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Dunkirk: The Defeat That Inspired A Nation

In the spring of 1940, the defeated British Expeditionary Force and portions of the French and Belgian armies were evacuated under fire from the beaches and breakwaters of Dunkirk, a French port on the English Channel. While the evacuation marked the end of the failed campaign of the British Expeditionary Force, in the days and weeks to follow, Dunkirk was represented to the British people not as a defeat but as a victory achieved against long odds. Ultimately, Dunkirk would represent not only an unlikely success, but also a moment in which the entire country had been united and the greatness of the British character had been revealed. Although initially created to inspire the British people following a failed military campaign, the myth of Dunkirk would persist throughout the postwar period, retaining its importance even alongside the victories Britain achieved later in World War II. In this paper, I investigate the creation of the myth of Dunkirk, its endurance into the postwar period, and how the myth had been reinterpreted over time.

The Myth of Dunkirk During World War II

After the failure of the Allied campaign in the spring of 1940, the British Expeditionary Force, as well as portions of the French and Belgian armies, was driven back by advancing German divisions towards the coast of France.¹ Hundreds of thousands of British, French, and Belgian troops became trapped in a pocket surrounding the French port of Dunkirk.² On May 25, General Gort, commander of the B.E.F., gave the order that troops be evacuated.³ The Royal

¹Jaime Burn. "Dunkirk: victory or defeat?" *Hindsight* Sept 2008.

² Penny Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War, 1940—58." *Journal Of Contemporary History* 45, 2010, Volume 4: 788

³ Burn, "Dunkirk: victory or defeat?"

Navy evacuated the soldiers, assisted by smaller civilian vessels able to sail in more shallow waters and ferry soldiers from the beaches to the warships. Though some of these little ships, particularly fishing boats and other working vessels, were operated by their original crews, most had been commandeered by the Royal Navy and had naval crews. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe bombed the British ships and the soldiers waiting to be evacuated, and British and French soldiers fought to hold the perimeter around Dunkirk. In the end, between May 27 and June 4, around 336,000 British, French, and Belgian troops were evacuated by the Royal Navy and small craft.⁴ The evacuated troops included approximately 215,500 British soldiers, 123,000 French soldiers, and 8,000 Belgian soldiers.⁵ However, approximately 30,000 soldiers were left behind, including both the dead and those captured by the German army.⁶ The B.E.F. was also forced to abandon the majority of its equipment and heavy weaponry, including over 2,000 guns, 60,000 trucks, 76,000 tons of ammunition, and 600,000 tons of fuel.⁷

As the final event in the unsuccessful B.E.F. campaign, as the culmination of a long retreat, and as a defeat leading to the loss of so much of the B.E.F.'s equipment, the evacuation of Dunkirk could have been interpreted as a disaster.⁸ Indeed, German reporters presented Dunkirk as the culmination of their victory in France.⁹ However, in Britain Dunkirk has been remembered both during World War II and throughout the postwar period as not only a success but one of the great achievements of Britain during the war. The evacuation was and is

⁴ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 788

⁵ Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal. *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth, and Memory*. (Bloomsbury, 2013.) 103-108

⁶ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 788

⁷ Burn, "Dunkirk: victory or defeat?"

⁸ Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson, *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.) 12-13

⁹ Nicholas Harman, *Dunkirk, the patriotic myth*. (United States 1980). 10-12

remembered as a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat and a moment in which the greatness of the British character was revealed.¹⁰

The myth of Dunkirk as it exists now was created largely during World War II. While the British government was influential in shaping the myth, the state did not strictly control public discourse, as authoritarian regimes did. Thus, almost immediately after the British people learned of the evacuation, they began to interpret and remember what had happened in different, sometimes competing, ways.¹¹ Winston Churchill's speech about the evacuation, and subsequent coverage in newspapers and newsreels, were the earliest sources of the myth of Dunkirk. Later, literature, film, and first-hand accounts would further shape the public narrative. The two figures who played the greatest role in shaping public memory of Dunkirk were Churchill and the BBC broadcaster J. B. Priestley. Churchill and Priestley each interpreted the evacuation differently, and each interpretation contributed to a different facet of the myth.¹² Churchill's speech was crucial in framing the evacuation of Dunkirk as a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. Before announcing what had actually occurred, Churchill told listeners that he had anticipated announcing catastrophic defeat:

The whole root and core and brain of the British Army, on which and around which we were to build, and are to build, the great British Armies in the later years of the war, seemed about to perish upon the field or to be led into an ignominious and starving captivity.

Likewise, Churchill informed his listeners that he had initially expected the evacuation would succeed only in rescuing between twenty and thirty thousand soldiers.¹³ Thus, when he

¹⁰ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 789.

¹¹ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 789.

¹² Tombs and Chabal. *Britain and France in Two World Wars*. 104.

¹³ Winston Churchill. 1940. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" Address to House of Commons, London, 4 June 1940. Reprinted by *The Churchill Centre*, online.

announced that in fact more than ten times that number of soldiers had been re-embarked, the story inevitably took on the tone of a great success. Churchill then noted that while the British “must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory,” since “wars are not won by evacuations . . . there was a victory inside this deliverance.”¹⁴ Despite this apparent caution, the overall structure of his speech did indeed position Dunkirk as a great triumph, and Churchill’s choice of the word “deliverance,” rather than “defeat” further undercut his warning.

