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The Long Defeat – Glimpses of Final Victory: The Years of the Locust

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Abstract

An examination of Tolkien's conception of history, the crisis of unpreparedness preceding the Second World War, and a relating of the story of Churchill's warnings and eventual ascension to the position of Prime Minister. This study will compare the historical perspective of Tolkien, as represented in his fictional works, with the turmoil that transpired during the early days of WWII. Mostly, it will demonstrate how Tolkien's view of history manifested itself within the context of the very perilous realities leading up to WWII. Nonetheless, a larger portrait of the nation of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, and their joint struggle to both realize Britain's full potential and awaken the world to the evils of Nazism and fascism are brought to the forefront. From a certain standpoint, they appear to be a distinctive and prime example of those who aspired to fight courageously, having in mind only the justice of their cause rather than the great odds standing against it and the suffering sure to come. Decency, goodness, self-sacrifice, and certain faith that final victory would ultimately come to those who fought for such things while bearing their cross righteously through the storms of war and defeat, were all ideals that Tolkien valued and continue to figure into the great play of our universe. Moreover, on a sub-celestial level, they figured prominently in the minds and hearts of the war-weary British people and their steadfast leader as well as all those who gave their life for the cause of freedom in the Second World War.

Keywords

Tolkien, Churchill, World War II, Dunkirk, The Lord of the Rings

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The Long Defeat—Glimpses of Final Victory: The Years of the Locust

Evan Lanning

History and Government

“... together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat . . . For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail; but only in knowing what was and is, and in part also what shall be. But this I will say to you: your Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while all the Company is true.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

“In the bitter and increasingly exacting conflict which lies before us we are resolved to keep nothing back, and not to be outstripped by any in service to the common cause. Let the great cities of Warsaw, of Prague, of Vienna, banish despair even in the midst of their agony. Their liberation is sure. The day will come when the joybells will ring again throughout Europe, and when victorious nations, masters not only of their foes, but of themselves, will plan and build in justice, in tradition, and in freedom, a house of many mansions where there will be room for all.”

“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 upon the ground.”

— Winston S. Churchill

“The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet, notwithstanding, go out to meet it.”

— Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

Introduction

John Ronald Reuel (J.R.R.) Tolkien, a veteran of the First World War and a prolific author of fantasy, once wrote of the “long defeat”, a summation of his philosophy of history. His notions of good and evil, right and wrong, and fighting for dignity, truth, and justice, even if all seemed hopeless – indeed, fighting in spite of the assured outcome – surface many times throughout his beloved epic *The Lord of the Rings*. This lofty and honorable ideal is clearly identified in the words of Galadriel, the immortal and wise Elf and Lady of Light over Lothlórien. Referring to her marriage with Celeborn, she says, “He has dwelt in the West since the days of dawn, and I have dwelt with him years uncounted; for ere the fall of Nargothrond or Gondolin I passed over the

mountains, and together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.”¹ But while these immortal elves know how desperate the struggle has been in Middle-Earth, they are entirely aware of their destiny and “what shall be.” It is only by knowing this and holding true to it, as Galadriel later makes clear to the Fellowship, that she is able to serve them in their perilous Quest against the evil embodied by the Dark Lord Sauron: “For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail; but only in knowing what was and is, and in part also what shall be.”² This great Lady of Light is herself a symbol to their cause. Though she possesses wisdom and powers of foresight and clairvoyance that would enable her to provide very wise counsel as to the path ahead, she tells the Fellowship any choice instruction from her does not compare to the guidance she provides through the greater knowledge of eternal truths.

