Defining the British Will to Resist in 1940

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If this paper is not entitled "Defining the British will to resist from May 1940," the only reason is that the months which preceded May 1940 will provide us with useful elements for the Introduction. This is because one of the central problems which must examined is why there is such a contrast in the "British will to resist" between the pre-May 1940 period and the months which followed. In popular mythology and historiography, the decisive turning-point is of course Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister only a few hours after the German early morning offensive of 10 May 1940, and I must confess that as a pupil taking the *Baccalauréat*, with the Second World War on the History syllabus, I believed that Churchill had actually been called as a result of the German attack — but then perhaps I was not alone, even among my counterparts in Britain.[1] Indeed the great man himself did nothing to dispel this confusion in his memoirs, accentuating the coincidence between the end of the Phoney War, with the start of the "real" war, and his accession to "the chief power in the State." The French would refer to "un homme providentiel," but Churchill prefers to speak of Destiny rather than Providence.[2] In Churchillian mythology, his "destiny" precisely coincided with Britain's "destiny," whose natural avocation is to resist oppression and aggression, but even though this image seems to be likely to persist for ever in popular conceptions, encouraged as it is by the never-ending flow of British television series on the subject,[3] few serious historians today would accept it at face value. As the popular description of the British will to resist is encapsulated in the phrase "fighting against all odds," examining the "odds," that is the obstacles, will perhaps enable us to have a clearer idea of the question.

Overcoming the political odds

The first element in the "lack of will to resist" is of course the legacy of the 1930s. Again, in popular memory the word and the name that spring to mind are of course "Appeasement" and Chamberlain, but "the legacy of the 1930s" is far more complex. Many authors point out that this automatic mental link is in fact the result of extremely effective Left-wing propaganda, culminating in the

1 Of course Chamberlain fell as a consequence of the Norway fiasco — for which Churchill was largely responsible as First Lord of the Admiralty.

2 "I felt as if I was walking with destiny." Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 vols (London: Cassell, 1948–1954); vol. I: *The Gathering Storm*, p. 667.

3 One could also mention the continued output of "commemorative books" on the Battle of Britain and of albums of photographs on the Home Front — a genre which was recently renewed with the development of "Women's Studies." All these productions are totally devoid of critical distance — their function is purely nostalgic and hagiographic.

extraordinary popular success[4] of the book *Guilty Men*, written under the pseudonym "Cato" by three Beaverbrook journalists: Michael Foot, Peter Howard and Frank Owen in July 1940.[5] Attack being the best form of defence, "Cato" entirely put the blame on the Conservatives, totally obfuscating the Pacifist past of the Labour Party and its reliance on "Collective security under the League of Nations," rather than British rearmament, in the 1920s and 1930s. *Guilty Men* also made no mention of the public mood of inaction[6] even when there was mounting unease in the face of the Nazi peril after 1933. The first piece of evidence (chronologically) has often been dismissed as a marginal phenomenon: it is of course the famous Oxford Union resolution that "this House will in no circumstance fight for its King and Country," voted on 9 February 1933, only a few days after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany — and we can accept that Oxford students in the inter-war years were hardly representative of mainstream public opinion. But the spectacular results of the East Fulham by-election later in the year run contrary to the *Guilty Men* thesis, since the Conservative candidate with a "safe" majority of over 14,000, who advocated faster rearmament, was largely defeated (by over 4,800 votes) by the Labour candidate who opposed it. Likewise, the enormous campaign mounted by the League of Nations Union in favour of its "Peace Ballot" in 1934–1935, with over 2.4 million respondents out of 11 million rejecting military force even in case of attack, showed that the "lack of will to resist" aggression was not confined to a few "guilty Conservatives" as "Cato" managed to persuade the British public.

Why then was the *Guilty Men* thesis, though not entirely convincing and credible, so eagerly embraced at the time of publication? Why has it remained a pillar of popular perceptions of the Second World War and its originators? There was of course an element of wishful thinking on the part of the general public who had loudly cheered Chamberlain on his return from Munich in 1938, but what most carried conviction in the book, even though it only covered a minor part of it in terms of number of pages devoted to the subject, was its denunciation of inaction during the "Phoney War." Chamberlain was rightly accused of having pursued a "Sitzkrieg" in the literal sense, in that he was inactive on the industrial and economic front as well as the military front whilst the Germans were only inactive on the latter, the better to build up their forces for the coming offensive. In "Cato"'s words:

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4 This success is reflected in the impressive list of print runs which covers one of the fly-leaves. The present author's copy, for instance, bears the mention "Forty-second impression May 1944."

5 'Cato' [= Michael Foot, Peter Howard, Frank Owen]: *Guilty Men.* (London: Gollancz "Victory Books" n° 1, 1940. With a new Preface by Michael Foot and an Introduction by John Stevenson: Penguin, 1998).