Not only did Churchill seek to ensure Dunkirk would be remembered as a triumph, rather than a tragedy, he also attempted to determine who would be remembered as Dunkirk’s heroes. His focus was primarily upon branches of the military. He honored the B.E.F. for having defended Boulogne and Calais, thus slowing the German army; the Royal Navy, for carrying out the evacuation; the crews of the hospital ships, for continuing to do their duty in the face of enemy fire; and the Royal Air Force for successfully challenging the Luftwaffe.¹⁵ While he acknowledged that the Royal Navy acted “with the willing help of countless merchant seamen,” Churchill did not dwell upon civilian participation in the evacuation. Rather, when discussing the role of civilians in the war, Churchill focused on the importance of ordinary Britons taking on factory jobs in order to replace the equipment and munitions abandoned by the B.E.F. in the evacuation.¹⁶

Churchill’s importance in shaping wartime memory of Dunkirk was reinforced by British newspapers and newsreels, which echoed his interpretation of events. For instance, an article published by *The Times* on June 5th, 1940, entitled “A Miracle of Deliverance,” reiterated the main points of Churchill’s speech. It repeated both Churchill’s assessment that the heroes of

¹⁴ Winston Churchill. 1940. “We Shall Fight on the Beaches.”

¹⁵ Winston Churchill. 1940. “We Shall Fight on the Beaches.”

¹⁶ Summerfield, “Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War,” 791.

Dunkirk had been the Royal Navy, the R.A.F., and the B.E.F., and his belief that civilians could best serve their country in the factories. While the article acknowledged the danger Britain faced following the failure of the B.E.F. and the surrender of France and Belgium, it still framed Dunkirk as a triumph and a miracle. It reassured readers that Britain remained unconquerable because both God and the New World would come to the country's aid.¹⁷ In the same vein, another article published by *The Times* on the same day concluded that Britain was “entitled to rejoice” not only because of the success of the evacuation, but because of the valor it demonstrated.¹⁸

Likewise, a newsreel aired on June 6th, 1940 also followed Churchill’s narrative of Dunkirk, quoting Churchill’s speech and assigning credit to the Royal Navy and the soldiers of the rearguard. Like Churchill, the newsreel depicted Dunkirk not as a source of embarrassment from past failures but as a source of inspiration for the future. According to the newsreel, Dunkirk should be a lesson to the British people: they must fight as bravely as the troops at Dunkirk had, and like them, they must never surrender. As Churchill had, the newsreel framed Dunkirk as a victory achieved against great odds. However, it went farther than Churchill did to cast Dunkirk as not only a victory but a feat of epic proportion. The narration was full of dramatic language, describing “the curtain of darkness hang[ing] over the coast of Britain,” broken only by the signal lights of ships; the brave reporters approaching “the hell that is Dunkirk;” and the evacuated troops “carried out of the jaws of death.” The newsreel ultimately described Dunkirk as not merely the most important event, but the “greatest epic,” of the war to

¹⁷ “A Miracle Of Deliverance.” Jun 05, 1940. *The Times* (London, England), pg. 7; Issue 48634*

¹⁸ “Mr. Churchill Surveys The War.” Jun 05, 1940. *The Times* (London, England), pg. 6; Issue 48634*.

date. Even a few days after the evacuation had ended, the British people were encouraged to remember it in terms befitting a legend.¹⁹

Meanwhile, BBC commentator J.B. Priestley also played an important role in creating the myth of Dunkirk. During the war, Priestley delivered a series of broadcasts, known as Postscripts, following the evening news. Priestley's depiction of the evacuation was responsible for reinterpreting Dunkirk as a populist narrative. In his Postscript on June 5, 1940, Priestley emphasized the role played by small boats in the evacuation. In particular, he described how the "fussy little steamers," ordinarily used as ferries, had been used to evacuate troops in the midst of the bombings and fires of Dunkirk. Though the steamers had been commandeered earlier in the war, and had not been operated by civilian crews at Dunkirk, Priestley drew a symbolic connection between participation by the boats' ordinary occupants, "crowds of holiday passengers," and participation by the boats themselves. Thus, through telling the story of the little ships, Priestley created another narrative of Dunkirk, one which gave civilians a far greater role in the evacuation than Churchill's narrative had done. According to Priestley, the central message of Dunkirk was the contribution of the little ships: he predicted that future generations would be taught "how the little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back glorious."²⁰

However, the myth of Dunkirk includes not only the idea that the evacuation was the triumph of civilian vessels, but also that it succeeded due to participation of mainly civilian crews, ordinary Britons who selflessly decided to sail their boats across the Channel to help the Royal Navy. This narrative of spontaneous civilian participation originated in American

¹⁹ "Evacuation of the BEF - Greatest Epic Of The War". Jun 06, 1940. *British Pathé*.