Thus, the idea of the “long defeat” is not without hope. The Elves know that someday, when the time comes, they will sail west from the Grey Havens to Valinor, the Blessed Realm. This land of peace and rest where the Blessed dwell is protected from all wars and afflictions of Middle-Earth. The perfection they so distantly recall will once again appear after thousands of years of fighting evil in Middle-Earth. Nevertheless, the Elves are destined to inhabit the decaying environs of Middle-Earth literally for ages. They long for the way things were, as they remember them, and for the world to remain as such forever. Deathlessness makes the constantly changing cycles of Middle-Earth – and the endless chain of death – too much for the Elves to bear. Quite dissimilar from Men, Elves are designed for a static world of perfection. Because of their immortality, they are not impassioned with the same urgency as Men to make a mark on the world of Middle-Earth. The story of the Elves is as much a tragedy for them as it is for the humans of Middle-Earth, perhaps more so. Indeed, their immortality is as much a curse as it is a blessing. By contrast, it is mankind’s fate to experience the diminishing world for a short time before passing out of the Circles of the World after death. Though Elves and Men possess differing paths of destiny, they share the burden of Middle-Earth’s chaos and evils. But along the way, there are certain shared lights of victory. However short and however small they may be, they all point to a definite and final victory, at least that seems to have been Tolkien’s purpose. “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic,” he states in one of his letters, “so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’ – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.”³

Accordingly, his depiction of the “long defeat” and the glimpses of “final victory” to come in the Middle-Earth fantasy epic were concepts just as applicable to this real earth from Tolkien’s perspective. The prelude to WWII and the first year of its devastation was surely a great example of this outlook. Though as a Christian, Tolkien no doubt considered this earth’s final victory to be the Second Coming of Christ, on a more basic level one might draw a parallel between the dramatic events of the Second World War and Tolkien’s conception of history in general. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder how much of Tolkien’s work was influenced by the political events of that time, given that he wrote *The Lord of the Rings* over the course of twelve years, beginning in 1937.⁴

Interestingly, Tolkien fought in the First World War and participated in one of its most devastating battles—the Battle of the Somme. Like one other notable participant of the Great War, Winston

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 347-8; italics mine.

² *Ibid.*, 348.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), Letter 195.

⁴ “Timeline,” The Tolkien Society, January 7, 2017, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.tolkiensociety.org/author/timeline/#top>.

Churchill, Tolkien managed to survive its onslaughts while emerging from the cultural wasteland that followed without succumbing to the despair and moral disillusionment that came to characterize the post-WWI society. As Joseph Loconte and other authors have argued, it was Tolkien's faith that sustained him through the difficult circumstances of war. Along with his faith, Tolkien was in large part influenced by his wartime service causing him to implement ideas of both heroism and otherworldly intervention into his many fantasy stories. Similarly, Churchill always held to a heroic ideal of chivalric honor that influenced him throughout his career and public life. But more to the point, Churchill's view of history was quite similar to Tolkien's. Much like Tolkien's sober outlook on history as being a "long defeat," Churchill once wrote that "the story of the human race is War."⁵ While Tolkien and Churchill were no enthusiasts for war, they recognized it as a tragic necessity that was unavoidable in a world marked by evil. Nonetheless, they each believed that there was some cosmic power shaping the fortunes of humanity, imbuing the world and each individual's life with meaning and moral purpose while allowing for the dimmest of hopes to be realized. As Tolkien sought to rescue society from its cynicism and hopelessly ignorant trend toward pacifism through his literary works, the same view of history he fused into his works could be seen playing out prior to WWII—a struggle of tumultuous economic and political upheaval which proved to be decades-long. Moreover, the same dynamic of Tolkien's "long defeat" and "final victory" was reflected through the life of one of its greatest leaders, Winston Churchill, whose many failures, flaws, and basic unpopularity, made his rise completely unexpected. Accordingly, from studying the prelude to WWII and the life of Churchill, one is reminded that Tolkien's view of history, which he incidentally embeds into his fantasy works, is extraordinarily true to life.

