



When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940 by Robin Prior.

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Had the Battle of Britain turned out differently, the Allies might well have lost the Second World War. Had Winston Churchill, the rare member of the British ruling elite who had taken the true measure of Adolf Hitler, not become prime minister, sound Tories like Edward Halifax might have settled on unsound terms with the Third Reich. Had the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) not escaped at Dunkirk in what Churchill portrayed as a kind of victory, Britain would have lost the material capacity and moral determination to continue the war. Had a German army landed in strength in Southern England or the Royal Air Force failed to defeat the Luftwaffe, Great Britain may never have enjoyed its Finest Hour instead of a German-dictated horribly compromised peace, with dire consequences for all of Western civilization. These are the core propositions of *When Britain Saved the West*.

Historian Robin Prior (Flinders Univ.) has published extensively on modern Britain, both World Wars, contemporary warfare, the Australian and British armies, and Winston Churchill.¹ He has now produced a compelling account of the drama—in Churchill’s cabinet room and the House of Commons, on the beaches of Dunkirk, and in skies over Dover—in the pivotal year of 1940, when Britain and France saved the Allied cause even before it came to be. As John Lukacs has put it, “Churchill and Britain could not have won the Second World War; in the end America and Russia did. But in May 1940 Churchill was the one who did not *lose* it.”² In short, this book’s title is no exaggeration.

The first three of the volume’s thirteen chapters concern, respectively, Britain’s halfhearted effort under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s leadership, the parliamentary crisis of early May 1940, and the subsequent cabinet predicament. Chapters 4–6 turn to the savaging of the Anglo-French armies by the Wehrmacht in Belgium and northern France, and Churchill’s pledge to restore France after Germany’s defeat, an outcome that seemed most unlikely at the time. Chapters 7–11 discuss Hitler’s decision to prepare an invasion of the United Kingdom, the Luftwaffe’s incompetent efforts to establish air superiority and its rout by British Fighter Command. Chapters 12 and 13 conclude the story of 1940, as London faced the Blitz alone and American aid was less material than purely moral.

Throughout, Prior’s clear and direct prose carries the book’s analytical narrative, which shifts smoothly between the political and the military, the strategic and the tactical. His account of the struggle within the Conservative Party over the direction of Britain’s war effort surpasses even Graham Stewart’s³ in its lucid treatment of parliamentary affairs.

Prior’s opening chapter stresses that, quite apart from the objective facts of a war going very badly, the lethargy of the Chamberlain government reflected an ossified Victorian Toryism unsuited to the realities of twentieth-century warfare. The public’s genuine dread of war sapped the prime minister’s

1. His books include, *Gallipoli: The End of the Myth* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2009), and, co-authored with Trevor Wilson: *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1996), *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914–18* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), and *The Somme* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2005).

2. *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999) 189–90.

3. In *Burying Caesar: The Churchill-Chamberlain Rivalry* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Pr, 2001).

will to see that Britain survived another war. As one historian has noted, “It is seldom appreciated just how close to the brink Britain came.”⁴ Prior places the blame squarely at the head of the cabinet table:

By not fully mobilizing the vast potential possessed by Britain in order to fight the deadliest foe that ever confronted it, by adopting a strategy of “wait and see” and an economic policy of laissez-faire, the Chamberlain government was conceding to Hitler the military initiative and allowing Germany time to remedy deficiencies in its war economy. The longer the phoney war persisted the greater the danger to Britain. As it happened, the first existential threat to the continuation of the British state as a liberal democracy was the Chamberlain government itself. (19)

A preoccupation of the book is the strengths and weaknesses of political and military leaders on both sides of the battles of France and Britain. British defeatism early on infected the French populace, who, unlike their ally, lacked the barrier of the English Channel to secure the Third Republic against the German war machine.⁵ The emerging consensus in the House of Commons that Chamberlain was a spent force and that Churchill, for all his faults, offered the best hope for resolute and energetic war leadership was Britain’s first step toward ultimate victory.

The second step was Churchill’s own signals during the parliamentary debate over the Narvik debacle as to the kind of government he would form if chosen to do so. Significantly, he called Ernest Bevin, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, “a friend of mine, working hard for the public cause, and a man who has much gift to help” (37), reaching across the partisan divide to an inveterate opponent in past political struggles.⁶ This augured a genuinely unified national government willing to wage war as remorselessly as the Third Reich and immune to the temptation of face-saving compromises with fascist dictators.

Prior next shifts to the tribulations of the BEF and its French allies. The Anglo-French forces’ advance into Belgium was quashed in the opening phase of the German offensive in the West. This was the result not of any inherent superiority of the Wehrmacht but of the Germans’ last minute shift of their main armored thrust through the Ardennes to outflank the Maginot Line and emerge to the south in the rear of their enemies’ forces. The BEF fought remarkably well in the circumstances. During the Arras counterattack (21–22 May 1940), British Matilda tanks inflicted heavy losses on the lighter armor of the 7th Panzer Division until Maj. Gen. Erwin Rommel deployed every gun, including the 88mm antiaircraft gun, which proved to be a peerless tank-killer for the remainder of the war. Even though it failed, the British attack “misled the German commanders about the strength of the British forces” and instilled a bit of caution in German operational planners. Maj. Gen. H.E. Franklyn’s actions at Arras bought the BEF time, but it was his commander in chief, John Gort (later blamed for the BEF’s defeat), who actually made possible the salvation of the army at Dunkirk (79–89).