²⁰ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 792.

literature written about Dunkirk during World War II. For instance, Robert Nathan's poem "Dunkirk: A Ballad," published in 1942, told the story of a two English children in their early teens who, upon arriving home from school, sail off to Dunkirk and help evacuate troops. According to the poem, there was "no command, there was no set plan" but boats of every kind and from every harbor decided to join. The children in their little sailboat reach Dunkirk, and are able to do their part in evacuating troops.²¹ Likewise, in Paul Gallico's short story *The Snow Goose*, the narrator told how villagers were "putting out. . . in answer to the government's call," taking "every tug and fishing boat or power launch that could propel itself." For this story's protagonist, an outcast from society, participation in the evacuation is his chance to at last take up a man's duty and play his part in society.²² *The Snow Goose* was initially published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1940. The story became popular for children, and ultimately shaped how children from growing up from the 1940s to the 1960s first learned about Dunkirk.²³ In addition, in the 1942 Hollywood film *Mrs. Miniver*, which told the story of an ordinary British family's wartime experiences, the title character's husband is shown departing for Dunkirk in his boat, alongside many other volunteers. *Mrs. Miniver* reached a broad audience both in the United States and in Britain, where it topped box office charts in 1942.²⁴

Despite the heroic popular narrative of Dunkirk presented both in the press and in fiction, more critical depictions of the evacuation emerged during the war. Soldiers' and officers' accounts, in particular, reflected more negative interpretations of Dunkirk. For instance, the sociology research organization Mass-Observation interviewed evacuated soldiers in June 1940

²¹ Robert Nathan, "Dunkirk: A Ballad." (New York, 1942).

²² Paul Gallico, *The Snow Goose*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941). 36.

²³ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 792.

²⁴ Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 793.

and found that the soldiers questioned the newsreels' optimistic portrayal of the evacuation. They also complained about the lack of support from the Royal Air Force, in contrast to Churchill, who had said that the R.A.F.'s success had made the evacuation possible.²⁵ Additionally, the memoir *Third Class to Dunkirk: A Worm's Eye View of the BEF, 1940*, written by a former junior officer, not only criticized the B.E.F.'s campaign in France, calling it "a hopeless struggle" by ill-equipped and ill-prepared troops, but also presented a cynical description of Dunkirk. It depicted the retreat to Dunkirk as disorderly, and described men waiting to be evacuated selfishly arguing about who was to board the boats first.²⁶

Nonetheless, some first-hand accounts did support the heroic interpretation of Dunkirk. Sir Basil Bartlett, a former Field Security officer, for instance, presented in his memoir of the B.E.F. campaign a narrative that overall matched Churchill's interpretation, yet still contained darker undertones. Bartlett praised the discipline of the evacuating troops and of the nurses and crews of the hospital ships under bombardment. Like Churchill, he focused on the role of the Royal Navy, and not civilian ships, in the evacuation. Bartlett also claimed that the evacuation had been made possible by British character, namely, the British ability to improvise, and a discipline rooted in "good sense" and faith in those in command, instead of the obedience rooted in fear characteristic of the German troops. His description of the evacuation was, for the most part, fairly jaunty. He described troops waiting on the beaches who "shared water bottles and biscuits and chocolate" and tried to take a celebratory swim after an R.A.F. victory; Bartlett recalled that when he himself had boarded a naval vessel, he had been happy to receive sausage

²⁵ File Report 171, June 1940, "Morale Today," 5 June 1940 and File Report 215, June 1940, "Newsreels in Early June," 4-5. Quoted in Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 792.

²⁶ Peter Hadley, *Third Class to Dunkirk: A Worm's Eye View of the BEF, 1940*. (London 1944). Quoted in Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 792.

sandwiches, whiskey and dry clothes. However, Bartlett's ship had been hit by a torpedo as it sailed back to England, and Bartlett described the resulting chaos and fear in detail, including the mangled bodies on the ship, the severe wounds he witnessed, and the pain from his own injuries.

²⁷ While his account reinforced the narrative of Dunkirk as a triumph of the British character, it also reminded readers of the violence of war and the death and destruction that occurred at Dunkirk.

While British accounts varied in assigning primary credit for the evacuation to the Royal Navy or the little ships, and in including or omitting the contributions of B.E.F. rearguard and the R.A.F., it is also important to note which group was never credited for its part in the evacuation. Wartime accounts never included French soldiers among those who had made the evacuation of Dunkirk possible. Though the rearguard defending Dunkirk during the evacuation was mainly comprised of French troops, the British did not remember the French as brave allies who had continued to fight to allow others to evacuate. Instead, they blamed the defeat of the B.E.F. in Europe on French cowardice and incompetence. Tales of British soldiers betrayed by their cowardly French allies were commonly believed by people throughout British society, and were often attributed to accounts from British troops returning from France, lending them a layer of authenticity.²⁸ For instance, Jimmy Drysdale, the *Sunday Chronicle* war correspondent, who remained in France until mid-June 1940, reportedly told James Drawell, the *Chronicle's* editor, that the "French were a different race from last war--all fighting spirit dead. Running away. Germans laughing."²⁹ This perceived French cowardice was presented as a foil to British

²⁷ Sir Basil Bartlett. *My first war: An army officer's journal for May 1940, through Belgium to Dunkirk*. (New York: The Macmillan Company 1940). 116-123.

²⁸ Tombs and Chabal, *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 100.

