



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

Dunkirk: Miracle or Blunder?

From the print edition of The New American

Director Christopher Nolan produced a dramatic masterpiece with his *Dunkirk* movie this summer, bringing to the screen the story of how more than 300,000 British and Allied soldiers escaped either death or captivity from the French beaches of Dunkirk. From shortly after the event, the massive evacuation was referred to as “the miracle of Dunkirk.”



Others, however, have referred to it as “the blunder of Dunkirk,” referencing either decisions made by the French and the British leading up to what was really a military disaster for both those nations, or inexplicable decisions made by the German side, which made the mass evacuation possible.

The movie understandably concentrates on the heroism of British pilots of the Royal Air Force (RAF), the plight of the soldiers stranded on the beaches, and even the heroism of what historian Katherine Savage calls “the queerest armada in history,” in her book *The Story of the Second World War*, writing of the assortment of ships, including passenger ferry steamers, barges from the Thames estuary, tramp steamers, lifeboats, pleasure boats, oyster dredgers, motorboats, tugboats from the Port of London, fishing boats from southern coastal villages, yachts with converted motor car engines, speedboats, and even row boats, that rescued the thousands of soldiers from death or captivity. Large numbers of those involved in the rescue were British civilians, with varying degrees of navigational ability to cross the choppy waters of the English Channel.

A movie, no matter how well done, simply cannot cover all aspects of such a story, but the audience is left to wonder how the British and their allies even got into such a desperate situation.

After Germany had taken over Austria and Czechoslovakia, and began to demand from Poland the return of territory they had lost after the First World War in the Treaty of Versailles, the British and the French warned the Germans that any attempt on their part to settle the dispute over the Polish Corridor by force would lead to war with them. The Polish Corridor was land taken from Germany at Versailles in 1919 to give the Poles access to the Baltic Sea.

The Anglo-French promise stiffened Polish resolve not to negotiate with German Führer Adolf Hitler, and after the German army began its blitz across Poland on September 1, 1939, the British and the French, to Hitler’s surprise, declared war. In the 1925 Locarno Treaty, Germany had accepted its losses from World War I in western Germany (such as Alsace and Lorraine to France), but not the losses in the East. British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, the half-brother of future British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for the Locarno pact, said of the Polish Corridor that it was a creation “for which no British Government ever will and ever can risk the bones of a British Grenadier.”

Of course, there was nothing the British and French could do immediately to help the Poles, Poland being on the other side of Germany, but World War II had commenced. After Poland’s capitulation,



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

Hitler made a peace offer to Britain and France on October 6, but was bluntly turned down.

But nothing much happened on the “western” front until the following spring, in 1940. During this time, neither side initiated hostilities, and many began to refer to it as “the Phony War.” The French had constructed what they considered to be an impregnable line of defense, known as the Maginot Line, and instead of attacking the nation they had declared war upon, they waited for the Germans to make the first move.

The Attack on the Western Front

The German attack came on May 10, 1940, the same day that Winston Churchill was asked by King George VI to take the job of prime minister upon the resignation of Chamberlain. Because the Maginot Line was thought to be so strong, the French and British expected the attack would instead come through neutral Belgium. And the Germans did “feint” an attack through Belgium, but the main attack came south, through the Ardennes Forest in Luxembourg.

This was a total surprise, as the Ardennes was both hilly and heavily wooded, and thought to be totally unsuitable for the tank *blitzkrieg* (German for “lightning war”) that had crushed Poland in only a few days. French General Marshal Petain had said of the Ardennes, “This sector is not dangerous,” and the French placed less-regarded troops there to defend it.

As the Germans launched their feint through Belgium with 20 divisions and three panzer (tank) divisions, advancing 60 miles to the Dyle River, the British and the French prepared to meet what they mistakenly believed would be the main thrust. Then bad news began to arrive from the Ardennes. German General Gerd von Rundstedt was racing through the Ardennes with 44 divisions and seven panzer divisions.

