

# Churchill's Mythmaking Years: An Analysis of the Public Opinion of Winston Churchill from 1940 to 1941

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## ABSTRACT

Winston Churchill became an idealized figure to the British public in his first two years as Prime Minister. The Battle of Britain and German blitzkrieg enabled Churchill to exercise his oratory skills through speeches that encouraged the suffering masses. Through an analysis of contemporary diary entries and public opinion polls, this essay reveals that British citizens connected with Churchill's inclusive language and admired his recurring public visits to the streets of Britain. Churchill contributed to his mythmaking as he manipulated the media to prohibit criticisms of his wartime policies. He also utilized emerging technologies, mainly the radio, to speak to the masses and cement his reputation as a humble servant of the people. Despite a few detractors, most British people revered Churchill for his preservation of morale in the beginning of WWII, owing largely to the Prime Minister's careful control over the creation of his own myth.

## KEYWORDS

Churchill, Public opinion polls, myth, press, radio

Winston Churchill is often regarded as the greatest political leader in British history. His oratory skills, steadfast confidence in the strength of Britain, and tireless commitment to the British cause in the Second World War gained him much public approval that persists into the twenty-first century. Churchill's leadership during his first term as Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 bolstered his reputation, owing to his ability to uphold British morale under the threat of Nazi Germany.

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His first two years as Prime Minister, from 1940 to 1941, are referred to as his “mythmaking years” as his public approval surged during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. However, not all sentiment was pro-Churchill, and some regarded the Prime Minister with skepticism that focused on Churchill’s often hidden shortcomings. Overall, though, Churchill was beloved by most British people. His myth—which can be defined as the idealized public conception of Churchill—was a combination of intelligent self-creation, concern for the wellbeing of the people, confidence in British fortitude, and careful utilization of emerging technologies. Churchill’s speeches, his attempts to control the press, and his regular visits to the streets of war-torn Britain all helped bolster his public image into this mythical figure.

Before the mythmaking years, Churchill built his reputation in less significant political offices. Churchill served as Home Secretary in 1910, and early in his term, a series of strikes broke out in Tonypandy. Churchill, as Robert Rhodes James notes in his skeptical view of the future Prime Minister, “without waiting for requests from the local authorities...mobilized fifty thousand troops supplied with twenty rounds of ammunition each and dispatched them to all strategic points. These actions aroused a storm of criticism, some of which was echoed in ministerial circles.”<sup>1</sup> Churchill was overeager to suppress the strikes, and in a bout of undue confidence, he handled the situation poorly. Churchill broke the law in suppressing the strikes, and while he never faced significant punishment for his poor handling of the Tonypandy riots, his public image soured among the working class.

Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911, ending his term as Home Secretary. Churchill was largely responsible for the quarter of a million Allied casualties lost in the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, even though the blame did not rest solely on his shoulders. As James explains, “if ministerial responsibility means anything, Churchill was to a very real extent deeply responsible. He had at no stage conducted anything approaching a thorough examination of the manifold problems involved in such an operation.”<sup>2</sup> Churchill’s overestimations and miscalculations at Gallipoli earned him the disapproval of both government peers and the British public. Before he became Prime Minister in 1940, Churchill’s years in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure 1900-1939* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), 42.

<sup>2</sup> James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure*, 86.

government were marked by other controversial happenings such as his opposition to reform in India and his opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s, and his largely unsuccessful turn as Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1924 to 1929. Despite skepticism surrounding Churchill from the working class and government peers, Churchill maintained positions in government for decades, and remained a staple of twentieth-century British politics.

Churchill's early years of leadership difficulties and political controversy did not prohibit him from becoming Prime Minister in 1940, a time when British politics demanded secure and reliable leadership. The beginning of Churchill's "mythmaking years" were marked by the Battle of Britain, from July 1940 to October 1940, and the Blitz, spanning from September 1940 to May 1941. The Battle of Britain was a bloody air assault by German forces, and as Daniel Todman notes in his survey of Britain during WWII, "the beginning of the air battle overhead had immediate consequences for those on the ground. The point of German attacks was not to kill civilians but given the vagaries of bomb aiming and the proximity of civilian housing to military targets, civilian losses mounted."<sup>3</sup> The Battle of Britain was the beginning of the German onslaught, with attacks that increased in frequency exponentially over an eight-month bombing campaign. Andrew Roberts notes in his recent analysis of Churchill, "the Luftwaffe was to assault the capital [London] for four terrifying months, and initially the bombers returned for fifty-seven consecutive months."<sup>4</sup> The attacks demanded effective leadership from Churchill, who had to overcome his controversial legacy for the sake of the British people.

Churchill's public speaking was a primary means to exert his influence and garner public approval. Churchill made hundreds of speeches in the early years of the war, and the British population admired its leader's encouragement and transparency. Churchill was careful to use inclusive language when addressing the nation, and his communal communication resounded with the public. John Ramsden, in his book *Man of the Century*, explains how Churchill's speeches made the public feel personally connected to the Prime Minister. Ramsden notes one woman who compared the printed text of a Churchill speech with the radio address she had heard, writing, "after

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937-1941* (London: Penguin, 2017), 440.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (London: Penguin, 2019), 592.

analyzing the methods by which the ‘great orator’ had achieved his results, she noted finally the extent to which the entire speech was founded on an assumption of trust between leader and followers, so that ‘the monosyllable “I” occurs only four times in all the sixteen hundred words’.<sup>5</sup> Churchill did not represent himself as a separate figure elevated above the troubles of British society. Instead, he spoke with a humility that gained him much approval.