²⁹ Tombs and Chabal, *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 100.

strength and resilience in the face of crisis, reinforcing the idea that Dunkirk had succeeded because of uniquely British virtues. Moreover, the ultimate French surrender was viewed by the British as a betrayal of the 28 March 1940 agreement that neither nation would make a separate peace with Germany, heightening popular sentiment that the French were not only cowardly but untrustworthy or even treacherous.³⁰

The French, meanwhile, did not perceive the evacuation of Dunkirk as a temporary retreat necessary in securing eventual victory, but as an example of the British tendency to abandon ship as soon as things became difficult, or even a betrayal.³¹ At the beginning of the evacuation, the Royal Navy had been given orders to preferentially evacuate British soldiers, and the French were understandably appalled.³² Even after the Navy began evacuating equal numbers of British and Allied troops, British and French leadership remained conflicted about whether or not the British had done enough to evacuate the French. While the French claimed that British ships had sailed away as French soldiers had been trying to reach them, the British claimed that their ships had been left in danger waiting for French soldiers who had failed to arrive when expected.³³

The Myth of Dunkirk in the Postwar Period

The myth of Dunkirk has persisted as a key event in the British memory of World War II because of its connection both to other myths of the British war experience and to Britain's history as a whole. Dunkirk is remembered as a turning point in World War II, the moment in which the Phoney War, with its embarrassing string of defeats, ended, and the rest of the war, in

³⁰ Tombs and Chabal, *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 100.

³¹ Tombs and Chabal, *Britain and France in Two World Wars*. 101.

³² Burn "Dunkirk: victory or defeat?" 2008.

³³ Patrick Turnbull, *Dunkirk, anatomy of disaster*. (United States: 1978).

which Britain would emerge victorious, began.³⁴ Memory of Dunkirk is deeply entwined with memory of other events of 1940, such as the Battle of Britain, the beginning of rationing, and the Blitz. Together, memory of the events of 1940 shaped two of the most important myths of Britain in World War II: that Britain, abandoned by its allies, had stood alone against Germany, and that World War II was a “People’s War,” in which ordinary people from every corner of the land had banded together to help the war effort.³⁵

In British collective memory, Britain’s defiance of Germany in 1940 is considered the nation’s greatest contribution to the war. Not even memory of Britain’s participation in the D-Day landings and ultimate defeat of Germany takes precedence over memory of the period in which Britain, bereft of allies, single-handedly defied the forces of fascism. In the words of Winston Churchill, this was Britain’s “finest hour.” This myth persisted throughout the postwar period, serving as a reminder of British greatness even as the country faced loss of empire and diminished importance in world affairs.³⁶ The myth of Dunkirk is strongly tied to the myth of “Britain Alone” because it represents the moment in which Britain was abandoned by its allies. Moreover, it marks the beginning of Britain’s lone defense against invasion and lone defiance of Germany. In fact, in his speech announcing the events of Dunkirk, Churchill ended by turning to the possibility to invasion and proclaiming Britain’s determination to continue the fight against fascism and “outlive the menace of tyranny. . . if necessary alone.”³⁷

³⁴ Summerfield, “Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War,” 789.

³⁵ Mark Connelly, “‘We Can Take It!’ Britain and the Memory of the Home Front in the Second World War,” Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens, *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 53.

³⁶ John Ramsden, “Myths and Realities of the ‘People’s War’ in Britain,” Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens, *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), 40-41

³⁷ Winston Churchill. 1940. “We Shall Fight on the Beaches.”

The other enduring myth to emerge from 1940 was the belief that World War II was a “People’s War,” in which all the people of the country had suffered and sacrificed together. According to the myth of the “People’s War,” World War II united the people, removing the class barriers that normally divided them as Britons put aside their differences to serve their country.³⁸ Dunkirk is connected to the myth of the “People’s War” through the narrative of the little ships. J.B. Priestley, in implying that the civilian boats had played a crucial role in the evacuation, tied ordinary Britons to the war itself. Furthermore, the literary accounts of spontaneous civilian participation presented perhaps the ultimate example of British wartime self-sacrifice. In these stories, civilians are not only willing to accept rationing and take on jobs in war industries, not only able to endure the bombing of British cities, but are also willing to voluntarily risk their own lives by sailing into the middle of a battle.

The myth of the “People’s War” also claimed that just as the war had led to increased unity and demonstrated the selflessness of the British people, it also brought out the resilience inherent in the British character. This became known as the “Dunkirk spirit.” While the “Dunkirk spirit” has never been strictly defined, it is frequently described as a combination of strength and unity in the face of crisis, refusal to surrender, and a knack for improvisation. The phrase “Dunkirk spirit,” or the interchangeable phrase “Blitz spirit,” has entered the British vernacular, and is frequently invoked to encourage the public in face of tragedy. For instance, as the *Daily Mail* reminded readers to “adopt the famous Blitz spirit” in the wake of the July 2005 bombings of the London public transportation system.³⁹ Dunkirk has also been used to explain British endurance in a variety of other situations. For instance, British healthcare workers asked to

³⁸ Connelly, ““We Can Take It!”” 55.

