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II

Churchill: The Glimmer of Hope in Britain's Dark Days

By Jaime Konieczny '07



When World War II broke out in 1939, Winston Churchill was not the British Prime Minister. However, he had been a Member of Parliament for forty years and as the war steadily increased in intensity his tenacious leadership inspired the country to elect him as Prime Minister by May of 1940. It has been said that he was one of the greatest leaders in the 20th century because of his inspiration, aggressive leadership and refusal to surrender. Along with his dynamic spirit, Churchill's creation and appointment of the position Minister of Defense in 1940 was crucial for Britain's perseverance during the darkest time of World War II (June 1940-41). Through the establishment of this position and his own personal knowledge Churchill was able to effectively direct and control the war effort and create an atmosphere of hope in an uncertain time for the British people, which ultimately lead to their victory in the war.

Churchill created the position of Minister of Defense primarily because of his previous concerns about the lack of effective administrative organization and control of wartime activities. He feared the lack of centralized information and decision-making. This fear had developed over his time in political office because he had taken part in and witnessed many issues develop from this lack of centralization. He began his role in politics before the First World War, attempting amelioration between the British and German naval rivalry in 1913.¹ In 1914 he was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty with duties that included the air defense of London and the protection of the Royal Navy and merchant shipping from German naval attack. In 1917 he was put in charge of the munitions production in Britain, which during this time was of great importance because supplies were low and strained. As his popularity began to grow he was designated as the diplomatic leader to devise a planned system of demobilization in order to calm and appease the tensions of the unsatisfied soldiers returning from the war.²

¹ Martin Gilbert. *Winston Churchill's War Leadership* (New York:Vintage Books 2003) 4

² IBID

These experiences helped Churchill develop a better understanding of politics and the inter-working of military defense strategy, all of which he later drew upon when he was reappointed First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939 and further still when elected Prime Minister in 1940. Many of his experiences helped him develop and establish one of his core ideas: that military intelligence needed a centralized person to which to report in order to better facilitate the actions necessary to quickly and efficiently protect British interests.

During the outbreak of World War II, Winston Churchill was not the most popular man in the British political world. In fact he was alienated and ostracized by both his party and the labor movement after speaking out against the Munich Conference in September 1938 that gave the Sudetenland to Germany. He prophesized more doom and dismay to come.³ Yet despite this gloomy outlook on the present events, some of the most important assets Churchill possessed during the winter of 1938-39 were his unique isolationist stance and his obstinate opposition to appeasement.⁴ It was because of this isolation that as the war progressed he was capable of speaking out and gaining public support. By May of 1939 a Gallop poll questioned the public asking "Are you in favour of Mr. Winston Churchill being invited to join the Cabinet?" 56% of those polled answered yes.⁵ He regained popularity slowly, beginning with the help of the "anti-appeasement section of the press" and continuing this growth through his actions and through a round of speeches delivered when he was appointed First Lord of Admiralty. His actions were drastically different from those of Prime Minister Chamberlain, who often seemed ill at ease as a war minister. Churchill raised the morale of the people simply by possessing a beaming face and exuberant style while holding office.⁶

Churchill's full recovery from political isolation and public support occurred after two speeches, the first of which was on Sept. 26, 1939. While delivering a review of the war at sea, one member of the House of Commons noted, "One could feel the spirits of the House rising with every word." The second speech occurred as a broadcast on Oct 1, 1939 on the state of the war and the British war effort during which it was described as "even more prime ministerial performance."⁷ These were key moments that instilled hope, revived spirits and allowed trust from the British people and from Parliament. The hope Churchill gave the people was not from the words he spoke but in the manner, intonation and grace with which he said them, for "The effect of Winston's speech was infinitely greater than could be derived from any reading of the text."⁸ The effect of his speeches was to add to his continuous growth in popularity as well as to lead to a deeper respect and admiration by the British people.

Due to the increase in support for Churchill and the failing self-confidence of Chamberlain with the debacle at Norway, Churchill was elected the successor to Chamberlain as the British Prime Minister in May of 1940. Following his election to the premiership, Churchill set about evaluating all aspects of British foreign policy. He determined that Britain would not only remain in the war but would continue to take the

³ Paul Addison *Churchill: The Unexpected Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 150-151

⁴ *IBID*, 152

⁵ *IBID*, 154

⁶ *IBID*, 156-157.

⁷ *IBID*

⁸ *IBID*

offensive against Hitler wherever possible. It was Churchill's own strength of conviction and determination to be victorious in the war that squelched any thought of peace through appeasement. Britain was now committed not only to fighting, but to winning World War II.⁹ He "had come to power to prosecute the war more forcefully,"¹⁰ and began doing so by creating new positions within the Executive Departments. His first action as Prime Minister created the position and title of Minister of Defense, which he then appointed himself. By creating this position he effectively took the central control of the war away from the War Cabinet who had conducted the war efforts under Chamberlain. The reason behind this new position was that the war should be centralized, in fact "he followed the war on all fronts in great detail with the aid of a portable Map Room." One of the main facets of this position was that Churchill now had the right both to summon the Chiefs of Staff and to give them instructions on the conduct of war.¹¹

Through this position the military secretariat of the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff Committee were incorporated into a small department under his direct control. The War Cabinet met almost daily and made all the fundamental decisions of the war with regard to Churchill's opinion and wishes. His aide General Ismay and his two deputies, who had control of the Joint Planning Committee and the Joint Intelligence Committee, headed the Defense Office. It reported directly to him, something that had never been done before.¹² Both committees were in charge of establishing the feasibility of the plans submitted to them by both Churchill himself and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹³ By creating this office and applying his own experiences and understanding of how the war should be fought Churchill effectively changed the course of the British defense system. He had eliminated any internal fighting or conflicts by systematically taking full control so that by the middle of the war he no longer called meetings with the Defense Committee of the War Cabinet but instead ran the military aspect of the war through his personal thoughts and the Chiefs of Staff Committee. As a wartime leader he was greatly respected but often ran his staff very hard.¹⁴

