

**WORLD WAR II (1939-
1945) - MIRACLE AT
DUNKIRK 1940**



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Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain what happened at the Miracle of Dunkirk, why the BEF and its allies needed to be rescued, how the evacuation of Dunkirk took place (including the role of the so-called "little ships"), and how Churchill's speech on the evacuation helped rally the British people as Hitler turned his eye towards Britain.

Subjects

European History
World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Dunkirk Memorial and Museum
- Imperial War Museum, London
- Houses of Parliament, London

Essential Questions

- What was the German Army's strategy for defeating France in 1940? Was this strategy effective when the attack came?
- How did the French army respond to the German attack? Why did France fall so quickly?
- What happened to the British army fighting in France and Belgium?
- What was the Miracle of Dunkirk?
- How did Winston Churchill rally the British people after the Miracle of Dunkirk?

Academic Summary

From Winston Churchill's Speech before the House of Commons, 04 Jun 1940

The enemy attacked on all sides with great strength and fierceness, and their main power, the power of their far more numerous air force, was thrown into the battle or else concentrated upon Dunkirk and the beaches. Pressing in upon the narrow exit, both from the east and from the west, the enemy began to fire with cannon upon the beaches by which alone the shipping could approach or depart. They sowed magnetic mines in the channels and seas; they sent repeated waves of hostile aircraft, sometimes more than 100 strong in one formation, to cast their bombs upon the single pier that remained, and upon the sand dunes upon which the troops had their eyes for shelter. Their U-boats, one of which was sunk, and their motor launches took their toll of the vast traffic which now began. For four or five days an intense struggle reigned. All their armored divisions - or what was left of them - together with great masses of infantry and artillery, hurled themselves in vain upon the ever-narrowing, ever-contracting appendix within which the British and French armies fought. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy, with the willing help of countless merchant seamen, strained every nerve to embark the British and allied troops; 220 light warships and 650 other vessels were engaged. They had to operate upon the difficult coast, often in adverse weather, under an almost ceaseless hail of bombs and an increasing concentration of artillery fire. Nor were the seas, as I have said, themselves free from mines and torpedoes. It was in conditions such as these that our men carried on, with little or no rest, for days and nights on end, making trip after trip across the dangerous waters, bringing with them always men whom they had rescued. The numbers they have brought back are the measure of their devotion and their courage. The hospital ships, which brought off many thousands of British and French wounded, being so plainly marked were a special target for Nazi bombs; but the men and women on board them never faltered in their duty.

Meanwhile, the Royal Air Force, which had already been intervening in the battle, so far as its range would allow, from home bases, now used part of its main metropolitan fighter strength, and struck at the German bombers and at the fighters which in large numbers protected them. This struggle was protracted and fierce. Suddenly the scene has cleared, the crash and thunder has for the moment - but only for the moment - died away. A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valor, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all. The enemy was hurled back by the retreating British troops. He was so roughly handled that he did not hurry their departure seriously. The Royal Air Force engaged the main strength of the German air force, and inflicted upon them losses of at least four to one; and the navy, using nearly 1,000 ships of all kinds, carried over 335,000 men, French and British, out of the jaws of death and shame, to their native land and to the tasks which lie immediately ahead. We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the air force. Many of our soldiers coming back have not seen the air force at work; they saw only the bombers which escaped its protective attack.

Nevertheless, our thankfulness at the escape of our army and so many men, whose loved ones have passed through an agonizing week, must not blind us to the fact that what has happened in France and Belgium is a colossal military disaster. The French army has been weakened, the Belgian army has been lost, a large part of those fortified lines upon which so much faith had been reposed is gone, many valuable mining districts and factories have passed into the enemy's possession, the whole of the Channel ports are in his hands, with all the tragic consequences that follow from that, and we must expect another blow to be struck almost immediately at us or at France. We are told that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles. This has often been thought of before. When Napoleon lay at Boulogne for a year with his flat-bottomed boats and his Grand Army, he was told by someone, "There are bitter weeds in England." There are certainly a great many more of them since the British Expeditionary Force returned.