³⁹ Noakes and Pattinson, *British Cultural Memory* 10.

describe their response to the 2009 influenza pandemic said that they had weathered the events due to the “Dunkirk spirit.”⁴⁰ The “Dunkirk spirit” has also been used to describe the resilience of doctors working as general practitioners facing an increasing workload, head teachers in underfunded schools, and universities facing severe budget cuts.⁴¹ A June 2000 BBC article analyzing the persistence of the “Dunkirk spirit” even claimed that because Britain was at peace, there had been few opportunities for the “Dunkirk spirit” to present itself in military situations, but it was still apparent in spectators’ response to a rained-out cricket match.⁴²

The myth of Dunkirk not only remains prominent in British cultural memory because of its connection to other myths of the British war experience, but also because of its position as part of the greater narrative of British history. The historian Mark Connelly has discussed the importance of historic imagery in the creation of the myth of the Blitz. According to Connelly, wartime representations of the Blitz emphasized the continuity between present-day London and the city’s historic past. This use of historic imagery gave Londoners the sense that they were living through historic times and ensured that the Blitz had a place as a part the greater arc of Britain’s history.⁴³ Like descriptions of the Blitz, descriptions of Dunkirk frequently connect it to Britain’s historic past. In his Dunkirk speech, Winston Churchill had compared the threat of German invasion to the threat of invasion by Napoleon in the nineteenth century. Reaching further back in Britain’s mythic past, he had also compared the valour of the R.A.F. pilots to that

⁴⁰ Tom Sorell, Heather Draper, Sarah Damery, and Jonathan Ives. ““Dunkirk Spirit:” Differences Between United Kingdom and United States Responses to Pandemic Influenza.” *American Journal Of Bioethics* 2009, 9, no. 11: 21-22.

⁴¹ Richard Adcock. “Dunkirk-spirit singlehanders need to be rescued.” *Pulse* 66, 2006, no. 4: 22, Mary Evans. “Higher education in recessionary times: A UK colloquium.” *Teaching In Higher Education* 2010, 15, no. 5: 615-621, Harvey McGavin. “Heads `relying on Dunkirk spirit'.” *TES: Times Educational Supplement* 1997, no. 4203: 16.

⁴² “Dunkirk spirit: Do we still have it?” *BBC News* 1 June 2000.

⁴³ Connelly, ““We Can Take It!”” 56-67

of the Knights of the Round Table.⁴⁴ Churchill's speech itself was then immediately presented in mythic terms: an article published by *The Times* on June 5, 1940, claimed that Churchill's speech had "breathed the spirit of Shakespeare's England."⁴⁵ Similarly, Robert Nathan's poem "Dunkirk: A Ballad," also tied the evacuation of Dunkirk to heroes from England's past. In the poem, clear skies allow German planes to bomb the British ships until the protagonists, children who have volunteered to evacuate troops, pray to the great figures of England's past for help. Then Lord Nelson and his crew, Sir Francis Drake, and other, unnamed great captains of England's past, appear, bringing a fog to hide the ships and helping the children steer home.⁴⁶ These connections to the historic past suggested that Britain was once more living through heroic times, and that Dunkirk was not only significant in the short term, but an important event in the overall history of the nation.

While the myth of Dunkirk has persisted throughout the postwar period to the present day, the exact meaning of Dunkirk has remained contested, and over time, representations have emphasized different elements of the myth. The end of World War II was initially followed by a lull in popular memory of the war from 1945 to 1949.⁴⁷ However, in the 1950s, films about World War II became popular with British audiences nostalgic for the war years.⁴⁸ Of the approximately 80-100 war films produced between 1945 and 1963, as many as 30 were top box office hits.⁴⁹ The 1958 Ealing Studios film *Dunkirk* represented an attempt to consolidate public memory of Dunkirk into a single narrative.⁵⁰ As a result, the memory of Dunkirk was heavily

⁴⁴ Winston Churchill. 1940. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches."

⁴⁵ "A Miracle Of Deliverance." Jun 05, 1940. *The Times* (London, England), pg. 7; Issue 48634*

⁴⁶ Robert Nathan, "Dunkirk: A Ballad."

⁴⁷ Summerfield "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 798.

⁴⁸ Tombs and Chabal *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 103

⁴⁹ Summerfield "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War," 800

⁵⁰ Tombs and Chabal *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 104

contested during the making of the film. Early plans for *Dunkirk* had contained two separate approaches to the film's story. The first, which had more closely followed the film's source material, Elleston Trevor's 1955 book *The Big Pick-up*, had been a less ambitious project that told the story of a group of enlisted men during retreat of the B.E.F. and the evacuation. The second approach had been to create a more epic film that told the story of Dunkirk as a historic event. In the end, *Dunkirk* became an uneasy mixture of the two stories.⁵¹ Moreover, since Ealing Studios had sought the support of the War Office in order to procure army uniforms, weapons, and vehicles, and infantry divisions to act as extras, the film was also modified to comply with the War Office's wishes. The War Office not only rejected any scripts that contained morally ambiguous behavior by soldiers, but also objected to early drafts that portrayed the retreat as chaotic, and criticized the film for featuring a working-class corporal as the protagonist.⁵²

Ultimately, *Dunkirk*'s portrayal of the retreat of the B.E.F. and the evacuation of Dunkirk reflected tensions present in 1950s British society as much as it represented the myth created during the war. While at a glance, the film may seem to reflect the populism of the myth of Dunkirk as part of the "People's War," it actually reflected 1950s anxiety about increasing instability of the middle class. During this period, rather than emphasize the importance of the "People's War," the middle class tried to strengthen its position by writing itself onto history.⁵³ Thus, while *Dunkirk* featured both a working-class corporal, Tubby Binns, and a civilian little ship owner, Mr. Holden, as main characters, the third main character, the reporter Mr. Foreman, acts as the voice of the middle class. It is Foreman who structures the film with his commentary

⁵¹ Gill Plain, "From Shorty Blake to Tubby Binns: Dunkirk and the Representation of Working-Class Masculinity in Postwar British Cinema." *Journal Of British Cinema & Television* 2012, 9, no. 2. 177

⁵² S.P. MacKenzie, "Victory from Defeat: The War Office and the making of Dunkirk (Ealing Films, 1958)." *War, Literature & The Arts: An International Journal Of The Humanities* 2003, 15, no. 1/2: 241-257.