It is what Tolkien referred to as "hope without guarantees" that his heroes confront time and again.⁶ And it is not all unlike the fateful circumstances in May of 1940, when, in a matter of days, the shroud of Nazi darkness covered the Continent of Europe, leaving only one Island and one unwavering leader to free her from the awful "menace of tyranny" and the tightening "grip of the Gestapo."⁷ At this, the darkest of hours, one lonely man stepped forth to put his words to war, for, besides words, there was not much left with which to fight. Winston Churchill, a man of incredible gifts and oratory flair, would give to his countrymen what they already had: hope. Yet, in giving voice to their rugged hope, he would renew the true spirit with which it ought to be carried, a spirit of hope that would stand firm regardless of the chances for success, regardless of how bad things got. This spirit of hope would fight to the end, even if that end meant death. For, like Tolkien's hero Samwise Gamgee in the film adaptation of *The Two Towers*, Britons would come to realize that "There's some good in this world . . . and it's worth fighting for." And like Churchill, they and the rest of the world would, in the end, fully understand that defending Britain and the ideals she stood for against the wave of Nazi evil was indeed worth fighting for – "whatever the cost."

"The war to end all wars" ending only through armistice, then a treaty tending only towards treachery; failure upon failure to enforce key provisions and redress grievances; the demands of global depression; the illusion of disarmament; the follies of appeasement; defeat after defeat; misery unto anguish; life into death; freedom questioned then vanquished; and fascism declared:

⁵ Winston S. Churchill, "Shall We All Commit Suicide?" (New York: Eilert Publishing Company, 1924), 1.

⁶ "Tolkien and the Long Defeat," *The Gospel Coalition*, December 10, 2013, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tolkien-and-the-long-defeat/>.

⁷ Winston Churchill, "Winston Churchill: We Shall Fight on the Beaches – edited," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2007, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/20/greatspeeches3>.

these were the defining elements of the interwar period. Yet, glimpses of light, small but piercing through the shadowy darkness, foretold of a greater plan still to come. This plan would tell of a great defeat but a “fool’s hope” amidst the desolation.⁸ It would also tell of an even greater victory at the end of that defeat, one in which the victors would find courage and inspiration not from their level of strength or any likelihood of success but from their knowledge of the eternal and unassailable truths that man is born free and that good, in the end, must triumph, whether or not evil has already laid waste to all that is fair and true.

Though many things in this world that bring hope do not come with full, palpable assurances here on earth, some things are so clearly the hand of the Divine that it would be foolish to claim otherwise. One particular officer in World War I knew this well – very well in fact. On November 26, 1915, six days after joining the second battalion of the Grenadier Guards as a Major under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Jeffreys, this forty-year-old veteran of the British Army found himself soldiering on once again. This time he was not atop a horse, galloping across the British Empire as a cavalry officer, taking in the morning mist of India or fighting to reconquer the Sudan in the hot desert climate of Omdurman. Now he was in the miry trenches of a French winter, only three miles behind the front lines. The story goes that a message from Lieutenant General Richard Haking summoned the Major to meet him at Merville. But when he reached the rendezvous point at which he was to find a car and driver, no one appeared. Due to heavy shelling, the escort had to abandon his vehicle and did not make it until hours later by foot. In the end, there was no meeting with the corps commander after all. It had actually been canceled, and the Major was annoyed that the whole ordeal “had resulted in ‘dragging [him] about in rain & wind for nothing.’”⁹ However, the Major returned to the trenches “only to discover that, a mere fifteen minutes after he had left, a German shell had exploded just a few feet from where he had been sitting.”¹⁰ This particular Major was none other than Winston Churchill himself. One of his comrades had died from the blast, and the small bunker in which they had been sitting was destroyed. Churchill would later say that he “was not so angry with the general after all” once he found the place in ruins.¹¹

Indeed, it was not for nothing. Destiny (or Providence) had once again preserved Churchill’s life. For what reason, Churchill could only wait and see. Nonetheless, at a young age he seemed to have possessed the surest sense of destiny. When he was sixteen, he had told his friend and fellow student Murland de Grasse Evans what he believed the future would hold for him. Though unsure about how he would begin – whether it would be the army or politics like his father – the young Churchill said that he had dreams about his future and had “a wonderful idea of where [he] shall be eventually.”¹² The remainder of the conversation was nothing short of remarkable. Churchill predicted he would play a very important role in defending London amid the calamities of war, a very odd and high-minded thing to say – at least, so it seemed, from Murland Evans’ point of view. London was in the middle of peace and great progress – not having experienced invasion since the days of Napoleon – so Murland thought. But years later, once Churchill’s predictions turned out to be essentially true, Evans would write a letter to Randolph Churchill telling him that he “was so

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 797.