Instead of pursuing the BEF in force to the Channel, German officers, including Gen. Heinz Guderian, the most aggressive of the Panzer commanders, chose instead to consolidate the Wehrmacht’s forces before engaging the remaining French divisions south of the Somme; this move was seen as necessary to avoid a “useless sacrifice of our best soldiers” (107). But it took time, since the Germans had no positions near the coastal ports and their infantry divisions in France in 1940 were horse-drawn. When the halt order was lifted, massed Panzer forces promptly demonstrated just how effectively they might have carried out an order to annihilate the BEF—“the British regulars fought well but

4. Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919–1939* (NY: Penguin, 2009) 345.

5. See Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (NY: Norton, 1996), and Philip Nord, *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2015).

6. Prior credits Ross McKibbin with drawing attention to the larger significance of Churchill’s speech: see *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010) 121–22.

they were no more able to withstand this type of attack than the French earlier in the campaign” (104). But there was seemingly little to be gained by an all-out effort to destroy the BEF when it was far from certain that a German army would ever again have to fight it (93–109).

Prior makes it very clear that hesitant and inept Luftwaffe commanders fatally hampered the German air assault on Britain. By contrast, Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding, though he stunted in his air support of the Dunkirk evacuation and in his initial allocation of fighter planes during the Battle of Britain, eventually deployed sufficient aircraft over England to overcome the threat of a Luftwaffe whose strength had been wildly overestimated (113, 197, 234–38). Dowding and his charges learned quickly:

in the first period of the battle, the British had a force with little training, some with experience in France, directed by a radar system that was still learning its business, flying planes in the wrong formations, with guns harmonized at too great a distance and using obsolete methods in moving to attack. Moreover, few pilots had mastered the skill of deflection shooting—that is aiming not directly at the enemy aircraft but at a position where that aircraft would be when the bullets arrived. Yet during this first month the Luftwaffe did not put this inexperienced force to the test. Probably the most aircraft sent over by [Field Marshal Albert] Kesselring and [Gen. Hugo] Sperrle was 200. Why the Germans adopted this tentative approach has never been satisfactorily explained.... The Luftwaffe’s tactics allowed Dowding’s men to learn the job without being overwhelmed. When the Germans increased the tempo from 8 August, they were to find a much more experienced force lying in wait for them. (207)

Recent easy victories over the Poles and the French had made Reichsmarschall Herman Göring overconfident in his command of the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain. “The air battles over Dunkirk, which saw the introduction of the Spitfire might have provided valuable lessons, but there is no evidence that Goering [*sic*] was paying attention” (188). Nor did Kesselring or Sperrle, commander of *Luftflotte* [Air Fleet] 3, evince any genuine appreciation of the challenges entailed in attacking Britain. Göring insisted in June 1940 that the destruction of Fighter Command was Germany’s paramount objective. And, in August, Hitler himself warned that Britain must be eliminated so Germany could concentrate the strength for an invasion of the Soviet Union, planned for spring 1941. Nonetheless,

Goering’s response contained the same flaw as his first plan, although neither Hitler nor the Luftwaffe chiefs seemed to notice.... [T]he Luftwaffe ... [was] not told, for example, to give absolute priority to the destruction of Fighter Command and then to concentrate on ports and imports. The implication was that every target listed was as important as every other target. Yet if the Luftwaffe tried to attack them all, the force would be spread very thin. Goering’s instructions to his airmen amounted to this: destroy Fighter Command on the ground ... and at the same time attack the aircraft industry while continuing with current operations against ports and merchant shipping.... [This] ensured that whatever pressure was brought to bear against Fighter Command, it would not be maximum pressure. The great offensive had ... been dissipated before it had begun. (209)

Even when the Luftwaffe got it right, Göring still got it wrong. The first German attacks on Britain’s radar chain were quite successful and a systematic effort might have deprived Fighter Command of its eyes in the air, “but Goering could not see the significance of the radar stations and there is no evidence that Kesselring or Sperrle could either” (214). When the Reichsmarschall’s attention shifted to the bombing of London, the Luftwaffe’s fighter forces were placed in an impossible position: the short-range Messerschmitt Bf 109⁷ fighters had to return home for lack of fuel, abandoning their

7. Prior, like many other writers, consistently uses the less correct designation “ME 109.”

bombers⁸ to be “picked off with the greatest of ease” (227). By September 1940, the Luftwaffe’s material losses over Britain could not be made good by proportional increases in production.

Prior debunks here the David-and-Goliath myth of the Battle of Britain by showing that British fighting capacity, once mobilized by a determined government, fulfilled Churchill’s memorable promise that “when time came Nazi Germany would receive a greater measure of destruction than had been meted out to Britain.” If it could hold out in 1940, Great Britain possessed the economic, scientific, and industrial resources to become a military colossus.⁹

For that other colossus of the West—the United States—Prior has little regard and less patience. While Britain and the Dominions fought freedom’s battle in 1940, “the largest democracy on earth occasionally threw them some crumbs” (280). This is both unkind and misleading. Once Pearl Harbor brought America into the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration committed greater resources to defeating Germany than Japan, a choice accepted with bitter resentment in the upper reaches of the US Navy leadership. Prior’s book contains a perceptive account of both the desultory early war effort led by British defeatists and appeasers and the parliamentary political maneuvering behind the choice of Churchill as prime minister. An equally nuanced discussion of Roosevelt’s frustrations with an isolationist Congress would not have been misplaced, especially since his initial actions in supplying war materials to Britain violated the Neutrality Laws passed by that very body.¹⁰ But these are marginal criticisms of a fine book.

Robin Prior has argued persuasively that, if by late 1940 Germany could still have won the war, Great Britain, at last, did not deserve to lose it. For this and for its readability, *When Britain Saved the West* will appeal to and instruct both students and professional historians of World War II.

8. All of them Dornier, Heinkel, and Junkers aircraft never designed for strategic bombing.

9. See further David Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine: Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011).

10. See, in particular, Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1994) 7–19.