⁵³ Gill, "From Shorty Blake to Tubby Binns" 180

on people and events. It is Foreman who acts as a teacher to Binns, explaining to him the political reasons for the war Binns is fighting, and it is Foreman who convinces Holden to put aside his cowardice and indifference and to sail to Dunkirk. Additionally, while over the course of the movie, Binns must take up the mantle of leadership to get his men to safety, by then end of the movie he has returned to his initial status, and is shown drilling with the other enlisted men. Though the characters of the “People’s War” were present in *Dunkirk*, any populist tones were dampened: in the film, it is the middle class that teaches to others how to behave during war, and any advancement by the working class is merely temporary.⁵⁴

Memory of World War II remained prominent in Britain throughout the 1960s and 70s, as the nation, facing the loss of its colonial empire, economic decline, and diminished importance in global politics, turned to its wartime past for reassurance. The memory of 1940 and the myth of “Britain Alone” became especially important as Britain lost status as a global power and needed to reaffirm its centrality to the Allied victory.⁵⁵ While the social changes of the 1960s once again increased the importance of the “People’s War” in British war memory, the rise of conservatism in the 1980s emphasized a more right-wing narrative. Under Margaret Thatcher, World War II memory became especially important as a means of establishing national unity during the Falklands War. However, the uniqueness of the British character, the leadership of Churchill, and the patriotism of the British people were emphasized more than the lessening of class barriers during the war.⁵⁶ British memory of World War II during the 1980s also emphasized the myth of “Britain Alone,” particularly the idea that Britain had been entangled in continental Europe’s problems. During this period, the memory of Dunkirk was used to justify

⁵⁴ Gill, “From Shorty Blake to Tubby Binns” 180, 192-194.

⁵⁵ Ramsden, “Myths and Realities” 43, Tombs and Chabal *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 104

⁵⁶ Connelly ““We Can Take It!”” 60, 65.

British resistance to strengthen its ties with the rest of Europe.⁵⁷ During the war itself, the collapse of France and the surrender of Belgium had been used to justify British isolationism. Many British people had been more relieved to be free of obligations to other European nations than disappointed to have lost their allies. For instance, King George VI had written in a letter to his mother that he was “happier now we have no allies to be polite to and pamper,” and his sentiments had been echoed by many ordinary Britons.⁵⁸ Likewise, in the 1980s and 90s, the memory of Dunkirk was used to justify Britain’s continued isolation within Europe. For instance, in an address on Dunkirk, Conservative politician Enoch Powell stated that the countries who were currently advocating greater European unity had been, in 1940, either victims of Nazism or collaborators. He argued that just as it had been key to the future of Europe that Britain stood apart in 1940, it would continue to be important for Britain to remain isolated.⁵⁹

The 1980s also saw the emergence of revisionist histories of World War II. Unlike memory of World War I, which was contested in revisionist histories beginning in 1918, heroic wartime narratives of World War II were generally accepted by the first postwar generation.⁶⁰ It was not until the 1980s and 1990s, when fewer people remembered the war firsthand, that major revisionist histories emerged. However, these accounts did not succeed in significantly shifting popular memory.⁶¹ For instance, in Nicholas Harman’s 1980 book *Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth*, Harman questioned the accuracy of the idea that Britain had been let down by its allies, and particularly critiqued the narrative of the little ships. Despite their relatively large role in the

⁵⁷ Christopher Coker. "Dunkirk, and Other British Myths." *National Interest* 1990, no. 22: 74-82, Brian Bond. "Dunkirk: Myths and Lessons." *Journal Of The Royal United Services Institute For Defence Studies* 1982.

⁵⁸ Coker "Dunkirk, and Other British Myths." 75-76

⁵⁹ Coker "Dunkirk, and Other British Myths." 75-76

⁶⁰ Ramsden, "Myths and Realities" 45 & 48

⁶¹ Ramsden, "Myths and Realities" 53

Dunkirk myth, Harman claimed that little ships had only been present in the last two days of the evacuation and had been largely ineffective.⁶² Reviews of his book were generally favorable. One praised Harman for his lack of cynicism, noting that the author had respected everyone involved in the Dunkirk evacuation and had acknowledged that the myth served a useful purpose during the war.⁶³ Another reviewer believed that Harman's narrative was as inspiring as the original myth, since it told a more human story.⁶⁴ While reviews tended to portray Harman as enlightening at last a British public still blinded by wartime propaganda, his version of events did not succeed in majorly changing collective memory of Dunkirk, and the participation of the small boats remained a key part of the Dunkirk narrative.

In recent years, representations of Dunkirk have approached the evacuation from a variety of perspectives. In 2005, the BBC documentary *The Other Side of Dunkirk* became the first documentary about Dunkirk to interview French and German historians as experts on the evacuation, and to give French and German perspectives prominence.⁶⁵ In addition, a 2010 documentary, *Dunkirk: The Forgotten Heroes*, focused on the soldiers who had not been evacuated and had become prisoners of the Germans. The film positioned itself as an exposé of a dark side of the Dunkirk myth, and focused on the suffering of the troops that became prisoners and slave laborers in Nazi Germany.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the 2007 film *Atonement*'s portrayal of Dunkirk adopted some elements of the traditional narrative, but took a darker tone overall. Upon seeing the scene on the beaches, a character describes it as "like something out of the Bible," emphasizing the epic nature of the evacuation as wartime newsreels had done. However, the

⁶² Harman, *Dunkirk, the patriotic myth*. 10-12

⁶³ Paul Addison. "Little Boats and Big Questions." *History Today* 1980, 30, no. 8: 58.

