

Dunkirk to Pearl Harbor: May 1940 to December 1941



Churchill takes aim with a [Sten](#) sub-machine gun in June 1941. The man in the pin-striped suit and [fedora](#) to the right is his bodyguard, [Walter H. Thompson](#).

War ministry created

Main article: [Churchill war ministry](#)

In May, Churchill was still generally unpopular with many Conservatives and probably most of the Labour Party.^[294] Chamberlain remained Conservative Party leader until October when ill health forced his resignation. By that time, Churchill had won the doubters over and his succession as party leader was a formality.^[295]

He began his premiership by forming a [five-man war cabinet](#) which included Chamberlain as [Lord President of the Council](#), Labour leader [Clement Attlee](#) as [Lord Privy Seal](#) (later as [Deputy Prime Minister](#)), Halifax as [Foreign Secretary](#) and Labour's [Arthur Greenwood](#) as a [minister without portfolio](#). In practice, these five were augmented by the service chiefs and ministers who attended the majority of meetings.^{[296][297]} The cabinet changed in size and membership as the war progressed, one of the key appointments being the leading [trades unionist Ernest Bevin](#) as [Minister of Labour and National Service](#).^[298] In response to previous criticisms that there had been no clear single minister in charge of the prosecution of the war, Churchill created and took the additional position of [Minister of Defence](#), making him the most powerful wartime Prime Minister in British history.^[299] He drafted outside experts into government to fulfil vital functions, especially on the Home Front. These included personal friends like [Lord Beaverbrook](#) and [Frederick Lindemann](#), who became the government's scientific advisor.^[300]

Resolve to fight on

Main article: [War cabinet crisis, May 1940](#)

At the end of May, with the [British Expeditionary Force](#) in retreat to [Dunkirk](#) and the [Fall of France](#) seemingly imminent, Halifax proposed that the government should explore the possibility of a negotiated peace settlement using the still-neutral Mussolini as an intermediary. There were [several high-level meetings](#) from 26 to 28 May, including two with the French premier [Paul Reynaud](#).^[301] Churchill's resolve was to fight on, even if France capitulated, but his position remained precarious until Chamberlain resolved to support him. Churchill had the full support of the two Labour members but knew he could not survive as Prime Minister if both Chamberlain and Halifax were against him. In the end, by gaining the support of his outer cabinet, Churchill outmanoeuvred Halifax and won Chamberlain over.^[302] Churchill believed that the only option was to fight on and his use of rhetoric hardened public opinion against a peaceful resolution and prepared the British people for a long war – Jenkins says Churchill's speeches were "an inspiration for the nation, and a [catharsis](#) for Churchill himself".^[303]

Churchill succeeded as an orator despite being handicapped from childhood with a speech impediment. He had a [lateral lisp](#) and was unable to pronounce the letter s, verbalising it with a slur.^[304] He worked hard on his pronunciation by repeating phrases designed to cure his problem with the sibilant "s". He was ultimately successful and was eventually able to say: "My impediment is no hindrance". In time, he turned the impediment into an asset and could use it to great effect, as when he called Hitler a "Nar-zee" (rhymes with "[khazi](#)"; emphasis on the "z"), rather than a Nazi ("ts").^[305]

His first speech as Prime Minister, delivered to the Commons on 13 May was the "[blood, toil, tears and sweat](#)" speech. It was little more than a short statement but, Jenkins says, "it included phrases which have reverberated down the decades".^[306] Churchill made it plain to the nation that a long, hard road lay ahead and that victory was the final goal:^{[307][308]}

I would say to the House... that I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. 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 the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: it is victory,

victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.

Operation Dynamo and the Battle of France

[Operation Dynamo](#), the evacuation of 338,226 Allied servicemen from Dunkirk, ended on Tuesday, 4 June when the French rearguard surrendered. The total was far in excess of expectations and it gave rise to a popular view that Dunkirk had been a miracle, and even a victory.^[309] Churchill himself referred to "a miracle of deliverance" in his "[we shall fight on the beaches](#)" speech to the Commons that afternoon, though he shortly reminded everyone that: "We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations". The speech ended on a note of defiance coupled with a clear appeal to the United States:^{[310][311]}

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

Germany initiated [Fall Rot](#) the following day and Italy entered the war on the 10th.^[312] The Wehrmacht occupied Paris on the 14th and completed their conquest of France on 25 June.^[313] It was now inevitable that Hitler would attack and probably try to invade Great Britain. Faced with this, Churchill addressed the Commons on 18 June and delivered one of his [most famous speeches](#), ending with this peroration:^{[314][315][316]}

What General Weygand called the "[Battle of France](#)" is over. I expect that the [Battle of Britain](#) is about to begin. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years, men will still say: "This was their finest hour".