We must never forget the solid assurances of sea power and those which belong to air power if it can be locally exercised. I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's government - every man of them. That is the will of parliament and the nation. The British Empire and the French republic, linked together in their cause and in their need, will defend to the death their native soil, aiding each other like good comrades to the utmost of their strength. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail.

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

The BEF (British Expeditionary Force) was on the run, beaten back by the German Army. The German "blitzkrieg" or "lightning war" had swept through Holland, Belgium and Northern France within a matter of days. Luftwaffe bombers ruled the skies. German panzer and armored divisions cut through the enemy with an almost surgical precision. The BEF was simply outmanned and outgunned. The fate of his majesty's kingdom hung in the balance. As the Germans advanced, BEF commanders and soldiers tried valiantly to hold the Nazi wave back, but to no avail. By 21 May 1940 (only 11 days into the invasion), remnants of what remained of the BEF and its allies were trapped in Dunkirk with their backs against the English Channel. All the Wehrmacht had to do was complete the push, but suddenly on 22 May, with the German army less than 6 miles from the beaches, an order came from Berlin to stop. It was, perhaps, Hitler's biggest mistake on the Western Front (although it would not be his last). The encoded message ordering the German Army's halt was intercepted by the British, whose commanders then organized an emergency evacuation of the BEF and other allied forces. Even to them, it seemed

like an overwhelming task. Even Prime Minister Churchill believed they would lose most of them as casualties or to capture. Then a miracle happened.

Between 27 May and 04 Jun 1940, almost 350,000 troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, including over 100,000 French soldiers. Called by newsmen the “Miracle at Dunkirk”, the evacuation was accomplished using the RAF (Royal Air Force) and the Royal Navy. Other ships were involved as well, including commercial and pleasure craft, some even using civilian crews. Two days into the rescue, when naval vessels had a difficult time getting the troops off the beaches, Churchill called upon any available vessels to help. Dozens responded, including pleasure boats and fishing vessels. The PS *Medway Queen*, a paddle-driven steamship, made 7 trips and rescued over 7000 men during the evacuation. The *Tamzine*, a fishing boat less than 15 feet in length, participated as well, and is now preserved on display at the Imperial War Museum. The British Army lost all of its heavy equipment, but most of the soldiers survived to fight another day.

A few hours after the last allied soldiers left Dunkirk and headed across the channel, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill addressed the House of Commons. He gave a somber, yet rousing patriotic speech about the events at Dunkirk. He called the events in France a “colossal military disaster” and reminded the British public that an evacuation was not a victory, but then went on to praise the army, navy, air force and civilian boats that had pulled together. Churchill then turned to what he believed was an upcoming invasion, calling on all citizens of the realm to defend their island to the last. The most famous phrase of the speech mentions the idea that the Brits would fight on the beaches, on the landing grounds and in the streets. They would never surrender. If necessary, Britain would go it alone, but Churchill also called on the “New World” (America) to come to Britain’s rescue. The speech would rally the British people in the dark days to come, and it made Churchill one of the greatest orators in history.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain what happened at the Miracle of Dunkirk, why the BEF and its allies needed to be rescued, how the evacuation of Dunkirk took place (including the role of the so-called “little ships”), and how Churchill’s speech on the evacuation helped rally the British people as Hitler turned his eye towards Britain.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the Miracle at Dunkirk 1940.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why the British Expeditionary Force and its allies needed to be rescued at Dunkirk in 1940.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the “little ships” participated in the Miracle at Dunkirk.
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Churchill’s speech on the evacuation at Dunkirk helped rally the British people as Hitler turned his eyes towards Britain.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How can speeches by political leaders help rally a nation in a time of crisis and/or war? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Miracle at Dunkirk (20 min)
- Audio – Churchill’s Speech before Commons (15 min)
- Video – Miracle at Dunkirk (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about the Miracle at Dunkirk, taking notes as necessary. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles at home to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should concentrate on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Miracle at Dunkirk (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail what happened at the Miracle of Dunkirk, why the BEF and its allies needed to be rescued, how the evacuation of Dunkirk took place (including the role of the so-called “little ships”), and how Churchill’s speech on the evacuation helped rally the British people as Hitler turned his eye towards Britain.