6 It would carry us too far even to attempt to give a brief sketch of Anglo-German Relations after 1933, but the general attitude of the Press was that Britain should keep aloof as long as Hitler acted "in his own backyard," *i.e.* in Germany, Austria and Central and Eastern Europe generally.

> Germany was spending £ 3,200,000,000 a year. Britain was spending no more than £ 2,000,000,000 […]. Thus through the first nine months of the greatest war in history Britain consistently spent less than her enemy by more than £ 1,000,000,000 […]. The soldiers of Britain had insufficient tanks and airplanes to protect them for the simple reason that insufficient money had been spent to buy them" (pp 100–101).

The Churchillian narrative — or the Churchillian legend as his critics would call it — has it that the perils of May-June 1940 definitively put an end to the hesitations characteristic of the former team and to the temptation of negotiating. There is an extraordinary passage in *Their Finest Hour* in which Churchill describes "a meeting in [my] room at the House of Commons of all Ministers of Cabinet rank other than the War Cabinet Members" on 28 May. When he told them "Of course, whatever happens at Dunkirk, we shall fight on,"

> There occurred a demonstration which, considering the character of the gathering — twenty-five experienced politicians and Parliament men, who represented all the different points of view, whether right or wrong, before the war — surprised me. Quite a number seemed to jump up from the table and come running to my chair, shouting and patting me on the back. There is no doubt that had I at this juncture faltered at all in the leading of the nation I should have been hurled out of office […]. There was a white glow, overpowering, sublime, which ran through our Island from end to end.[7]

This unanimity is confirmed by Hugh Dalton, who was one of the participants as Minister of Economic Warfare, with a slightly different version in his diaries: "'And I am convinced,' he concluded, 'that every man of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment contemplating to parley and surrender.'"[8]

The key factor here is that "all Ministers of Cabinet rank other than the War Cabinet Members" probably had different views from those of "War Cabinet Members." Modern critics like David Reynolds — who is not a provocative "revisionist" — are not even sure about Churchill's own resolve,[9] but the consensus among recent commentators is that at least Lord Halifax, the arch-appeaser, had not abandoned hope of negotiating terms with Hitler — indeed on 27 May he had threatened to resign over this issue.[10] John Charmley, in his controversial biography of Churchill, makes the point that:

> The "finest hour" myth has such a hold on the British national consciousness that even to suggest, fifty years later, that a compromise peace might have been had is enough to prompt letters

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7 *The Second World* War, vol. 2: *Their Finest Hour*, p. 100.

8 Ben Pimlott (ed.), *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940–1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 27.

9 David Reynolds, "Churchill and the British 'decision' to fight on in 1940: Right policy, wrong reasons" in *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War: Essays in Honour of F. H. Hinsley*, ed. by Richard T. A. Langhorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 147–167.

10 Confirmation comes from Halifax himself, in his unpublished diaries, which Charmley consulted for his Churchill biography. John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory. A Political Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p. 404.

> to the press denouncing such an idea as "shameful" and the product of "dubious hindsight."[11]

But it is clear from the evidence produced by Ponting and Charmley that R. A. Butler and Halifax, followed by an untold number of Conservatives, still believed in the possibility of a negotiated peace even after the Fall of France.[12] The general point of course is not that the British Government was prepared to sell out to Hitler, but that the "All behind you, Winston" image does not rest on fact, since the "Old Gang" remained irreducible. Still, as Kevin Jefferys suggests,[13] Churchill knew that he benefited from the overwhelming support of the Labour and Liberal parties, which made his position impregnable, whatever the reticence on Conservative benches.[14]

No doubt the Labour leaders like Attlee or Bevin backed Churchill for patriotic reasons. As Malcolm Smith convincingly explains, "Right-wing, patrician political figures such as Winston Churchill had virtually nothing in common with working-class champions such as Ernest Bevin, except a shared belief that Chamberlain's appeasement had left Britain perilously exposed."[15] But they also had their own agenda. As Bevin put it in a speech of 1942: "We are Socialists, and this is the test of our Socialism […]. If our Movement and our class rise with all their energy now and save the people of this country from disaster, the country will turn with confidence forever to the people who saved them."[16] For Malcolm Smith, the cement in the Government was provided by the rapid succession of disasters or potential disasters, which left no time for the political intrigue which had plagued the Asquith Government in the First World War: "The coalition that came into being on 10 May 1940 might easily have been undone within months, had it not been for the events which succeeded it — the defeat in France, the threat of invasion, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz."[17] Thus, in a somewhat contorted logic, it is the apparently insurmountable military "odds" themselves which created the condition for overcoming the political "odds" against national unity and near unanimity against the enemy.

Overcoming the military odds

Chamberlain had founded his "Sitzkrieg" policy on a war of attrition against Germany, gradually asphyxiating the country by a naval blockade. But after the Fall of France, with Germany controlling the coastline from Norway to the

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11 Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory*, p. 422.