Churchill demanded as much from himself as he did from the staff with which he worked. He gave everything he had, and told the English people he had to offer "nothing but blood, toil, tears and sweat." He sacrificed in order to keep the British morale alive and to fulfill his promise that "[w]e shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be... we shall never surrender." In his attempts to keep the war effort contained and controlled directly he demanded up-to-the-minute updates from all fronts of the war. During the height of the Battle of Britain he lived in a bunker beneath the Cabinet office where he could be reached at all times and could also make radio broadcasts to the British citizens.¹⁵ He did not keep regular work hours because his work was everywhere. From his home and office every one of his advisors, secretaries and Generals could be sent for

⁹ John Charmley, *Churchill The End of Glory A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 400.

¹⁰ *IBID*, 398

¹¹ Addison 174

¹² Virginia Cowles, *Winston Churchill: The Era and the Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1953) 317

¹³ Addison, 174

¹⁴ *IBID*, 175

¹⁵ William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Churchill: Visions of Glory 1874-1932* (Boston: Little Brown and Company) 6-8

at any time of the day or night in order to be dictated notes and orders. This was vastly different from Chamberlain who had conducted everything through the process of formal meetings and arranged times.¹⁶

For Churchill the work did not end and he constantly needed to be in the know and in the thick of whatever was going on. This often caused him to run out in between bombings during the Battle of Britain so that he could view the damage from a firsthand account. He would later assess it as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense.¹⁷ After Churchill was given information he was often able to see the larger picture and theorize Hitler's next move from a political and ideological aspect. This unique ability was derived from his many years of experience and his understanding of the German maneuvers during WWI. Due to this he often suggested plans that the British Intelligence community did not understand because they viewed Hitler's strategy only from their own military viewpoints while failing to learn the lessons of history. Churchill's main conclusion, reached in a "lightening flash" of illumination, was that Hitler would probably attack the Soviet Union after defeating Great Britain or possibly even before. In May of 1941 he sent a letter of warning to Stalin but Stalin did not heed the warning. His foresight and intuitive analysis of Hitler's intention to move East helped him have a better understanding of the influx of the information filtering through London.¹⁸

Another essential aspect of Churchill as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense was that he recognized the desperate need for aide to Great Britain. Churchill was determined to stand his ground and never surrender, but he was also not above asking for help. He directed his pleas to President Roosevelt and the United States. Churchill was convinced even before his appointment as Prime Minister that if Great Britain did not gain support from another country, the results could be devastating. Therefore Churchill's other great act in the spring and summer of 1940 was to convince President Roosevelt that Great Britain was still willing and able to fight and therefore was worthy of their support.¹⁹ Knowing that U.S. support was essential to the survival Britain, both U.S. and British media sources began proliferating propaganda throughout the U.S. proclaiming Churchill as a national hero as soon as he was elected Prime Minister. This was designed to spark public support in favor of accepting a deal such as the Lend Lease Act, legislation that was proposed by Churchill in a letter to President Roosevelt. Churchill's ability to produce a spirited and rising oration made his U.S. observers enthralled with his "extrovert style of leadership" and was a great asset in garnering Congressional support.²⁰ The Lend Lease Act was enacted by Congress in 1941.

After gathering support from the U.S., Churchill was equipped to devote the necessary time to promote and plan projects for British offensive landings on the beaches of Norway, Sicily, Italy and North Africa. Churchill's military approach was an almost entirely offensive strategy to thwart the enemy at any feasible location. He was not a calculated strategist; he often was caught closely examining one area and then soon fixating on another target. However, by being able to understand the method of Hitler's strategy and using his previous experience Churchill was capable of turning the tide of

¹⁶ Addison, 183

¹⁷ Manchester, 7-8

¹⁸ Tuvia Ben-Moshi *Churchill: Strategy and History* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1992) 141-142

¹⁹ Addison, 178

²⁰ IBID, 179-180

the war by means of “constant action as wide scale as possible so that the enemy would be made to continually ‘bleed and burn,’ a phrase he often used.”²¹

Churchill’s other great feat was putting aside political and personal dislikes in order to ally with the Soviet Union to form a tight, cohesive alliance with the goal of attacking Germany from all sides. He saw this as almost an act of treachery and would not have agreed except as acting Minister of Defense the mere size of the Soviet Union offered an unquestionable strategic advantage of sheer manpower against the Germans. It also showed the ability to support the Eastern Front, possibly allowing for the establishment of democratic ideas at the war’s end. Thus, through the arguments and coercion of President Roosevelt, Churchill agreed to ally Great Britain with the Soviet Union and participate in active talks with Stalin. This was essential to the war because it showed that Churchill, although gruff and stubborn, would and could do what he deemed necessary for the British success in the war effort.²²

Winston Churchill as a Prime Minister effectively inspired and guided the British through the grimmest part of the war while still giving them hope. As Minister of Defense he created a brand-new system in which the war would operate effectively under his direct control. He was making strategic military alliances in which he procured the necessary supplies and support to manage British survival. “As a war leader, he was head and shoulders above anyone the British or any other nation could produce. He was indispensable and completely irreplaceable.”²³ Therefore it was Churchill and his political, ideological and military leadership combined with his previous experiences that sternly and miraculously led a fighting, hopeful Great Britain through June of 1940-1941, and ultimately to victory.

²¹ Addison, 182

²² Geoffrey Best, *Churchill and War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 139

²³ Addison, 182

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