⁹ Jonathan Sandys and Wallace Henley, *God and Churchill* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² Sandys and Henley, *God and Churchill*, 4.

'stunned' by the conversation that he 'recorded it with utmost clarity.'" ¹³ The letter's contents reveal just how prescient Churchill really was. At sixteen he had said, "This country will be subjected somehow, to a tremendous invasion, by what means I do not know, but I tell you I shall be in command of the defences of London, and I shall save London and England from disaster."¹⁴

When Murland Evans had asked young Churchill if he would be a general commanding troops, he said he did not know: "Dreams of the future are blurred, but the main objective is clear. . . . I repeat—London will be in danger and in the high position I shall occupy, it will fall to me to save the Capital and save the Empire."¹⁵

After experiencing many setbacks and failures, most recently with the overseeing of the Battle of Gallipoli, Major Churchill perhaps received a new surety and humility with which to aspire once again. The near-death experience must have reminded him that something – or Someone – was overseeing his very life. Here, near the front lines of danger, after the humiliation of Gallipoli, those words of his youth may have come back to inspire and comfort him as he soon undertook the next steps of public life with growing confidence and with the same sense of duty that brought him ever closer to discovering his life's significance, a significance that was mandated, protected, and secured by destiny and, on several occasions, quite clearly by the works of Divine intervention.

The hour had arrived. After years of warning his compatriots of the rise of fascism and Nazism, Winston Churchill was finally recognized as the voice of reason on this one point. Though he had been wrong about many things throughout his long career as a Member of Parliament and minister, he was right about Hitler and, consequently, about the necessity of rearming. On May 10, as Hitler and his army of "malignant Huns" struck all at once against Western Europe, invading the Low Countries (Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Belgium), Churchill entered 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister and began forming a government at the request of King George VI.¹⁶ While Germany defiantly moved across neutral Netherlands and Belgium towards France, the French and British armies made a desperate attempt to rush to the aid of distant Belgian and Dutch armies. The ominous silence, as the armies were finally allowed to enter the Neutral countries in their defense, revealed a German trap was underway. Though the hour was grim and bespoke of dark days ahead, with the appointment of Churchill as Prime Minister, it seemed as if "the uncanny symmetry of history [had] supplied the antidote in the very instant of administering the poison."¹⁷

But was it too late? The policies of his predecessors, Neville Chamberlain and Stanley Baldwin, had not set Churchill and the new Government on the surest of footing when it came to war policy. Indeed, it seemed Chamberlain was still in denial about having to make war policy, or at least reluctant to do so considering the fact he had promised "peace for our time."¹⁸ Later, Churchill would have to deal with the formidable pressure and influence of Chamberlain, who, along with Lord Halifax, continued to believe diplomacy with Hitler was an option. Fortunately, the British were beginning to align their outlooks with Churchill, someone who treated war against Germany

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sandys and Henley, *God and Churchill*, 4.

¹⁶ Larry P. Arnn, *Churchill's Trial* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 3.

¹⁷ Philip Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill* (Cornwall, NY: Cornwall Press, 1942), 289.