12 Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), p. 113. Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory*, pp. 423–424.

13 Kevin Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics, 1940–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

14 Churchill's early wartime relations with the Conservative Party are fully examined in Sheila Lawlor, *Churchill and the Politics of War, 1940–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

15 Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 91.

16 Ernest Bevin, *The Job To Be Done* (London: Heinemann, 1942), p. 26.

17 Smith, *Britain and 1940*, p. 91.

Pyrenees (in fact Portugal, considering Spain's fake neutrality), Britain faced the reverse situation, as German U-Boats posed a mortal threat to British supplies, especially food supplies since Britain only produced about half the food it consumed in peacetime. Military odds must therefore be understood in the widest sense, since they included what must be one of the oldest elements in the art of warfare, namely starving a besieged enemy into surrender. Curiously, the then current cliché of "Fortress Britain" was generally understood in classic terms of face-to-face combat, with the idea that British territory was or should be made impregnable by physical assault, and nobody seemed to refer to the disadvantage of being a fortress, that is isolation and eventual dependence on outside relief if supplies in food, equipment and ammunition cannot be maintained by home production. The word "sustainable" was not in common use at the time, but the sustainability of Fortress Britain's war effort after Dunkirk was in fact the crux of the matter.

Thus the precondition for the British will to resist to make sense was the organisation of national production and the available manpower with a view to achieving that sustainability. This was not arcane grand strategy, only accessible to the best brains in the High Command — it was basically a practical task, a job of household management which the general public could easily understand and therefore accept. The objective was seductively popular, since the main aim was to reduce private individual consumption of non-essential goods and foods — an egalitarian agenda which fitted in perfectly with another cliché of the time, "we are all in the same boat," and, as we saw, which had the full backing of the Labour Movement. In this sense, if the British decided to resist, they had no choice: the only possible course was then to accept the challenge of "Total War," which needed the active participation of every inhabitant in the Fortress. It is therefore no exaggeration, no "myth," to argue that the only two alternatives were surrender or a People's War.

Ever since 1940, historians have of course been discussing that elusive notion, the People's War, sometimes with a ferociously critical eye, and here I am not thinking so much of Ponting, Barnett[18] or Charmley, who primarily attack the elites, as of Pete Grafton in *You!, You! and You!: The People Out of Step with World War II*[19] who reproduces interviews with disaffiliated ordinary people who use their memories of the war years to pour scorn on the notion of solidarity and unanimity. Here is a typical example:

> All this stuff about Churchill's speeches being morale-boosting is utter rubbish. A lot of people had no time for him. One night when I was taken to the shelter I found a bug, not that I had not known bugs before, but I really objected to an unhygienic place where there were hundreds of people, and although I was young, my feelings about Churchill were expressed through-out the shelter along the lines of

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[18] Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

[19] Pete Grafton, *You!, You! and You!: The People Out of Step with World War II* (London: Pluto Press, 1981).

> "that dirty no-good bastard is sleeping in a beautiful bed tonight — why am I not?"[20]

And another one:

> Before the invasion of Normandy, the King — King George — came to inspect us. My usual experience was that I ended up being the person who was spoken to. This occasion wasnae any different. The King says to me "How do you like the army?" I told him I didnae like it. He said something like "Private something or another, there are lots of things you've got to do during the war." If looks could have killed me, everybody that passed me committed murder.[21]

It is important to notice that the two personal testimonies given above are post-Dunkirk. The first one must refer to the period after the start of the Blitz, that is from September 1940, and the second one obviously refers to 1944. In fact, Grafton explains that "Two omissions in the book are Dunkirk and life in prisoner of war camps,"[22] and of course the omission of Dunkirk greatly reduces the force of his argument, since it is obvious that a war-weary soldier on the eve of D-Day could not possibly have kept the "Dunkirk spirit" intact. The point here is that it seems extremely difficult to find evidence of dissentient voices in May-June 1940: many people may have become disillusioned later with all the talk of the "same boat" or the "People's War" — but then it was too late, as the choice to fight on had been made. Another difficulty is that one must not confuse the many extant narratives of disgust on the part of the troops returning from Dunkirk with a defeatist attitude. All the evidence shows that, on the contrary, their anger at the "Old Gang" was skilfully redirected towards adhesion to plans for a Better Britain after the war by books like *Guilty Men* and magazines like *Picture Post.*

