

## *DARKEST HOUR* – HOW HISTORICALLY ACURATE IS IT?

By

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It has been five years since the movie *Darkest Hour* came out and there has been another round of inquiry into just how historically accurate it is.

Before trying to answer that question I want to say this — *Darkest Hours* is an extremely entertaining movie about the time in May 1940, a few weeks after Hitler had launched his successful campaign to conquer all of Western Europe and Churchill became Prime Minister, when there was an effort in the War Cabinet to get Britain to commence peace negotiations with Germany. The screenplay, written by Anthony McCarten, who also wrote the book, is excellent, and the acting is superb. Indeed, Gary Oldman, who received an Academy Awards for his portrayal of Winston Churchill, was the finest “Churchill” that I’ve ever seen. Moreover, the casting of certain other characters such as Lord Halifax, Clementine Churchill, Elizabeth Layton, and King George was, in my view, first-rate; the set design, cinematography and costume design were as well. All in all, the movie also does a very good job of capturing the essence of Churchill.

On a more personal note *Darkest Hours*, both the movie and McCarten’s enjoyable and informative book, led me to ask why Churchill chose to fight WWII alone rather than negotiate with Germany, research that question, and, with the assistance of a psychiatrist, write *No Peace with Hitler*. Thus I feel a close relationship with both the movie and the book.

The movie does a fine job of covering many of the things that occurred during the few weeks covered, such as Churchill’s “victory at all costs” speech on May 13, his battle with

Halifax over peace negotiations, his telling the Outer Cabinet on May 28 that there is no chance of Britain giving up the struggle; and his “we shall fight on the beaches” speech (which actually was given on June 4). The movie accurately reflects any number of rather small details, e.g. the existence of a new typist at No. 10 named Elizabeth Layton; the fact that because Halifax was not a member of the House of Commons, he was required to sit in the gallery during the debates held there; that on May 10 King George did tell Chamberlain that by being forced to resign Chamberlain was being treated poorly, and that when the King quizzically said to Churchill do you know why I’ve asked you here, Churchill did inject humor into the situation by saying “Sir, I simply couldn’t imagine why.”

That said, *Darkest Hour* is, however, just a movie. As such, while many things in the movie are true and accurately portrayed, almost by definition, it also contains conversations which could have occurred as depicted, but likely did not; adds and embellishes things in an attempt to enhance the general story line; omits other things that were likely viewed as uninteresting; does not necessarily deal with things in strict chronological order; changes the place where they occurred; and frequently conflates several conversations into one. Perhaps the most notable embellishment in the movie is the scene in which Churchill’s car is stuck in London traffic and he jumps out, takes the subway to Westminster, and in the process engages ordinary citizens on the question of whether Britain should fight on alone or make peace with Hitler. Endearing as it is, this incident simply never happened. However, to me this is more of a Hollywood embellishment than it is an historical inaccuracy. Indeed, I can hardly think of a movie based on an historical event that does not have one or more of such embellishments. For example, in *Titanic* the entire existence of the two main characters, Jack and Rose, is fictitious, as is the story of the Heart of the Sea diamond necklace, but these embellishments do not mislead

the audience about the story of the sinking of that ship. (I will not, however, attest that all other facts in that movie were 100% accurate.) Likewise, the subway scene in *Darkest Hour* does not mislead the audience as to what really happened with regard to peace negotiations in May 1940.

Although *Darkest Hour* is guilty of all of the things noted above, with only a few exceptions, its efforts to stay true to the essence of what actually occurred (a disagreement between Halifax and Churchill over peace negotiations with Hitler) are fairly good — probably better than most movies of this genre.-

Set forth below is a list of things in *Darkest Hour*, like the afore mentioned subway scene, which are minor embellishments, inaccuracies, or restructuring of the facts having little to no impact on the essence of what really occurred.

While I can easily categorize scenes like Churchill's subway discussion as mere embellishments that do not affect the basic story, I have trouble doing so with regard to other things set out in the movie – (1) the idea that, after Churchill became Prime Minister, Chamberlain and Halifax wanted to get Churchill to say that he would never consider peace negotiations as a pretext to their resigning and bringing down Churchill's Government and (2) that Chamberlain opposed Churchill's no-peace-negotiations-position nearly to the end. These things simply are not true and including them in the movie is misleading. To my thinking, the actual story is better than the one that was made up.