French cavalry fled from German tanks, churning up the hills of the Ardennes, and the Germans reached the Meuse River 10 miles inside France by the evening of May 12, only two days into the attack. The line of tanks stretched about a hundred miles, back to the east side of the Rhine River. The tanks and infantry were followed by dive-bombing Stuka planes, and French troops attempting to stop the crossing of the Meuse collapsed under the horrific bombardment on May 14. The Germans crossed the Meuse on a 12-mile front.

Photo: AP Images

This article appears in the August 21, 2017, issue of The New American.

Early in the morning on May 15, Churchill was awakened by a phone call from French Premier Paul Reynaud. From Paris, he shouted, “We have been defeated! We are beaten!”

Churchill was stunned. He later explained, “I did not comprehend the violence of the revolution effected since the last war by the incursion of a mass of fast-moving armor.”

William Shirer, who was a news correspondent in Berlin at the time, later wrote in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, “And yet we who were in Berlin wondered why these German tactics should come as such a shattering surprise to the Allied leaders. Had not Hitler’s troops demonstrated their effectiveness in the campaign against Poland?”

The gap quickly widened, and on May 20, German tanks reached the French coast at Abbeville, cutting the Allied armies in two, isolating the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the north. The British had no



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

supply line of food and ammunition, and no retreat, except into the English Channel. The BEF dug in and fought bravely, but were ordered to retreat to the coast. The retreat was complicated by roads jammed with civilian refugees.

The Miracle of Dunkirk Begins

British General John Gort then made the decision to form a defensive line around the coastal city of Dunkirk, with miles of sandy beaches, with hope the Royal Navy could save them from annihilation. The situation worsened when Belgium surrendered on May 27, and the French and British had to do their best to close that huge hole in the lines.

The Dunkirk bridgehead was 20 miles long and five miles inland. The BEF defended the beaches, while the French First Division moved into position to block the Germans from the town of Dunkirk. At this point, "Operation Dynamo," the evacuation effort, began. Fortunately, British Admiral Bertram Ramsay, who was at Dover on the English side of the channel, had already been at work collecting available ships for the rescue effort, anticipating the military disaster.

It appeared grim, with Churchill hoping to save only 30,000 troops. The naval officers bravely predicted to the army officers, "We can give him, maybe, 45,000."

Operation Dynamo began at 6:57 p.m. on May 26, the evening of the National Day of Prayer. Over 850 vessels of all types began the evacuation, with 7,669 soldiers brought out on May 27, followed by 17,804 the next day. On May 29, 47,310 were evacuated, then 53,823 on May 30. Success continued on May 31, with 68,000 salvaged from the beaches of Dunkirk. The first day of June saw 64,429 more escape from the clutches of the Nazis.

By dawn on June 2, only 4,000 British soldiers remained, protected by 100,000 French troops. Over the next two days, the evacuation was completed for the BEF, and 60,000 French also escaped. Often neglected is the role that these gallant French soldiers played in helping to hold off the Germans until the evacuation was complete, with 40,000 of them being left behind.

The *Luftwaffe*, which was responsible for the sinking of 243 of the 861 boats and ships deployed in the evacuation, would have, no doubt, sunk even more had the RAF's Spitfires and Hurricanes not challenged them in the skies over the channel and on the coasts of France. Of course, many RAF pilots lost their lives in the gallant effort.

Addressing the House of Commons on June 4, Winston Churchill cautioned the British people that "wars are not won by evacuations."

He continued with what is certainly one of the greatest orations of the 20th century:

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.

The "miracle" of Dunkirk is that the British lost only 30,000 men, while saving 338,226 British and Allied troops from death or imprisonment.

It used to be well understood that a "miracle" implied a God who performs miracles. King George VI put out a call for his subjects to make Sunday, May 26, an observed National Day of Prayer. Millions of his



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

subjects from across the commonwealth and empire responded by filling the churches, with thousands more unable to get inside.

Some believed that God answered their prayers. A sudden storm enveloped the Flanders area on May 28, forcing the grounding of German Luftwaffe bombers that had been killing British soldiers on the beaches. The sandy beaches had already reduced the effects of the bombs, as the bombs sunk deep into the sand before exploding. That was followed by an unusually calm English Channel, so calm that some compared its usually turbulent waters to a “millpond.” This no doubt allowed many of the smaller boats, not designed for the ocean, to make the round trip successfully retrieving their human cargo.