Churchill was determined to fight back and ordered the commencement of the [Western Desert campaign](#) on 11 June, an immediate response to the Italian declaration of war. This went well at first while the Italian army was the sole opposition and [Operation Compass](#) was a noted success. In early 1941, however, Mussolini requested German support and Hitler sent the [Afrika Korps](#) to [Tripoli](#) under the command of [Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel](#), who arrived not long after Churchill had halted *Compass* so that he could reassign forces to Greece where the [Balkans campaign](#) was entering a critical phase.^[317]

In other initiatives through June and July 1940, Churchill ordered the formation of both the [Special Operations Executive](#) (SOE) and the [Commandos](#). The SOE was ordered to promote and execute subversive activity in Nazi-occupied Europe while the Commandos were charged with raids on specific military targets there. [Hugh Dalton](#), the [Minister of Economic Warfare](#), took political responsibility for the SOE and recorded in his diary that Churchill told him: "And now go and set Europe ablaze".^[318]

The Battle of Britain and the Blitz



Churchill walks through the ruins of [Coventry Cathedral](#) with [Alfred Robert Grindlay](#), 1941.

On 20 August 1940, at the height of the Battle of Britain, Churchill addressed the Commons to outline the war situation. In the middle of this speech, he made a statement that created [a famous nickname](#) for the RAF fighter pilots involved in the battle:^{[319][320]}

The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

The [Luftwaffe](#) altered its strategy from 7 September 1940 and began [the Blitz](#), which was especially intensive through October and November. Churchill's morale during the Blitz was generally high and he told his private secretary [John Colville](#) in November that he thought the threat of invasion was past.^[321] He was confident that Great Britain could hold its own, given the increase in output, but was realistic about its chances of actually winning the war without American intervention.^[322]

Lend-Lease

In September 1940, the British and American governments concluded the [Destroyers for Bases Agreement](#), by which fifty American [destroyers](#) were transferred to the Royal Navy in exchange for free US base rights in [Bermuda](#), the [Caribbean](#) and [Newfoundland](#). An added advantage for Britain was that its military assets in those bases could be redeployed elsewhere.^[323]

Churchill's good relations with United States President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) helped secure vital food, oil and munitions via the North Atlantic shipping routes.^[324] It was for this reason that Churchill was relieved when Roosevelt was [re-elected in 1940](#). Upon re-election, Roosevelt set about implementing a new method of providing necessities to Great Britain without the need for monetary payment. He persuaded Congress that repayment for this immensely costly service would take the form of defending the US. The policy was known as [Lend-Lease](#) and it was formally enacted on 11 March 1941.^[325]

Operation Barbarossa



Churchill and Roosevelt seated on the quarterdeck of [HMS Prince of Wales](#) for a Sunday service during the Atlantic Conference, 10 August 1941

Hitler launched his [invasion of the Soviet Union](#) on Sunday, 22 June 1941. It was no surprise to Churchill, who had known since early April, from [Enigma decrypts](#) at [Bletchley Park](#), that the attack was imminent. He had tried to warn [General Secretary Joseph Stalin](#) via the British ambassador to [Moscow](#), [Stafford Cripps](#), but to no avail as Stalin did not trust Churchill. The night before the attack, already intending an address to the nation, Churchill alluded to his hitherto anti-communist views by saying to Colville: "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favourable reference to the Devil".^[326]

Atlantic Charter

In August 1941, Churchill made his first transatlantic crossing of the war on board [HMS Prince of Wales](#) and met Roosevelt in [Placentia Bay](#), [Newfoundland](#). On 14 August, they issued the joint statement that has become known as the [Atlantic Charter](#).^[327] This outlined the goals of both countries for the future of the world and it is seen as the inspiration for the 1942 [Declaration by United Nations](#), itself the basis of the [United Nations](#) which was founded in June 1945.^[328]

Pearl Harbor to D-Day: December 1941 to June 1944

Pearl Harbor and United States entry into the war

On 7–8 December 1941, the Japanese [attack on Pearl Harbor](#) was followed by their [invasion of Malaya](#) and, on the 8th, Churchill declared war on Japan. Three days later came the joint declaration of war by Germany and Italy against the United States.^[329] Churchill went to Washington later in the month to meet Roosevelt for the [first Washington Conference](#) (codename [Arcadia](#)). This was important for "[Europe First](#)", the decision to prioritise victory in Europe over victory in the Pacific, taken by Roosevelt while Churchill was still in mid-Atlantic. The Americans agreed with Churchill that Hitler was the main enemy and that the defeat of Germany was key to Allied success.^[330] It was also agreed that the first joint Anglo-American strike would be [Operation Torch](#), the invasion of [French North Africa](#) (i.e., Algeria and Morocco). Originally planned for the spring of 1942, it was finally launched in November 1942 when the crucial [Second Battle of El Alamein](#) was already underway.^[331]