⁶⁴ "Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth" *Kirkus Reviews* 1 June 1980.

⁶⁵ Tombs and Chabal *Britain and France in Two World Wars* 103

⁶⁶ Adam Sweeting, "Dunkirk: The Soldiers Left Behind," *The Telegraph* 21 May 2010.

mood is one of abandonment, rather than heroism. No boats are in sight save a washed-up wreck, and an officer bemoans the lack of air support and announces orders to leave the wounded behind.⁶⁷ *Atonement* also sought to present the variety of soldiers' experiences. Some troops on the beach are shown crying or drunk, but others are seen singing hymns, meticulously organizing their equipment, or lining up in neat rows. During this scene, the camera wheels erratically over the scene, creating a sense of fevered vision to represent the terror felt by the soldiers waiting to be evacuated.⁶⁸

However, while popular memory of Dunkirk has shifted over time, commemorations of major anniversaries of Dunkirk have remained consistent throughout the postwar period. Since 1950, in order to commemorate the evacuation, the little ships that originally participated in the evacuation have sailed from Ramsgate to Dunkirk, accompanied by a vessel from the Royal Navy. In Dunkirk, there are memorial services, and veterans parade through the city to the town hall. R.A.F. planes, often original Hurricanes and Spitfires, fly overhead in salute, and wreaths or poppies are placed in the sea.⁶⁹ While an article describing the 75th anniversary commemoration stated that the ships' and planes' journey had taken place every five years since 1975, use of this ritual is older, and the 10th and 25th anniversaries were commemorated in the same way.⁷⁰ In 1975, 2000, and 2015, members of the royal family attended the ceremonies in Dunkirk,

⁶⁷ *Atonement*. Directed by Joe Wright. (2008; CA.: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

⁶⁸ Valerie Kripps. "Memory and atonement: Valerie Krips, on the cultural memory of Dunkirk." *Arena Magazine* Feb.-Mar. 2008: 45+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*

⁶⁹ "The Pilgrimage To Dunkirk." *The Times* (London, England), Monday, Jun 05, 1950; pg. 10; Issue 51709, "Dunkirk: 25 Years After." *British Pathé* 6 June 1965, "Veterans of Dunkirk rescue gather on 50th anniversary." *The Spokane Review*, Spokane, Washington. 28 May 1990, "Dunkirk's heroes return." *BBC News* 2 June 2000, "Ships recreate Dunkirk journey for 70th anniversary." *BBC News* 27 May 2010, "Dunkirk 'little ships' set sail for 75th anniversary" *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

⁷⁰ "Dunkirk 'little ships' set sail for 75th anniversary" *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

underscoring the importance of the events, and in 1950, King George VI sent remarks honoring both those who had participated in the evacuation and those who were commemorating it.⁷¹

Anniversary commemorations reinforce the narrative of Dunkirk as a primarily maritime and populist event. Though the commemorations represent many different groups involved in the evacuation, with participation from the Royal Navy, the R.A.F., veterans, and the little ships, news coverage invariably focuses on the journey made by the little ships, arguably the biggest and most dramatic part of the commemorations.⁷² In fact, in his remarks upon the tenth anniversary of Dunkirk, King George VI referred to the participation of the little ships as the greatest “adventure of chivalry” in “all the long story of our seafaring race,” thus framing Dunkirk as a key part of Britain’s identity as an island nation.⁷³ Additionally, because the press focuses on the dozens of little ships sailing to Dunkirk, and not on the Royal Navy vessel (which is typically described as an “escort”) commemorations emphasize J.B. Priestley’s narrative of civilian involvement, connecting Dunkirk to memory of the “People’s War.” News articles tend to emphasize the variety of boats involved, referring to the little ships as a “motley,” “ragtag,” or “ramshackle” fleet.⁷⁴ In particular, articles suggest that the variety of little ships indicates a breakdown in class barriers as the British people put their differences aside in order to commit to

⁷¹ “The King and Dunkirk Anniversary, News in Brief.” *The Times* [London, England] 6 June 1950: 3, “Court Circular.” *Times* [London, England] 3 Apr. 1975: 16, “Prince Honors Dunkirk Spirit.” *BBC News* 4 June 2000, “Dunkirk ‘little ships’ set sail for 75th anniversary” *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

⁷² “The Pilgrimage To Dunkirk.” *The Times* (London, England), Monday, Jun 05, 1950; pg. 10; Issue 51709, “Dunkirk: 25 Years After.” *British Pathé* 6 June 1965, “Veterans of Dunkirk rescue gather on 50th anniversary.” *The Spokane Review*, Spokane, Washington. 28 May 1990, “Dunkirk’s heroes return.” *BBC News* 2 June 2000, “Ships recreate Dunkirk journey for 70th anniversary.” *BBC News* 27 May 2010, “Dunkirk ‘little ships’ set sail for 75th anniversary” *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

⁷³ “The King and Dunkirk Anniversary, News in Brief.” *The Times* [London, England] 6 June 1950: 3.

