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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

How Fleet Street turned Dunkirk from catastrophe into cultural icon

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Epic story of courage? Or dangerous shambles? Imperial War Museum

For most British people the Dunkirk evacuation between May 26 and June 4 1940 was the most significant early event of World War II. And in the 75 years since those momentous events it has come to occupy, in Penny Summerfield's words, "an iconic place in British culture".

As the Wehrmacht relentlessly progressed through the Netherlands, Belgium and France in May 1940, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), along with sections of the French and Belgian armies, was driven back to the beaches of northern France. Trapped and at the mercy of imminent German

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attack on Dunkirk's beaches, it seemed perfectly possible that if the allied forces were beaten and captured, then Britain could not continue its fight against Hitler's Germany.

That some 336,000 troops were rescued in that week at the end of May and beginning of June is down entirely to the RAF and "Operation Dynamo", which involved a combination of naval ships and civilian vessels coming together to bring the men back across the channel.

For the newly appointed prime minister, Winston Churchill, if the events leading up to Dunkirk were a "colossal military disaster" then the evacuation represented a "miracle of deliverance". On June 4 he addressed the House of Commons in a 34-minute speech which is regularly cited to illustrate the fortitude of Churchill and the courage and resilience of the British nation as a whole.

It was a speech which, according to Roy Jenkins' biography of Churchill, matched the mood of the moment and inspired the nation. Churchill said:

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, and we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.

Though Churchill did not shy away from the reality of Britain's predicament ("wars are not won by evacuations") he used events at Dunkirk to propagandise and celebrate a proud history of an island race standing firm against invasion. Napoleon had been told of the "bitter weeds in England", said Churchill, now there were "certainly a great many more of them since the British Expeditionary Force returned."

Almost at once a strategic defeat of catastrophic possibilities was being turned into an episode of determination and endurance. Yes, Britain's forces had been sent packing, but the manner in which

they had salvaged this “miracle” actually demonstrated all the qualities which would allow the country to prevail against the menace of tyranny. If all did their duty, if nothing was neglected, this island home would be able, Churchill said, to “ride out the storm of war, if necessary for years, if necessary alone”.

In many ways, Dunkirk saw Britain celebrate its history and national identity as events happened: here she was confronting a brutal foreign enemy, refusing to be beaten, demonstrating unflinching resolve. The armada was defeated, so was Napoleon. Hitler would be, too.

An atmosphere of glory

As Phillip Knightley, points out – Churchill’s speech notwithstanding – while it would be incorrect to imagine that there was an organised campaign to change the evacuation into a victory, the British media certainly reacted to events in an overwhelmingly positive fashion.

The Pathe Newsreel which was distributed to cinemas across the country showed images of a proud BEF who, despite having experienced the “hell” of Dunkirk, were still in formation, still grinning, with an “atmosphere of glory” around them.

Land of Hope and Glory.

To the rousing strains of Land of Hope and Glory, the newsreel ends with smiling soldiers aboard a train and the stately narrator’s voice informing the audience that:

The spirit and cause for which they fight has not gone. That can never be taken away from them ... While these men live and breathe Britain is safe. The enemy will never pass.

Queer habit of winning

For the novelist and playwright J.B. Priestley, whose *Postscript* programmes on the BBC attracted audiences in the region of 16m listeners, Dunkirk was an example of Englishness at its finest. On June 5 he broadcast:

What strikes me about it is how typically English it is. Nothing, I feel, could be more English both in its beginning and its end, its folly and its grandeur ... What began as a miserable blunder, a catalogue of misfortunes ended as an epic of gallantry. We have a queer habit – and you can see it running through our history – of conjuring up such transformations.

What we have here in essence is a distillation of Churchill's speech refashioned for a broader audience. The unified and consistent message throughout the period in the immediate aftermath of the evacuation was hope and resilience. Britain's (or England's – the terms were used interchangeably) singularity, glorious past and traditions had to be believed in. The threat of German invasion was very real and the impossible had to be seen as possible.

Shock absorbers

Newspaper reports were similar in tone – the evacuation was the result of divine providence and the soldiers were unbeatable. EA Montague wrote in the *Guardian* on June 1 1940 that as the soldiers arrived back: "War correspondents watched with incredulous joy the happening of a miracle."

Meanwhile the *Daily Express* of May 31 reported: "Tired, dirty, hungry they came back – unbeatable". In fact this doesn't come anywhere close to capturing the reality of Dunkirk.





Tommy Atkins and his mates return from Dunkirk. Frank Capra (still from Why We Fight)

Reports of desertion, anarchy and the 30,000 left behind were suppressed. So too was the fact was that the returning troops were often filled with despair – bedraggled and disillusioned. Cyril Ray of the Guardian, as with all of the war correspondents, covered the evacuation from point of return and not from Dunkirk itself. He later told David Jessel of troops “coming back in a shocking state ... morale shot to ribbons, throwing their rifles away on the railway lines saying: ‘the buggers will be here tomorrow’.”

But Ray did not report that reality at the time. Because the censors would not have allowed it and because there was a very effective system of news management in place to make sure that he didn't.

There were no British war reporters at all in France at the time and as Clive Ponting indicates, in this time of national crisis they were simply expected to behave as if they were an arm of government. On May 28 General Mason-Macfarlane, the head of military intelligence, told selected journalists:

I'm afraid there is going to be a considerable shock for the British public. It is your duty to act as shock-absorbers, so I have prepared ... a statement that can be published, subject to censorship.

So the press absorbed the shock of Dunkirk in the only way it could – by accentuating the positive. In an attempt to understand the situation, let's remember that the journalists were, at this time and as citizens, very much a part of this very real fight for survival and not objective reporters of the war. To some, like Tom Hopkinson of the Picture Post, his task as an editor in this situation was not to tell the British people the truth. Hopkinson felt that there was something more important than telling the truth. Perhaps history has proved him right.

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