At the time that World War II started on September 1, 1939, Halifax was Chamberlain's Foreign Minister as well as both his friend and a longtime supporter. Churchill on the other hand, had been an antagonist of Chamberlain's for many years. Among other things, Churchill had been extremely harsh in his criticism of Chamberlain's actions in selling out the Czechs at

Munich in 1938 and his failure to form an alliance with Russia after Hitler had grabbed all of Czechoslovakia. Additionally, in early August 1939 Churchill had backed a Labour resolution which called for a shortening of Parliament's normal two-month recess on the implicit ground that, with House members scattered, Chamberlain could not be trusted not to pull off "another Munich." Chamberlain had every right to be greatly offended by Churchill's support of Labour's resolution. Of course Chamberlain had, since at least 1938, made a number of nasty comments about Churchill's judgment and fitness for office<sup>1</sup> and how he generally looked on Churchill as something of a leper.<sup>2</sup> In addition, prior to Germany's invasion of Poland, Chamberlain had done everything within his power to resist the pressure of the press and average Britons to put Churchill back in the Cabinet.

With the coming of the war, Chamberlain knew that he could no longer keep Churchill, with his military expertise, out of any War Cabinet he picked and reluctantly appointed him as First Lord of the Admiralty. Surprisingly, in the ensuing months, despite years of animosity, Churchill and Chamberlain worked well together and grew to be close and loyal colleagues. From the moment he joined the Government, Churchill, played the role of "Chamberlain's loyal, if impulsive lieutenant."<sup>3</sup> In early May 1940, Churchill was even given the critical job of being the final speaker defending the Chamberlain Government against a motion in the House to oust it from power over the military's performance during the Norwegian campaign. Churchill even commiserated with a devastated Chamberlain when the results of the vote proved disappointing.

When Churchill became Prime Minister two days later, contrary to the story in the movie, Chamberlain and Halifax did not seek to pounce on some statement from Churchill that he would

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., HC Deb 17 Nov 1938 Vol 341 cc1196

<sup>2</sup> Manchester, *Alone*, pictures following p.448

<sup>3</sup> Self, p. 417

never enter peace negotiations in hopes of ousting him from the Prime Ministership. Rather, at that time, Chamberlain, Halifax, and Churchill were all of the belief that the war needed to be fought to its conclusion and Hitler vanquished. There was never any agreement between Chamberlain and Halifax to look for ways to undermine Churchill. The idea of engaging in peace negotiations did not even come up then. It only arose on May 25, after continuing bad news from the fighting in France and the issuance of a very pessimistic report (not mentioned in the movie) from the British Chiefs of Staff, which was extremely pessimistic about Britain's ability to win the war if France fell. These two things caused Halifax to change his mind about fighting to the end and to immediately push for negotiations with Germany to be mediated by Mussolini instead.

Although not shown in the movie, rather than looking to undermine Churchill, it was only with Chamberlain's support that Churchill's no-negotiations position prevailed in the War Cabinet. Had Chamberlain not supported Churchill's position, it "would have been dangerously compromised, even undermined."<sup>4</sup> The consequences would have been profound "for the history of Churchill's wartime Government, Britain, and the entire free world."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, without that support, Churchill would have been forced into peace negotiations or more likely forced to resign so that a new Prime Minister, perhaps Halifax, could negotiate a peace agreement with Hitler.<sup>6</sup> In either event there would have been no Winston Churchill, savior of western democracy, as we have come to know him. Instead, Britain, like France, would have become a vassal state "with a new Germanophile British government established"<sup>7</sup> likely lead by Nazi-

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<sup>4</sup> Self p. 438

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> *NPWH* p. 453

<sup>7</sup> Lukacs, *The Last European War* p.101

leaning ex-King Edward VIII<sup>8</sup> with former P.M. David Lloyd George, an unabashed Hitler sympathizer, appointed as Prime Minister.<sup>9</sup>

*Darkest Hour*'s inclusion of a fictitious effort by Chamberlain and Halifax to undermine the Churchill Government, rather than telling the story of why and how Chamberlain and Churchill grew close and loyal to each other and that Chamberlain supported Churchill's no-peace negotiations position in the War Cabinet, is unfortunate. It makes the movie less complete and less historically accurate than it could have been. Nonetheless, *Darkest Hour* is still worth seeing. Its shortcomings notwithstanding, it does provide a good basic glimpse of the debate in the War Cabinet that took place during the last week of May 1940.

### **Some of the minor embellishments, inaccuracies or restructuring of facts in *Darkest Hours***

Churchill was aware that on May 9 Chamberlain had offered the Prime Ministership to Halifax but that Halifax did not accept the offer. As such Churchill did not, as the movie indicates, tell the King on May 10 that he was unaware of this fact.

At any meeting, like the one that supposedly occurred between Halifax and the King on May 13 it is highly unlikely that Halifax, even though a friend, would have addressed the King by his nickname "Bertie."

Churchill did not fly to France on May 13 to discuss French plans for counter attack. The first of his five trips to France was on May 16. It was on that trip that he asked about French plans for a counter attack and received a tepid response.

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<sup>8</sup> DGFP Series D, Vol X No. 152 p.188

<sup>9</sup> Manchester and Reid pp. 116-17

Planning for the evacuation of the BEF from France (Operation Dynamo) began on May 17 not May 25.

