

Book review on name

[War](#), [World War 2](#)



‘ Instructor’s Name’

Five days in London May 1940 by John Lukas

The five days between May 24, 1940 and May 28, 1940 is a period, which had a profound implication in the course of the Second World War, and in effect on modern history. During these five days, the British war cabinet discussed whether they should negotiate with the Nazi Germany or continue on the offensive. The crucial significance of these five days is the central theme of John Lukacs’ book ‘ Five Days in London, May 1940’.

John Lukacs is the author of the famous work ‘ the End of the Modern Age’, which garnered him the Pulitzer nomination, and other notable books such as ‘ The Hitler of History’ and ‘ The Last European War’. Lukacs is a Hungarian born historian. He worked as a professor of history in Chestnut Hill College, and also served as a visiting professor for many reputed institutions, like the Princeton University, University of Budapest and Johns Hopkins University.

Winston Churchill had opined in his book ‘ the history of World War II (Volume IV)’, that the year 1942 was the ‘ hinge of fate’, as it was the year when the Axis forces had begun to turn back. However, Lukacs considers the five fateful days of May 1940, as more significant in the context of the war, as during these days Churchill put up a valiant fight in convincing the British cabinet to fight on.

Churchill’s effort, to reverse the British council’s policy of appeasement of the Hitler regime, was meted with stiff opposition from several factions, some coming from his own party. Almost a quarter million British troops were trapped by the German army in Dunkirk, and efforts were on to evacuate them, and some of the cabinet members were tempted to

negotiate with the Nazis, seeing the tight situation they were in.

Being a Liberal for most of his life up until 1924, Churchill did not enjoy the full support of the Conservative party, at that time. The book presents a fly on the wall account of, the heated discussions that took place between Churchill and the other prominent politicians of that era such as Harold Nicholson, Alexander Cadogan and Neville Chamberlain.

Many historians have written about Churchill before, but their accounts were based on partial revelations of certain official and private documents, and the memoirs of others. However Lukacs' book differs from the others, by its sheer dramatic presentation of the events, which is a juxtaposition of in-depth historical knowledge and lurid literary style. He starts his book by saying

“ This book attempts to reconstruct the history of five days that could have changed the world. The setting is London, and the five days are Friday through Tuesday, 24 to 28, May 1940. Then and there, Adolph Hitler came closest to winning the Second World War, his war.”

These words aptly set the tone to what is to follow. During those five days the future of Europe hung in a perilous balance. England was faced with two paths: come to an understanding with Hitler or face the music alone (since America was yet to enter the war) and dauntingly so. The path they chose is today history, but the part Churchill played in it is not known to many, and this is what this book aims to clarify.

There are seven chapters in total the book, with five chapters (except the first and last) dedicated to each of the five days from May 24th to May 28th, of 1940. The book is basically about defending Churchill from his detractors.

Many recent historians have over the years painted a picture of Churchill, which is less than flattering. For instance, in his book 'A Republic, Not Empire', Pat Buchanan, has written that it would have been better if England had chosen to stay out of the war, and let the Nazis and the Russians battle it out amongst themselves.

During the war, England was the only country which showed resistance to Germany, during the period between the fall of France to Nazis and the invasion of Russia by Hitler. On retrospect a few argue that the victory in war, cost England its empire and its hold on the West, and it would have been reasonable and lot less expensive, if Churchill would not have been so stubborn and had made a deal with Germany. The crux of their arguments is that Stalin was an equal if not a greater threat for Europe. However, through his intense research, Lukacs, a staunch anti-communist, defends the stand Churchill took, and explains how Churchill had the historical consciousness which made his proclaim, that if Hitler wins the whole world will be drowned in dark abyss of a modern age characterized by perverted science.

" Britain could not win the war. In the end America and Russia did. But in May 1940 Churchill was the one who did not lose it. Then and there he saved Western civilization"

The story Lukacs narrates in his elegant and insightful book is not a new one, and anybody familiar with English history, would know that Churchill was responsible for England's defiance. Also known is the fact that Churchill's political position was anything but strong in May 1940, and he did not enjoy the full support of the Conservative party. However Lukacs' works involves an intense research from the archives, and thus presents a more

comprehensive and detailed account, of those decisive five days, when the British cabinet swayed between the possibility of salvaging something from the wreckage, or to die gallantly.