¹⁸ British Historical Documents: "Peace for Our Time," 1938, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/peacetime.html>.

as an enormous challenge to be tackled head on rather than as a depressing emergency to be navigated. For almost a decade, Churchill was one of the few in Parliament urging Britain to fortify its military in light of Germany's increasing efforts to rearm. Germany was acting in direct defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, and by 1935 Hitler had abandoned the treaty altogether.¹⁹ As Hitler's unchecked belligerence and the threat of fascism gained momentum in Germany and other parts of the world, Churchill continued his warning cries calling for swift rearmament and collective action through the League of Nations:

"Such a policy does not close the door upon a revision of the Treaties, but it procures a sense of stability, and an adequate gathering together of all reasonable Powers for self-defence, before any inquiry of that character can be entered upon. In this august association for collective security we must build up defence forces of all kinds and combine our action with that of friendly Powers, so that we may be allowed to live in quiet ourselves and retrieve the woeful miscalculations of which we are at present the dupes, and of which, unless we take warning in time, we may some day [sic] be the victims."²⁰

Churchill did not want war. He was not – as some maligned him – a warmonger or a drunken fool. On the contrary, he was "looking for peace" and "looking for a way to stop war."²¹ His solution was based on strength and action, not weakness. Germany could not be allowed to violate international law without punitive measures from law-abiding nations. And if those measures were not successful, punitive force had to be an option. It is a principle that has preserved today's volatile world from falling into the ruins of another global conflagration: international law must be supported by the deterrence of security and military force if necessary. Unfortunately, it took World War II – the largest and costliest war in history – for the lesson to be learned.²² Such ideas relating to international security, fused into the United Nations Charter after the war, partly took their cue from the New Commonwealth Society, of which Churchill, serving as the body's president, referred to in a 1937 speech as being "one of the few peace societies that advocates the use of force, if possible overwhelming force, to support public international law."²³ But Churchill's suggestion in 1936 for a "Grand Alliance of all the nations who wish for peace against the Potential Aggressor, whoever he may be" went unheeded until the spring of 1939.²⁴ Over these critical years, as it became ever clearer who the "Potential Aggressor" would be, Churchill exerted every effort in calling for Britain's own military and national defenses to be modernized. He called for an organized aircraft industry, highlighted the deficiencies of the Royal Air Force, and sought to set up a Ministry of Munitions Supply. And, presciently, he stressed the need for anti-aircraft research and for some attention to what was in 1936 the very distant chance of an airborne invasion.²⁵

¹⁹ History.com Staff, "Treaty of Versailles," History.com, 2009, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaty-of-versailles>; Robert Cowley and Geoffrey Parker, eds., *The Reader's Companion to Military History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

²⁰ Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill*, 256.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

²² *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. "World War II," accessed March 23, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II>.

²³ James W. Muller, ed., *Churchill's "Iron Curtain" Speech Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 101.

²⁴ Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill*, 258.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

As the war-weary British people finally began to wake up to German aggression, the politicians could slowly get in line behind Churchill. Indeed, some, such as Mr. Baldwin, had privately indicated agreement as early as 1936, but, for fear of their political futures, they were unwilling to speak truthfully before the public about the growing threat of Hitler. Though Baldwin recognized the need to deter Germany by rearming, it had come at the forceful prodding of Churchill, who continued to receive startling and classified intelligence from contacts in the Government's Foreign Office; this time concerning the size of the German Luftwaffe.²⁶ Nonetheless, Baldwin's recognition was not met by the sort of immediacy and urgency that Churchill had long been awaiting. With Baldwin dragging his feet, and obvious signs that "the scale of [Britain's] arms production was still not adequate to meet a German threat in 1937 or 1938," Churchill somberly lambasted the state of affairs.²⁷ Deprecating the Government's argument that instituting a Ministry of Supply would somehow turn Britain "into one vast munitions camp," Churchill addressed the House saying:

Anyone can see what the position is. The Government simply cannot make up their minds, or they cannot get the Prime Minister to make up his mind. So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent. So we go on preparing more months and years – precious, perhaps vital to the greatness of Britain – for the locusts to eat. They will say to me, 'A Minister of Supply is not necessary, for all is going well.' I deny it. 'The position is satisfactory.' It is not true. 'All is proceeding according to plan.' We know what that means.²⁸

Quite provoked by this attack, Baldwin tried to deflect Churchill's criticism that he was furthering and, in part, responsible for "The Locust Years" of 1934 and 1935. The explanation for the delay came with what would be perhaps Baldwin's worst moment. In an apparently unscripted moment, he admitted that, in order to win, he had waited to announce the need for rearmament until after the General Election of 1935:

Supposing I had gone to the country and said that Germany was rearming and that we must rearm, does anybody think that this pacific democracy would have rallied to that cry at that moment? I cannot think of anything that would have made the loss of the election from my point of view more certain.²⁹

This duplicity, or "squalid confession," as Churchill later wrote, contributed to the growing perception of Baldwin as a weak and somewhat declining figure in politics.³⁰ Combined with his Government's very poor handling of the Abyssinia crisis – in which Mussolini had his way, the League of Nations was ignored, and Fascist Italy became emboldened to conquer Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) – the blunder in Parliament brought Baldwin to the lowest point in his political career, and he began looking for the right moment to leave. ³¹ That moment came after his successful handling of the Abdication crisis, which was met with general approval by the public. To

²⁶ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 560.

²⁷ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 567.

²⁸ Churchill's Speeches: "The Locust Years," November 12, 1936, accessed March 25, 2018. <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/Locusts.html>; italics mine.

²⁹ Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill*, 260.

³⁰ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 567.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 548.

Baldwin's credit, his refusal to let King Edward VIII marry the twice-divorced Mrs. Simpson – which resulted in the King giving up his throne – averted a constitutional crisis and perhaps worse problems, given that the couple were Nazi sympathizers and admirers of Hitler.³²

Having resigned on a high note in the spring of 1937 not long after the coronation of George VI, Baldwin gave up the premiership to his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain. Though year after year the House of Commons and its leaders had ignored Churchill's pleadings for rearmament, the great attention he received at a meeting with the Conservative Committee on military defense had offered him some hope that they were waking up.³³ The deaths within three months of two of Churchill's friends and key allies in the call for rearmament, MP Austen Chamberlain and informant Ralph Wigram, seemed to have depressed his spirits. However, despite their deaths, and despite the loss of two powerful voices to this imperative cause of strengthening Britain's defenses, Churchill remained hopeful. He provided encouragement to Wigram's widow, noting the light Ralph was through their long battle for Britain's future:

He was one of those – how few – who guard the life of Britain. Now he is gone – and on the eve of this fateful year. Indeed it is a blow to England and to all that England means . . . And you? What must be your loss? But you still will have a right to dwell on all that you did for him. You shielded that bright steady flame that burned in the broken lamp. But for you it would long ago have been extinguished, and its light would not have guided us thus far upon our journey.³⁴

Much to Churchill's frustration, Neville Chamberlain would prove as inept as Baldwin in overseeing Britain's defense. And much to Churchill's anger, Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler at the Munich Conference meant the loss of the fortified Sudetenland to the Nazis and thus the loss of support from what was formerly a stout and capable Czechoslovakian military. Nonetheless, Britain's response to the Munich Agreement signaled a growing light in the minds of the British people. Though a crowd of 5,000 gathered in front of 10 Downing Street to embrace Neville Chamberlain as he gave his infamous "Peace for Our Time" speech, less than a mile away in Trafalgar Square there were 16,000 people demonstrating against the agreement.³⁵ The Government had not only left Czechoslovakia in the dark – at the mercy and disposal of Hitler – they had left their own people in the dark through careful censorship and manipulation of the media. Listeners of the BBC heard next to nothing about what actually took place in the meetings with Hitler, and the extent of their knowledge was mostly based off of two recorded statements made by Chamberlain, one before leaving for Germany and the other on his return.³⁶ What could not be hidden, however, was Hitler's lust for domination that had already stretched its hand across Austria, the Rhineland, and now the Sudetenland. The distrust of Hitler was solidifying once it became apparent Germany was taking over the rest of Czechoslovakia; Hitler's promise that he did

³² Christopher Klein, "The Scandalous Romance That May Have Saved the British Monarchy," History.com, 2016, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/the-scandalous-romance-that-may-have-saved-the-british-monarchy>.

³³ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 570.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 571.

