yes they did.

No, Hitler had intended, somebody asked me did Hitler intend to conquer Europe. Yes, he did intend to conquer Europe, but on the other hand, he thought that Britain wouldn't fight, and that in imperial, colonial terms, the rest of the world could be divided between Britain and Germany. A terrible mistake, but his real goal, which you can read in "Mein Kampf" if you're so minded was Russia. Russia was always the enemy, right back to mediaeval times. It's all about Teuton versus Slav, but they also thought I got involved in Europe because of bringing all Germans under German rule, the Czechoslovakia, Poland and so on, but they went like a knife through butter in France, and they had revenge in mind. After all, France had taken back Alsace-Lorraine in 1918. France had humiliated them, and when France does surrender eventually, they surrender in the same railway carriage they made the Germans surrender in, and then Hitler has that carriage taken from Compiègne to Berlin and put on show.

Yeah, that's another reference to "The Splendid and the Vile." Wars are not won by evacuations. No. Churchill was always honest, you see? We're now suffering in Britain by a government that is not entirely in line with truth all the time, and Churchill always told the truth.

Yeah, people are, oh yeah, I've got lots of people commenting about that book. Yes, one of my



favourite quotes says someone, and one of mine, "Success is having failure after failure without loss of enthusiasm." That's an interesting thought.

Q: Do I think the Battle of Britain, which lasted just over three months, was as if the two commanders were fighting the Battle of Waterloo every day.

A: Yes, except at Waterloo, we were on the same side. Well, thanks for people who put nice things up. It's always encouraging, those.

Somebody liked what you said. Oh, no, I didn't say, yes.

Q: Would I say something about the German conquest in Yugoslavia and Greece in early '41?

A: Well, no, I didn't on purpose say that because it was too big a subject to pull into this, but in Greece, they were pulled in by Mussolini. I think Hitler would gladly have strangled Mussolini for getting him involved in Greece, and indeed in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia is a fantastically interesting case because of Churchill's, after the war in 1945, by Churchill's manoeuvring directly without Roosevelt, with Stalin, was the agreement over vast quantities of vodka, which I'm pleased to say Churchill drank Stalin under the table, Stalin agreed that Greece should be part of a Western sphere of influence and that Yugoslavia should be part of an Eastern sphere of influence, but Churchill also believed that Tito was a different sort of communist leader, and that all of which turns out to be true.

Yep, people from Natal volunteered. Absolutely. People from all over the empire came, and as I said before, some Americans. There's some interesting American accounts from young men who were in Spitfires and they had leave and they were allowed to go back to America on leave. I say it sounds extraordinary, and they went back to America on leave to some small American town, and they couldn't believe it. They couldn't believe that life was ordinary and normal when they had come from Blitz London, and it sort of blew their minds. They're very interesting American accounts like that. Oh, well, that's, people have just put nice things. I think probably we need to stop.

- [Judi] Stop, yeah, sorry. I was just about to jump in. My dogs were barking in the background. I want to open up. But thank you so much again, William. Enjoyed listening to you talking, and thank you to everybody who joined us, and we'll see everybody tomorrow.

- Farewell, everyone. Keep safe.

- [Judi] Thank you, everybody. Bye-bye.

- [William] Keep safe. Bye.