Churchill called Dunkirk “a miracle of deliverance.”

The Mysterious Halt Order

Others pointed to the decision of the Nazi government to order a halt to the advance of their tanks and infantry, though some were as close as eight miles from Dunkirk, that allowed the BEF and their French allies to strengthen their defenses and hold off the Germans until the evacuation was complete.

On May 24, German General Heinz Guderian’s tanks had driven up the Channel from Abbeville, captured Boulogne, and surrounded Calais, only 20 miles from Dunkirk. Suddenly, the German armored units received the surprising order to halt their advance. Some cynically refer to *this* as the “miracle” of Dunkirk. Of course, an inexplicable decision by Hitler does not rule out Divine Intervention.

Shirer wrote, “Whatever the reasons for this stop order, it provided a miraculous reprieve to the Allies.” The tank crews were astounded. John Toland, writing in *Adolf Hitler*, said they could see the spires of Dunkirk in the distance.

The “halt order” has generated some of the greatest controversies of the war — who had the idea originally, and what was its purpose?

Some have placed the blame for the idea upon General von Rundstedt, but Rundstedt told Major Milton Shulman, a Canadian intelligence officer, after the war that it was not his decision: “My hands were tied by direct orders from Hitler himself.... This incredible blunder was due to Hitler’s personal idea of generalship.” To the inquisitors at the Nuremberg Trials, he added, “That was a very big mistake of the Commander.... How angry we leaders were at the that time is indescribable.”

General Franz Halder supports Rundstedt’s version of events. In a letter in 1957 to Shirer, he said, “Hitler’s decision was mainly influenced by Göring.... He offered to fight the rest of the great battle of encirclement alone with his *Luftwaffe*, thus eliminating the risk of having to use the valuable panzer formations.” Halder explained that Hitler’s lack of military training was overcome by anxiety that a reversal loomed. “Göring, who knew his Führer well, took advantage of this anxiety.... He wanted to secure for *his* Air Force, after the surprisingly smooth operations of the Army up to then, the decisive final act in the great battle and thus gain the glory of success before the whole world.”

General Alfred Jodl also complained, saying that Göring was “shooting off his big mouth again.” Göring assured Hitler, “Only fish bait will reach the other side. I hope the Tommies are good swimmers.”

Some have speculated that Hitler wanted to give Göring and the *Luftwaffe* more credit in the defeat of the BEF because Göring was a strong Nazi, and the *Luftwaffe* was much more “Nazified” than the army. While logical, actual evidence for this conclusion is sorely lacking.



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

Halder's contemporaneous entry in his diary for May 26, "These orders from the top just make no sense," demonstrates his puzzlement at the time of the bewildering incident. "We could not understand why we let so many get away," recalled Hans von Luck, who commanded a panzer company.

On the evening of May 26, Hitler finally allowed the armored advance toward Dunkirk, but by then it was too late. Halder said that by that time, "the cornered enemy had had time to strengthen his defenses."

What Was Hitler's Motive With the Halt Order?

Why had Hitler held up his own tanks, thus saving the British Expeditionary Force from extinction?

The historical evidence is quite strong that Hitler had never really wanted a war with the British, and believed allowing the beaten British to escape might be the best thing — for Germany. He had often expressed his admiration for the British Empire to his generals, to Fascist Italian leaders Galeazzo Ciano and Benito Mussolini, and to many others. "To bring England to her knees by force," he told his generals, "would not benefit Germany," but those who would benefit would be "Japan, the United States, and others."

"It may be," Shirer wrote, "that Hitler restrained his armored forces before Dunkirk in order to spare Britain a bitter humiliation and thereby facilitate a peace settlement."

Thomas Ricks, who has covered the U.S. military for the *Wall Street Journal*, writes in *Foreign Policy*, "One group of historians argue that Hitler, still hoping for a peace settlement with the British, stopped his tanks in order, as [British historian] Stephen Bungay put it, to 'avoid inflicting a humiliating defeat on the British' that would make them less willing to negotiate."

Ricks adds, "The historical record is mixed, but one quite persuasive piece of evidence is that Hitler's order stopping his ground forces was sent unencrypted, making it possible for the British to hear and understand it immediately as a kind of peace offering."