Those who try to debunk what they call the Myth of 1940 also face the difficulty of the visible evidence of popular enthusiasm for the national campaigns in favour of the war effort. This enthusiasm may have been misguided, as when housewives donated their saucepans made of the wrong kind of aluminium to make more Spitfires, but it cannot be denied. And there is of course the overwhelming immediate response to Anthony Eden's call for the setting up of a corps of Local Defence Volunteers on 25 May — better known as the Home Guard, their official name from 23 July. By June, these volunteers were almost 1.5 million, a figure which makes it difficult to deny that there was massive support for the idea of voluntary service. The celebrated television series *Dad's Army* has often made them the butt of ridicule — nostalgic ridicule, though — but a serious author like Paul Addison writes: "It seems to me that one of the most intriguing aspects of British resistance in 1940 was the establishment of the guerilla Home Guard units intended to harass a German occupying force."[23] The idea was in fact largely derived from the ideas diffused by Tom Wintringham in

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20 Grafton, *You!, You! and You!*, pp. 25–26.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

23 Private correspondence (5 September 2001).

his numerous books, articles and pamphlets [24] and inspired from his experience as a volunteer in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. We have of course George Orwell's magnificent description of 1941: "a sort of People's Army officered by Blimps,"[25] and the motivation which he sees in them, "old-fashioned patriotism mixed up with ill-defined but genuine hatred of the Nazis"[26] is in no way a refutation of the "Spirit of Dunkirk." These of course were the men who no doubt fully approved of Low's cartoon in the *Evening Standard* of 7 June 1940, which showed a soldier back from Dunkirk angrily shouting "Very well, alone!" towards the Continental coast from the white cliffs of Dover. One irony, of course, is that the proprietor, Lord Beaverbrook, now Minister of Aircraft Production in Churchill's Government, had been an arch-appeaser and isolationist until the last minute. In a way, in fact, Beaverbrook's U-turn in May 1940 — and that of course of his principal newspapers like the *Daily Express* and the *Evening Standard* — can be seen as archetypal of the complexities and contradictions which characterised British attitudes in May-June 1940.

I would like to conclude by expanding that point. It seems that a large number of people have a commercial or political interest in perpetuating the "Alone / Fortress Britain / Finest Hour" trilogy uncritically. For instance, the commercial sector of mammoth television series followed by substantial sales of video tapes can only appeal to the lowest common denominator — after all, the function of profit-making enterprise is to maximise sales by reaching the widest possible market. And of course uneducated people do not buy disturbing stuff, but only productions which confirm their *a priori* "knowledge" of the subject. Likewise, serious politicians survive by maximising votes, not by peddling marginal theories. Wilson was adept at calling for a revival of the "Dunkirk Spirit" whenever the country was in financial difficulty during his Premiership — which was a frequent occurrence, of course. All biographers of Margaret Thatcher point to the parallel she wanted to establish between Churchill at the time of Dunkirk and herself during the Falklands crisis. More curiously, William Hague also used the motif during the Conservative Conference in October 1999:

> Winston Churchill and the British people, hand in hand, as we stood alone and saved Europe from tyranny. Rab Butler and the British people, hand in hand, as we extended free education and brought opportunity to millions of children. Harold Macmillan and the British people, hand in hand, as we brought prosperity to the cold, grey post-war era. Margaret Thatcher and John Major and the British people, hand in hand, as we freed the nation from state intervention.[27]

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[24] Notably *Armies of Freemen* (London: Routledge, 1940) and the Penguin Special, *New Ways of War* (1940).

[25] Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), vol. II, p. 141.

[26] Orwell and Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays of George Orwell*, Vol. II, p. 142.

[27] Quoted in *The Guardian*, 8 October 1999.

Against such examples of uncritical perpetuation of the Myth of 1940, we have the opposite extreme, for instance with Grafton's concluding lines: "I would suggest that the British war effort was maintained on the basis of threat and coercion, rather than on any volunteer spirit that prevailed amongst the majority of the population."[28] One could also call attention to the recent appearance of a book with the ultimate "revisionist" title, *Their Darkest Hour*.[29] In defining the British will to resist in 1940, few scholars would agree with either of the two extremes — not because of the legendary academic wariness of extremes, but simply because the evidence does not bear out a wholly black or wholly rosy picture. This only makes the modern commentator's task worse, because it seems impossible to take all the "ifs" and "buts" into account, it seems that nobody can hope to grasp the enormous number of factors which shape the collective consciousness of an inordinately complex community like the British population in 1940. In such a case, the limits of historical interpretation are in fact dictated by the limits of psychological investigation, which as we all know are very soon reached. All that can be offered, therefore, is reasoned speculation — as it seems unfortunately clear that no hard-and-fast definition of the British will to resist in 1940 can be arrived at.

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[28] Grafton, *You!, You! and You!*, p. 167.

[29] Stuart Hylton, *Their Darkest Hour: The Hidden History of the Home Front* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001). In reality, behind the sensationalist title, the book only covers well-trodden fields like "The Evacuees" (chapter 2) or "Women at war" (chapter 9), and the discussions of spivs and looting have been commonplace for at least the last twenty years in the published literature.