After Churchill's first radio broadcast to the nation as P.M. on May 19, the King did not call and rebuke him for not giving Britons an honest assessment of the military situation in France.

Peace negotiations were not presented by Halifax as an alternative to having the garrison at Calais defend the city to the death as the movie shows. (On May 25, Churchill did actually order BEF Brigadier General Nicholson to hold Calais at all costs.<sup>10</sup> Churchill said that "Every hour you continue to exist, is of the greatest help to the BEF. The Government has therefore decided you must continue to fight. ... Evacuation will not (repeat not) take place ..."<sup>11</sup>

Churchill did not have a conference with just Chamberlain and Halifax on May 25 to discuss peace negotiations.

Churchill did not call FDR on the night of May 25 to talk about obtaining 50 old US destroyers and the delivery of US aircraft already purchased by Britain. Churchill requested the loan of 40 or 50 of America's old destroyers on May 15.<sup>12</sup>

King George did not visit Churchill at 10 Downing St on the night of May 27, to tell him that he supported Churchill's no-peace negotiations position.

Churchill's meeting with average Britons in the subway did not occur.

The actual evacuation of troops from Dunkirk started on May 27 not May 28.

The movie shows a briefing by the Chiefs of Staff on May 27 about the possibility that the Germans may employ a large fleet of fast motor boats (possibly up to 200 vessels carrying 100 men apiece) to invade Britain. This briefing actually took place, but on May 30, 1940. At the meeting both Chamberlain and Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Cyril Newall, showed significant concern. Churchill, however, dismissed the Chiefs' report, doubting that a raid on a large scale

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<sup>10</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* pp. 81-82

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* p. 82

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* p. 353

could be carried out by motorboats. He added that these craft would have to come over in flotillas if they were to put ashore any useful number of men at any one spot. He added that the Royal Navy would simply have to “make every endeavor to intercept such raids on the high seas.” While the comment seems rather cavalier, Churchill knew that any large invasion flotilla, whether traveling by motorboat or, more likely, by much slower river barges, would have to travel at night in order to hit the beaches at dawn. But once night fell, Luftwaffe fighters would be grounded — and the Royal Navy, with its largest ships having radar, owned the night.<sup>13</sup> On May 28, there were actually morning and afternoon sessions of the War Cabinet sandwiched around Churchill’s mid-day speech to the House.

It was at the 4 PM session of the War Cabinet on the 28<sup>th</sup> where Churchill said, “the position would be entirely different when Germany had made an unsuccessful attempt to invade this country.”<sup>14</sup>

After that session, Churchill met with the Outer Cabinet at 6:15 PM. Thereafter, he again met with the War Cabinet at 7 PM and told them that the Outer Cabinet had not seemed alarmed at the precarious posture of the BEF in France, and, more importantly, had expressed the greatest satisfaction when he had told them there was no chance of Britain giving up the struggle.<sup>15</sup> After that, there was silence from all members of the War Cabinet, including Halifax. The matter of peace negotiations was closed,

Churchill did not address Parliament on the evening of May 28 and thus Chamberlain did not signify his acceptance of the no-peace talks position via a handkerchief signal at such a session. (Indeed, he never did.) Besides, he had already shown his support for Churchill’s position in the War Cabinet meeting of May 26 and May 27.

The inspiring words that Churchill uttered to the House of Commons (according to the movie on the evening of May 28) that:

“We shall prove ourselves once more able to defend our island home, ride out the storm of war and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary, for years, if necessary, alone. ... 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.*”

were in fact part of his speech to the House on June 4, 1940.

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<sup>13</sup> Manchester and Reid p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert, *Finest Hours* p.305

<sup>15</sup> Confidential Annex to CAB65/1 145 (40) p.6 189



Churchill had far more secretarial support than just Elizabeth Layton.

### **Some of the more significant inaccuracies in the movie.**

Churchill never indicated that he was willing to enter into peace negotiations. (This point is discussed at length in Chapter 17 of *No Peace With Hitler*.) In response to a hypothetical situation posed by Halifax where a weakened Germany offered terms to both France and Britain, Churchill said that “if he were told what the terms offered were, he would be prepared to consider them.”<sup>16</sup> (Seeing that at the time Halifax was backing Churchill into an uncomfortable corner, Chamberlain quickly interceded and reset the scenario.) Churchill did tell the Outer Cabinet on May 28 that “I have thought carefully in these last days whether it was part of my duty to consider entering into negotiations with That Man [Hitler].” Notably, he did not, however, tell the members of the Outer Cabinet he had been thinking about whether Britain should or should not negotiate with Hitler. Rather, all he said was that he was turning over in his mind whether, as P.M., he had a duty to be open to the possibility of negotiations. The question was whether as Prime Minister he was obliged not to believe that negotiations were simply foreclosed. The seeming ease by which, what Churchill imagined Hitler’s peace terms would truncate the examination of his duty merely to “consider negotiations” provides evidence that Churchill did not actually think about a negotiated peace in and of itself.