Hitler later expressed regret that he had let the British off too easily at Dunkirk. Ricks quotes General Walter Warlimont as saying that Hitler told him, "Churchill was quite unable to appreciate the sporting spirit of which I have given proof by refraining from creating an irreparable breach between the British and ourselves. We did, however, refrain from annihilating them at Dunkirk."

Finally, Hitler even told one of Rundstedt's generals who expressed that he could not understand why the halt order was issued, that his aim was to "make peace with Britain on a basis that she would regard as compatible with her honor to accept."

Ian Kershaw, who has written two books on Hitler, dismissed such comments as Hitler just trying to save face for having made a poor decision. Other historians have expressed similar sentiments.

What type of peace settlement did Hitler envision? According to Jodl, even before the Dunkirk evacuation, right after the initial breakthrough in the Ardennes, Hitler busied himself "with the peace treaty which shall express this theme: return of territory robbed over the last 400 years from the German people." That did not, of course, require the dismemberment of the British Empire.

Toland writes of Hitler's reaction when he learned that the bulk of the BEF was going to escape from his grasp. "Oddly, the continuing evacuation did not seem to perturb Hitler. It was almost as though it was no concern of his. While Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch [the army chief of staff] and Halder



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

frantically looked for ways to stop the steady flow to England, the Führer responded haltingly, almost lackadaisically.”

Hitler told his generals who were quite agitated at the ongoing evacuation, “It is always good to let a broken army return home to show the civilian population what a beating that they have had.” He told his private secretary Martin Borman that he had purposefully spared the English, and he told architect Frau Gerdy Troost, “The blood of every single Englishman is too valuable to be shed. Our two people belong together, racially and traditionally — this is and always has been my aim even if our generals can’t grasp it.”

Andre Francois-Pocet, the French ambassador to Germany during the time before the war, was convinced that Hitler never really wanted war with England, but only to neutralize them, which is essentially what Hitler told Ciano and Mussolini on June 18, 1940, two weeks after the “miracle” at Dunkirk. He told them that he had no desire to destroy the British Empire, because they were “too important a factor in world equilibrium.”

Is this possible? After all, this is the Hitler who was responsible for the Holocaust, and who had created a totalitarian regime in Germany, with intentions to eventually crush the Christian churches in Germany. Albert Speer, Hitler’s chief of armaments, wrote in his memoir, *Inside the Third Reich*, that Hitler was only postponing the abolition of Christianity until a more “favorable” time, considering the traditional Christian faith an “absurdity,” dismissing it as “humbug” all founded on “lies.”

Because of the monstrous evil of the National Socialist (Nazi) dictatorship led by Hitler, it is assumed that he was some sort of “madman” who wanted to rule the whole world. And if he wanted to rule the entire world, the destruction of the British Empire would be an obvious step to achieve that goal.

But if Hitler did not even have the military capability to get across the 21 miles of water that separated Britain from the continent, how was he going to rule the Earth? His navy was incapable of transporting his soldiers across the Channel — they could not even stop the evacuations from Dunkirk. Hitler made no effort to build a navy to challenge the British. He believed that the Kaiser’s decision to build a High Seas Fleet so as to challenge Britain’s supremacy of the seas was “monumental folly.” He argued that this only turned the British into an enemy and had pushed them into an entente with France prior to WWI.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote, “We must stop the endless German movement to the south and west of Europe, and turn our gaze to the land in the East.” That land was “Russia and her vassal border states.”

Sir Roy Denman wrote in *Missed Chances: Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century*, “Hitler ... had no basic quarrel with Britain.... His territorial aims were in Central and Eastern Europe and further east. He could never understand why the British constantly sought to interfere.”

Even after the British lost Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942, Hitler refused to issue a statement gloating about it. According to Denman, “[Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister] had dictated a gloating announcement. Hitler tore it up.” Hitler explained to Ribbentrop, “We have to think of centuries. Who knows, in the future, the Yellow Peril may be the biggest one for us.”