On 26 December, Churchill addressed a joint meeting of the [US Congress](#) but, that night, he suffered a mild heart attack which was diagnosed by his physician, [Sir Charles Wilson](#) (later Lord Moran), as a [coronary deficiency](#) needing several weeks' bed rest. Churchill insisted that he did not need bed rest and, two days later, journeyed on to Ottawa by train where he gave a speech to the [Canadian Parliament](#) that included the "some chicken, some neck" line in which he recalled French predictions in 1940 that "Britain alone would have her neck wrung like a chicken".^[332] He arrived home in mid-

January, having flown from [Bermuda](#) to [Plymouth](#) in an American [flying boat](#), to find that there was a crisis of confidence in both his coalition government and himself personally,^[333] and he decided to face a [vote of confidence](#) in the Commons, which he won easily.^[334]

While he was away, the [Eighth Army](#), having already relieved the [Siege of Tobruk](#), had pursued [Operation Crusader](#) against Rommel's forces in Libya, successfully driving them back to a defensive position at [El Agheila](#) in [Cyrenaica](#). On 21 January 1942, however, Rommel launched a surprise counter-attack which drove the Allies back to [Gazala](#).

Elsewhere, recent British success in the [Battle of the Atlantic](#) was compromised by the [Kriegsmarine](#)'s introduction of its [M4 4-rotor Enigma](#), whose signals could not be deciphered by Bletchley Park for nearly a year.^[335] In the Far East, the news was much worse with Japanese advances in all theatres, especially at sea and in Malaya. At a press conference in Washington, Churchill had to play down his increasing doubts about the security of Singapore.^[336]

Fall of Singapore, loss of Burma and the Bengal famine

Churchill already had grave concerns about the fighting quality of British troops after the defeats in Norway, France, [Greece](#) and [Crete](#).^[337] Following the [fall of Singapore](#) to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, he felt that his misgivings were confirmed and said: "(this is) the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British military history".^[338] More bad news had come on 11 February as the [Kriegsmarine](#) pulled off its audacious "[Channel Dash](#)", a massive blow to British naval prestige. The combined effect of these events was to sink Churchill's morale to its lowest point of the whole war.^[337]

Meanwhile, the Japanese had occupied most of Burma by the end of April 1942. Counter-offensives were hampered by the [monsoon season](#) and by disordered conditions in [Bengal](#) and [Bihar](#), as well as a [severe cyclone](#) which devastated the region in October 1942. A combination of factors, including the curtailment of essential rice imports from Burma, poor administration, wartime inflation and a series of large-scale natural disasters such as flooding and crop disease led to the [Bengal famine of 1943](#),^[339] in which approximately 3 million people died.^[340] From December 1942 onwards, food shortages had prompted senior officials in India to ask London for grain imports, although the colonial authorities failed to recognise the seriousness of the emerging famine and responded ineptly.^[341] Churchill's government was criticised for refusing to approve more imports, a policy it ascribed to an acute wartime shortage of shipping.^[342] When the British realised the full extent of the famine in September 1943, Churchill ordered the transportation of 130,000 tonnes of Iraqi and Australian grain to Bengal and the war cabinet agreed to send 200,000 tonnes by the end of the year.^{[343][344]} During the last quarter of 1943, 100,000 tons of rice and 176,000 tons of wheat were imported, compared to averages of 55,000 tons of rice and 54,000 tons of wheat earlier in the year.^[345] In October, Churchill wrote to the newly appointed Viceroy of India, [Lord Wavell](#), charging him with the responsibility of ending the famine.^[343] In February 1944, as preparation for [Operation Overlord](#) placed greater demands on Allied shipping, Churchill cabled Wavell saying: "I will certainly help you all I can, but you must not ask the impossible".^[344] Grain shipment requests continued to be turned down by the government throughout 1944, and Wavell complained to Churchill in October that "the vital problems of India are being treated by His Majesty's Government with neglect, even sometimes with hostility and contempt".^{[342][346]} The relative impact of British policies on the death toll of the famine remains a [matter of controversy](#) among scholars.^[347]