Churchill became the prime minister of England on the very same day when Germany invaded the West. His predecessor Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax, his foreign secretary, had entered a pre-war appeasing policy with the Nazis, and had proclaimed that they had brought peace to England.

Unfortunately this illusion had left the country unprepared for the onslaught they were about to face. The English complacency and narcissism did not stand a chance against the German army motivated by Hitler. Just within a fortnight the German army defeated the French, and trapped a part of the British battalion near the French northern coast.

Lukacs uses his findings and research to showcase, how the public opinion of that period was shaped by, panic and inadequate information. He says that the press misinterpreted, and in some cases wantonly suppressed news about the war. So only a selected few had the necessary information to gauge, whether surrender or aggression would be the right means to pursue. Whatever might have been the public sentiment at that time, the British leaders did not record or analyze it, as they had absolutely minimal time in hand.

The book also throws light on how the other British leaders reacted to the emergency, and their relationship and opinions about Churchill. Lukacs says Lord Halifax had changed his mind about appeasing Hitler, but he was not sure how this war could be won. He at least wanted to know what would be the terms of Hitler, if a peace treaty was proposed. He also thought Churchill

to be hot headed, and dreaded that he might lure the nation into an unwanted conflict.

Halifax supported the idea of approaching the Italians, and knowing what might be the proposition of the Germans. Chamberlain too supported this idea initially, and Churchill did not overtly refuse at this point. Following the defeat of Belgium, the situation looked bleaker, and Chamberlain wavered and Halifax still wanted to approach the Italians.

On May 28th, Halifax, by Lukacs words, was defeated and Churchill convinced the council that they have nothing to lose by fighting on. Since by the next day it became clear the most of the army could escape from Dunkirk, the issue of an agreement with Germany was never raised again. Halifax was sent to the USA and he proved to be a good ambassador.

The most fascinating aspect of Churchill's character, as revealed by the book, is that he was not just showing blind bravado. Apart from being courageous he was also a realist, and he knew that the chances of British to survive the German attack were slim. He was also aware that many of his colleagues did not favor a war with German, and they had reservations about his capabilities as a leader. Yet he had the conviction that Hitler was a greater threat than Stalin or communism, and the determination to stand his ground in spite of the stiff opposition he faced.

Some of Churchill's colleagues not just felt defeatist, but they also harbored a secret admiration for Hitler, and saw him as a formidable force that could stand up against Russia. However, Churchill realized how potent an enemy Hitler could be, and how he had managed to form a populist nationalism, which was an ideological merger of nationalism and socialism. He realized

that the Hitler wave is sweeping against Europe, and he was the last man standing to check its flow.

Lukacs opines that, many of us around the world owe our freedom, institutions and lives, to Churchill's attempt at steering the war committee's decision in favor of his views, and this is the essence of the entire book. He presents those crucial moments with enthralling detail, against the fearful backdrop of the French army defeat and the evacuation of British soldiers from Dunkirk.

Lukacs also touches the spiritual element of the tussle, when he writes about the prayer meeting held on May 26th, which was attended by the royal family and other prominent political personalities including the Prime Minister, and presided by the archbishop of Canterbury. He also ends the book with a religious note, when in the final pages he writes:

“ Because of his resolution and—allow me to say this—because of God's will, of which, like every human being, [Churchill] was but an instrument. He was surely no saint, he was not a religious man, and he had many faults. Yet so it happened”.

Today decades have passed since the Great War ended, and looking back many of us think that the victory of the Allies over the Nazis was almost preordained. The victory of the alliance of USA, England and Russia and the like minded good guys, over the dictatorship and tyranny of Hitler and his friends, has an almost inevitable quality about, it when we read about the war through history books.

However, how crucial was the leadership of the nations going to war against the Nazis? What importance did the choices made by the leaders during this

period, have on the results of the war? If there were some other leaders at the helm of the Allied forces, will the results or strategies of the war have been different? Lukacs book is an attempt to answer these above mentioned questions.

Only one among the major countries involved in the war saw a leadership change during the course of the war, that country being England. So, this detailed and captivating description of the five days when Churchill changed the decision of the British war committee, and in effect the course of the war, is both interesting and informative to read.

Works Cited

Lukacs, John. *Five Days in London: May 1940*. London: Yale University Press, 1999. Print.