³⁵ Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the British Road to War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 126. According to a British public opinion poll taken in March 1938, around six months before the Munich Agreement, fifty-eight percent of those surveyed said they did not support Chamberlain's foreign policy (see 127).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 125 and 127.

not want any more land in Europe was just another one of his schemes. His word was indeed worthless.

Emboldened after having his way at Munich, Hitler began to set his eye of treachery against the ideas of the West. Sensing the potential threat Churchill and other backbenchers posed to his plans, Hitler sought to disparage them before the enactment of his policies betrayed previous promises for the lies that they were. Particularly worried about Churchill, who had called for opponents of Nazism within Germany to make their voices heard, Hitler issued an indirect attack against him when he “warned the democracies of the world of the ‘dangers’ of free speech, especially ‘freedom for war-mongering.’”³⁷ The absurdity of the remark was exposed three days later when Hitler directed Kristallnacht, the night of widespread terrorism, destruction, and violence against the Jewish people, which resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands more being sent to concentration camps. If there was any moment when Britons would hear the cries of Churchill for a Ministry of Supply, it had to be now. But, alas, Parliament stood in his way, and they would have none of it. Chamberlain rashly called into question Churchill’s judgment, and the motion for a Ministry of Supply was soundly defeated in the House.³⁸ Churchill was disgusted by the result and wrote to a friend, “Chamberlain has now got away with everything. Munich is dead, the unpreparedness forgotten, and there is to be no real, earnest, new effort to arm the nation. Even the breathing space, purchased at hideous cost, is to be wasted.”³⁹

In defiance of Britain and France’s warnings, Hitler’s Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. When the two allies declared war a couple of days later, it did not come with an immediate military plan to confront the complicated situation in Poland. Moreover, they needed time to do what they ought to have done years before—rearm. Without Churchill’s vigorous attention and private correspondence with Government Ministers relating to the issue of Britain’s security, the fate of freedom would have been even more desperate than indeed it was. For as it stood, Britain was declaring war on a power that was close to four times its size in terms of airpower, not to mention Germany’s well-advanced strategy and highly developed military machinery. Britain’s reliance on France for infantry was fundamental to the Allies’ plan. Yet the beginning of the war would mostly revolve around the sea. Consequently, in Britain the central figure at the start was the First Lord of the Admiralty. By the clamor of the press, PM Chamberlain was forced to fill this Cabinet position with the man who should never have been relegated to the backbench in the first place.⁴⁰ Churchill was appointed and given a seat in the War Cabinet on September 3, the same day on which war was declared.

As the most vocal member of the Government, Churchill received even more recognition as the early war months passed with many sea encounters involving the Royal Navy. When an attempt to prevent Germany from taking Norway ended in the withdrawal of Naval and expeditionary forces, Churchill explained to a critical Parliament the reason for the disaster. There was a manifest reason why the Navy had failed to stop the German troops from crossing the sea and failed in its efforts to land equipment and reinforcements for the ground forces: “It is our failure in the last five years to maintain or regain air parity with Germany,” Churchill said,

The immense enemy air strength which can be brought to bear upon our patrolling craft had made this method far too costly to be adopted . . . The intense and continuous bombing of the bases at

³⁷ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 604.

³⁸ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 604-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁴⁰ Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill*, 274-5.

Namsos and Andalsnes prevented the landing at these small fishing-ports of any large reinforcements, even of the artillery and of the many supplies for the infantry we had already landed . . . There was no means by which their air superiority could have been overcome.⁴¹

Churchill had been vindicated, and those Members of Parliament who had been derisive of him for so long now had to accept the reality of their mistake. The loss of confidence in Chamberlain and Labour's unwillingness to join a coalition with the Conservative PM made way for Churchill, who would form a National Coalition. Being the only one detached enough from party politics, Churchill fit the bill for a wartime leader who would inspire national unity. It seemed that even the political isolation he had endured during much of the thirties turned out to be by design as well. For not but a few weeks would pass from Churchill's accession before Britain found herself alone with her cause "upon the edge of a knife."⁴² Someone once rejected by Parliament as an "alarm-monger and scaremonger" was now duly embraced by British people, who recognized the need to put aside petty political squabbles in favor of collective security.⁴³ Fulfilling their duty by rallying around King and country and staying true to each other was the message Britons heard from their new and determined leader. Still, while the people were inspired to new heights by Churchill's hope-filled messages, he had to convince a distrusting Parliament to unite around his leadership.