Was it possible that Hitler’s hope for a peaceful settlement in the aftermath of Dunkirk could have happened? Today, it is portrayed that the British government was united behind Churchill’s determination to continue the war, but as historians often say of such events in the past that could have



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

turned out differently, “It was a close thing.”

Five members of Churchill’s War Cabinet met on May 27, during the early hours of the evacuation. Lord Halifax, the foreign minister, believed that the British should negotiate peace while the French were still fighting. Churchill adamantly disagreed, and carried the day.

Churchill is now seen as a dominating figure of the war, but at the time he had only been prime minister for a few weeks. Had he taken the Halifax position, he would probably have gone the way of Chamberlain, the former prime minister, who resigned. Ricks quotes Churchill at another Cabinet meeting: “If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood on the ground.”

Many have given Churchill credit for saving the world, because, they contend, had Britain made peace with Hitler, Hitler could have continued on his supposed plan to conquer the world.

Yet once the Battle of Britain was over, the *Luftwaffe* was certainly no threat to America. After all, if they could not defeat the RAF a little over 20 miles away, how were the Germans going to cross the Atlantic Ocean and attack the United States?

As historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote in his excellent study, *The Origins of the Second World War*, the conventional explanation is that the failure to resist Hitler earlier was the cause of the Second World War. This has, of course, been the neoconservative mantra in calling for practically every military intervention in recent years. To them, every two-bit thug dictator around the world is “another Hitler,” and every refusal to attack the latest incarnation of “Hitler” is “another Munich,” where Chamberlain appeased Hitler in 1938. For the neoconservatives, it is always 1938, and if we don’t put “boots on the ground,” then we are going to have another global war.

This is why a better understanding of the Second World War is still important today. Just because a foreign leader is a brutal dictator does not mean that we face “another Hitler.” The “miracle of Dunkirk” is certainly an example of how the obvious lessons of history can be missed if someone has previously made certain assumptions. If one assumes that Hitler was out to take over the world (which was unrealistic even if that had been his desire — he simply did not have the resources or the population to accomplish such an ambitious goal), then the British escape from Dunkirk makes no sense. But if seen in the light that Hitler’s goal was not to go to war with the British to begin with, but rather to attack the Soviet Union in the East instead, then the decision to hold up the tanks before Dunkirk becomes understandable.

Still, the escape from Dunkirk played a large role in the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany. Near the end of the movie *Dunkirk*, we see an old man handing out blankets to the soldiers returning to England from the beaches of Dunkirk. As he gives each soldier a blanket, he tells them, “Well done.” One soldier, clearly understanding that Dunkirk was a humiliating defeat, replied in puzzlement, “All we did is survive.”

“That’s enough,” the old man replies, perhaps showing the wisdom that comes with age — or should come with age.

And that is what happened in what is known to history as “the miracle of Dunkirk” when more than 300,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force in France were saved from death or captivity. Many of these men returned four years later to French beaches at Normandy as part of the D-Day invasion,



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

which began the liberation of France from the rule of Nazi Germany.

They had survived to fight again. And even though the old myth that Hitler was out to conquer the world has little evidence to commend it, they did their part to bring down one of history's most evil regimes.

We can say with the old man, "That's enough."

Photo: AP Images



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 21, 2017

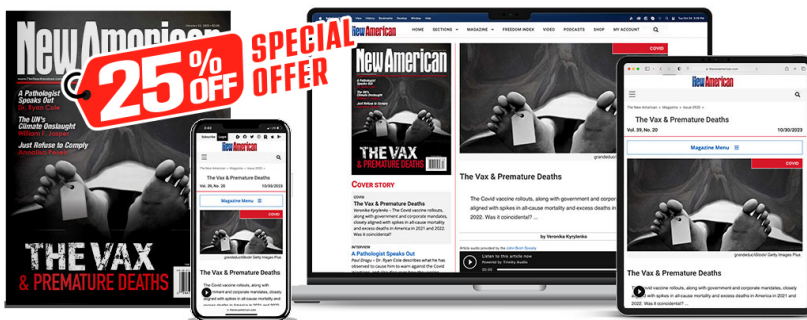
Published in the August 21, 2017 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 33, No. 16

Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative, non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



[Subscribe](#)

What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.