Halifax never raised Churchill’s actions with respect to Gallipoli in any of the discussions/arguments he had about entering peace negotiations.

Halifax also never told the King that Prime Minister Churchill might have to be replaced.

### **Some things omitted from the movie were:**

The fact that upon becoming P.M. Churchill was most gracious toward Neville Chamberlain — appointing him to the War Cabinet, as well as making him President of the Privy Council and Leader of the House of Commons. He also told the Chamberlains that they need not rush to move out of 10 Downing St.

In a touching note, Churchill also said “In these 8 months we have worked together [since the war started] I am proud to have won your friendship and your confidence in an increasing measure. To a very large extent I am in your — hands — and I feel no fear of that. ...”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Confidential Annex to CAB 65/1 142 (40) p.6 180

<sup>17</sup> McCarten p.80

The fact Churchill had sent FDR telegrams on May 20 and again on June 15 in which he attempted to guilt and threaten FDR. In the telegram of May 20, 1940, Churchill said that “if this country was left by the United States to its fate, no one could have the right to blame those responsible if they made the best terms they could for the surviving inhabitants.”

The June 15 wire was even more explicit — suggesting that there could be circumstances under which a future British Government might have to turn the Royal Navy over to the Nazis as part of a deal to save some semblance of the UK. The telegram read in part:

Although the present Government and I personally would never fail to send the [British] fleet across the Atlantic, if resistance was beaten down here, a point may be reached in the struggle where the present Ministers no longer have control of affairs and when very easy terms could be obtained for the British islands by their becoming a vassal state of the Hitler empire. A pro-German government would certainly be called into being to make peace and might present to a shattered or starving nation an almost irresistible case for entire submission to the Nazi will. The fate of the British Fleet, as I have already mentioned to you, would be decisive on the future of the United States. ... If we go [down] you may have the United States of Europe under the Nazi command far more numerous, far stronger, far better armed than the New [World].<sup>18</sup>

In response to Churchill’s not-too-subtle threat, exactly one month later Roosevelt told the P.M. that he could persuade Congress to send fifty old destroyers to Britain on two conditions: (1) Britain would secretly agree never to allow the Royal Navy to be scuttled or surrendered, and (2) Britain would sell or lease its naval bases in North America to the US.<sup>19</sup>

There was an order issued by Hitler on May 24<sup>th</sup> (lifted on May 26<sup>th</sup>) directing the German forces moving toward Dunkirk to halt their efforts.

Halifax became angry and frustrated at the way Churchill and other members of the War Cabinet treated his proposal for peace negotiations.<sup>20</sup>

### **Some of the significant inaccuracies in the movie were:**

As discussed above, unlike what was indicated in the movie, at the time Churchill became P.M., peace negotiations to end the war were not being considered. Accordingly Chamberlain and Halifax did not try to get Churchill to say that he would never consider peace negotiations so

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<sup>18</sup> Kimball, *Complete Correspondence* Vol 1 pp. 49-51

<sup>19</sup> Colville p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> *NPWH* pp. 460

they would have an excuse to resign and bring down the Churchill Government. Furthermore, Chamberlain never rejected Churchill's push for "victory at all costs" nor did he ever say that Churchill must be removed from office.

At the beginning of Churchill's Premiership, Churchill, Chamberlain, and Halifax each believed that the war should be carried on to a conclusion. Throughout the German campaign in France, Chamberlain was, however, frequently in despair about the military situation and the French not fighting, but it was Halifax, not Chamberlain, that changed his position about continuing the war. He did it on May 25.

Chamberlain never rebuked Churchill about his unwillingness to engage in negotiations. To the contrary, he supported Churchill's position.

Chamberlain and Halifax also did not confer about both resigning on May 28 after Churchill told the War Cabinet of his meeting with the Outer Cabinet and that the matter of peace negotiations was closed. Indeed, Chamberlain had been on record supporting Churchill's no-peace negotiations position at least since May 26.

When on May 28, Churchill told the War Cabinet of the Outer Cabinet's willingness to fight on rather than enter peace negotiations, Halifax simply accepted those results. (Halifax did threaten to resign on May 27. But with regard to a private meeting in the garden at 10 Downing St after the War Cabinet sessions were over, respected historian John Lukacs, writes that Churchill was likely "able to charm and sooth Halifax somewhat."<sup>21</sup> Churchill perhaps did so by reinforcing and playing on Halifax's belief that his resignation at that moment could create a national crisis.<sup>22</sup>)

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<sup>21</sup> Lukacs, *Five Days* p. 155

<sup>22</sup> See, *Ibid*