Extension

On tour: Imperial War Museum, London

While on tour, students can visit the Imperial War Museum on King Charles St. in London (a couple of blocks from Parliament in the basement of a Whitehall building) to see for themselves the Churchill War Rooms Museum. Here they can see for themselves the actual rooms that the British War Cabinet worked and lived in during the Second World War. The museum contains many artifacts and has been restored to as it was during the Second World War. It’s almost as though Churchill himself should be around every other corner. Highly recommended for Churchill fans or anyone who wants to know more about the British government during the war. Adults 16 and over are £17.50 each, but children under 16 are free. Special group rates and private tours are available. The IWM also has an extensive collection of items related to the Miracle at Dunkirk, including the littlest of the “little ships”, the *Tamzine*.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/4/newsid_3500000/3500865.stm
On this day: 1940 Dunkirk Rescue (primary and secondary sources) – from the BBC
- http://1940.iwm.org.uk/?page_id=12
Dunkirk (website) – from the Imperial War Museum (UK), this site contains a great deal of primary source material and is a great start for all students and teachers.
- <http://yesterday.uktv.co.uk/dunkirk-forgotten-heroes/article/dunkirk-what-actually-happened/>
Dunkirk: The Forgotten Heroes (website)
- www.historylearningsite.co.uk/dunkirk.htm
Dunkirk (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- <http://myclass.peelschools.org/sec/10/18013/Lessons/Unit%203%20World%20War%20II%201939-1945/H.%20%20Battles%20of%20World%20War%20II/A.%20%20Dunkirk/Evacuation%20Of%20Dunkirk%201940.ppt>
Miracle at Dunkirk (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- <http://audio.theguardian.tv/sys-audio/Guardian/audio/2007/04/20/Churchill.mp3>
Winston Churchill: Speech before the House of Commons, 04 Jun 1940 (audio recording) – students should be given a full text copy of the speech so they can follow along.
- www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/20/greatspeeches3
Winston Churchill: Speech before the House of Commons, 04 Jun 1940 (transcript) – goes with the audio recording above.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSoDLfQKhGI
British Dunkirk Evacuation Footage – Operation Dynamo 1940 (video) – 4 minutes of primary source footage
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjA5A1eW28U
World War Two: Fall of France (video). This video, produced by PolyGram Video International in 1994 as part of an extensive documentary series on the Second World War, has been shown on both the BBC and PBS. At 2 hours, it is too long for most in-class showings, but is well worth watching. Using primary source video footage from both sides, the video details the Fall of France. Highly recommended for all students, especially AP / Advanced, as an out-of-class assignment in preparation for in-class discussions.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miracle_at_Dunkirk
Dunkirk Evacuation – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_France
Battle of France (1940) – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_ships_of_Dunkirk
Little Ships of Dunkirk – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/france/country_profile
On the Road: France – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/winston-churchill-speeches-during-the-blitz
World War II (1939-1945) – Churchill's Speeches
- www.passports.com/lesson_plan/england/second-world-war-st-paul-stands
World War II (1939-1945) – St. Paul's Stands against the Blitz
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-fall-of-france-1940
World War II (1939-1945) – Fall of France 1940
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939
World War II (1939-1945) – German Invasion of Poland 01 Sep 1939

Key Terms

- British Expeditionary Force
- Dunkirk
- Fall of France (1940)
- House of Commons
- Winston Churchill