Nonetheless, even they would come under the persuasion of Churchill's stirring words, and some measure of magnanimity from Churchill helped too. He kept his focus on the task at hand. Avoiding the arguments of previous years, Churchill soon maintained, was critical to their survival: "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."⁴⁴

It was not only the dire circumstances that compelled Churchill to express magnanimity and withhold criticism of past failures. He needed to gain the trust and support of many more Conservatives as the party was still under the leadership of Neville Chamberlain. The National Coalition that Churchill swiftly formed in the first few days enabled his Government to manage policy with a freer hand. With nearly every elected party represented, Parliament more or less aligned itself with the Government, assured by the oversight taking place within by corresponding party members and its feeling of greater access to the central levers of power. Even so, the rivalries of a three-party administration would naturally be a concern of Churchill's, but for now the turn of events had everyone in agreement with the Government's policy of forming a coalition "representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion."⁴⁵

Though publicly Churchill conveyed confidence and hope, privately he confronted the grave realities of the coming days, telling General Ismay: "Poor people, poor people. They trust me, and I can give them nothing but disaster for quite a long time."⁴⁶ When Churchill made this remark, he

⁴¹ Ibid., 285.

⁴² Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 348.

⁴³ Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, 544 and 606.

⁴⁴ Guedalla, *Mr. Churchill*, 303.

⁴⁵ "The Knives Come out of the Cabinet in Churchill's Wartime Government," *The Spectator*, March 25, 2015, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/03/the-knives-come-out-of-the-cabinet-in-churchills-wartime-government/>; "Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat," The International Churchill Society, October 27, 2017, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat-2/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

knew that the Dutch were nearly defeated, the Belgians were losing ground, and the French were under the heavy thrust of Germany's advance. Nevertheless, destiny had proffered glimpses of final victory all along. A leader driven to do his duty, a nation united in courage for freedom against barbarity, a people standing up for decency, and an Island protected by the sea just as its army would soon be delivered from it. The Battle of France would be the culmination of a much more extensive defeat for the Allies—the product of years of myopic post-WWI policy. But having known failure, Churchill knew by experience that it was not fatal. The years of the locust were at an end, and the time which history had appointed for Churchill to “save London and England from disaster” had finally come.⁴⁷

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!
But westward, look, the land is bright!⁴⁸

While it was famously and rightly said of Churchill that “he mobilized the English language and sent it into battle”—at a time when arms and munitions were in scarce supply—the heart of his oratory demonstrates that Churchill's aim was much more than that of victory.⁴⁹ As glimpsed through this poem Churchill quotes, his battle-ready words reveal a greater longing for ultimate victory and a time when world peace is made possible by the brighter lights of human nature passing through the divine. Likewise, Tolkien's writings and convincing legends do as much as they point us toward this real world's final victory when, at long last, “a light from the shadows shall spring . . . [and] the crownless again shall be king.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Sandys and Henley, *God and Churchill*, 4.

⁴⁸ Churchill's War Time Speeches: “A Difficult Time,” April 27, 1941, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://churchill-society-london.org.uk/LngHrdWr.html>. In a BBC Radio Address Churchill made only a year after the perilous events of May 1940, he concludes with this quote from the profound poem “Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth” by Arthur Hugh Clough.

⁴⁹ Tom Vitale, “Winston Churchill's Way With Words,” *NPR*, July 14, 2012, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2012/07/14/156720829/winston-churchills-way-with-words>. Quote from a speech President John F. Kennedy made on April 9, 1963.

⁵⁰ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 241.

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