⁷⁴ “Dunkirk Anniversary To Be Remembered.” *St. Petersburg Times*, St. Petersburg FL, 10 March 1965, “Veterans of Dunkirk rescue gather on 50th anniversary.” *The Spokane Review*, Spokane, Washington. 28 May 1990, “Dunkirk’s heroes return.” *BBC News* 2 June 2000, “Dunkirk ‘little ships’ set sail for 75th anniversary” *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

the war effort. Where J.B. Priestley had described the little ships of Dunkirk as “fussy little steamers” used to transport holiday passengers, connecting the evacuation to the British people in general but perhaps the middle class in particular, articles describing Dunkirk commemorations stress that the little ships ranged “from luxury yachts to fishing trawlers,” invoking an image of wealthy and working class Britons working side by side.⁷⁵

Furthermore, the news coverage of Dunkirk anniversary commemorations perpetuates the narrative of spontaneous civilian participation as crucial to Dunkirk’s success. In 1950, an article in *The Times* referred to the little ships as the vessels that had “played such a notable part in the evacuation of Dunkirk,” and King George VI praised the little ships for having participated in the evacuation “so willingly and so gallantly,” implying that the boat’s owners, too, had willingly made the journey to Dunkirk. Neither *The Times* nor King George VI acknowledged that most of the little ships had been operated by Royal Navy crews.⁷⁶ According to an article published for the 50th anniversary, the little ships had been a fleet of fishing boats, yachts, and miscellaneous boats that had “rallied to Winston Churchill’s call to save the Allied armies,” evidently implying that the prime minister had requested any civilian with a boat to do their part.⁷⁷ Likewise, when the BBC called upon readers to submit their own memories of Dunkirk for its 60th anniversary commemoration, these stories focused mainly upon individual heroism. A notable example recounts how the writer’s grandfather’s neighbor, upon hearing about the soldiers trapped at Dunkirk, had paddled his two-man canoe across the Channel and had helped transport soldiers

⁷⁵ “Dame Vera to unveil Dunkirk plaque.” *BBC News* 5 June 2000.

⁷⁶ “The Pilgrimage To Dunkirk.” *The Times* (London, England), Monday, Jun 05, 1950; pg. 10; Issue 51709, “The King and Dunkirk Anniversary, News in Brief.” *The Times* [London, England] 6 June 1950: 3

⁷⁷ “Veterans of Dunkirk rescue gather on 50th anniversary.” *The Spokane Review*, Spokane, Washington. 28 May 1990.

back to England.⁷⁸ At the 70th anniversary in 2010, veterans were quoted speaking about the importance of the little ships' participation, and an anecdote recounted in an article from the 75th anniversary recalls how, upon being told by the Royal Navy that their boat was too small to be of use, a crew of fishermen had told "the Navy that they would go to Dunkirk whether they liked it or not."⁷⁹

Conclusion

The evacuation of Dunkirk, following the failure of the B.E.F., French, and Belgian armies in the spring of 1940, could easily have been termed a defeat. The armies were forced to abandon almost all their equipment and heavy weaponry, and the soldiers waiting to be evacuated seemed at the mercy of Luftwaffe fire. Yet Dunkirk was represented to the British people as a victory snatched from defeat and a triumph of the British character. This narrative of Dunkirk was created to inspire Britons during the war, yet has remained one of the key moments in British cultural memory of World War II throughout the postwar period. From the beginning, Dunkirk was framed as a great triumph achieved despite long odds. Both Winston Churchill and J.B. Priestley presented Dunkirk as a deliverance, but while Churchill had focused on the role of the military, Priestley emphasized the importance of civilian-owned small boats in the evacuation, creating a more populist narrative. Where Priestley had drawn a symbolic connection between involvement by civilian boats and involvement by ordinary people, American authors and filmmakers made this connection explicit. Their work was influential enough to make spontaneous civilian participation a crucial piece of the Dunkirk myth.

⁷⁸ "Dunkirk: Your Memories." *BBC News* 5 June 2000.

⁷⁹ "Ships recreate Dunkirk journey for 70th anniversary." *BBC News* 27 May 2010, "Dunkirk 'little ships' set sail for 75th anniversary" *The Telegraph* 21 May 2015.

After the war had ended, the myth of Dunkirk remained an important part of British collective memory. Though Dunkirk was not a great military victory compared to later British successes, it remains integral in collective memory because of its connection to other myths about the British war experience: namely, the myth that Britain had stood alone against Nazi Germany and the myth that World War II had been a “People’s War.” However, while the myth of Dunkirk has remained important throughout the postwar period, different aspects of the myth have been emphasized in different eras. In particular, the populist side of the Dunkirk myth has been contested over time. Commemoration of major anniversaries of Dunkirk, meanwhile, have remained consistent in the postwar period. Since commemorations focus on the role of the little ships, they present Dunkirk as the triumph of ordinary British citizens and an important part of the “People’s War.” In the years following the evacuation, whether the evacuation of Dunkirk is being used as a symbol for British populism in times of crisis or refusal to surrender against overwhelming odds, Dunkirk has come to represent the British character at its finest. Seventy-five years after the evacuation occurred, the myth of Dunkirk remains an important part of British national identity and memory of World War II.

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