The Prime Minister’s speeches reverberated with lower-class citizens who faced constant threats of German bombing. Maggie Joy Blunt, a young British freelance writer who recorded her experiences during the war in a personal diary, commented after hearing a Churchill speech in August 1940 that, “Churchill has made another impressive speech this week. He is undoubtedly a figure in our history.”<sup>6</sup> Blunt wrote that Churchill had made several remarkable speeches, and while both the war and Churchill’s term were new, she believed that Churchill’s speeches had already cemented his place in British history.

Prime Minister Churchill greatly valued the role of the common people during the war. In a speech to the House of Commons on June 20, 1940, Churchill emphasized that “it was of the utmost importance...to preserve public morale.”<sup>7</sup> Churchill also valued the people themselves, adding, “this supreme battle depends upon the courage of the ordinary man and woman.”<sup>8</sup> Churchill’s concern and value of the common people extended beyond the public eye. In Churchill’s own account of the early years of WWII, he reveals a broadcast to the people on September 11, 1940, which outlined the military situation during the Battle of Britain. His communal language and appeal to the public’s sense of self-importance reverberate deeply in this speech. He ended the broadcast by stating, “therefore, we must regard the next week or so as a very important period in our history.”<sup>9</sup> After naming several significant historical events, he concluded with a dramatic summarization of the current moment: “We have read all

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<sup>5</sup> John Ramsden, *Man of the Century: Winston Churchill and His Legend Since 1945* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Garfield, *We Are at War: The Remarkable Diaries of Five Ordinary People* (London: Ebury, 2006), 345.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume VI: Finest Hour, 1939-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 578.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 578.

<sup>9</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 2: Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951), 330.

about this in the history books; but what is happening now is on a far greater scale and of far more consequence to the life and future of the world and its civilization than those brave old days."<sup>10</sup> In this crucial moment, Churchill turned to the common people to uphold British fortitude.

Churchill's immortalized speech, "Their Finest Hour" reflects the inclusive language Churchill used to strengthen British morale and build his reputation as a concerned leader. The conclusion of his speech, given on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940, is a powerful call to action for every British citizen to realize the gravity of the moment and to stand strong in the face of German opposition. Churchill states, rather dramatically, "I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire."<sup>11</sup> Finally, in a rousing call to action, "let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'this was their finest hour.'"<sup>12</sup> Churchill acknowledged it was the duty of every British civilian to fight for the empire, regardless of rank or class. Churchill's language was eloquent yet clear, as compared to other political leaders who used esoteric political language in speeches. He knew his audience, and he sought to communicate effectively with civilians of all classes and backgrounds. Churchill's awareness of audience and use of inclusive language contributed greatly to his myth as a beloved leader.

Though encouraging, Churchill was careful to remain grounded despite dismal situations. The Blitz wore down civilian morale in England with its constant nighttime bombings: Churchill walked a fine line between encouragement and sympathy when addressing the public. Henry Pelling comments in his foundational biography of the prime minister that, "Churchill thought it worth emphasizing, in his Commons speech of October 8<sup>th</sup>, that at the existing rate of attrition it would be ten years before half of London had been destroyed, and 'after that, of course, progress would be much slower.'"<sup>13</sup> Churchill began hopefully

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<sup>10</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, 330.

<sup>11</sup> Winston Spencer Churchill, "Their Finest Hour," in *Winston S. Churchill, His Complete Speeches: 1897-1963, Volume VI, 1935-42*, ed. Robert Rhodes James, (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 1974), 6238.

<sup>12</sup> Churchill, "Their Finest Hour," 6238.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Pelling, *Winston Churchill* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1974), 455.

to boost public spirits, especially for those living under direct bombing attacks in London. Pelling continues, “but at the same time it was essential not to minimize the personal loss that people experienced when their homes were destroyed. Churchill made a point of visiting some of the areas of damage, and on one occasion early in September he was quickly on the scene at an ‘incident’ in the London Docks, and was moved to tears by the sight of the damage and by the spontaneous enthusiasm of the people for himself.”<sup>14</sup> Churchill was transparent about the casualties of the war while providing hope for the public.

Many respected Churchill for his refusal to shirk away from the grisly facts of the war. In August 1940, about a month after the Battle of Britain commenced, Christopher Tomlin, a poor writing-paper salesman in his late twenties, wrote in his diary about Churchill’s speech regarding recent attacks on England. He noted, “Mr. Churchill’s speech was pessimistic: ‘if victory comes’, not ‘victory is sure’. This is the first time a statesman faced reality and tried to tell the truth. It is an encouragement to me.”<sup>15</sup> Churchill was not an ignorant optimist; he was not afraid to acknowledge the danger of the war and Britain’s role in it. This nuanced approach gained him favor amongst some of the more realist-minded English people.

Churchill projected his oratory skill on emerging technologies, such as the radio, which contributed to his “mythmaking.” Ramsden states that “Churchill planned indeed to use the media, but directly through his personal appearances and speeches rather than only through the distorting mirror of press coverage. On radio, then *the* medium for addressing the nation directly, Churchill established an immediate and unprecedented impact on the British population, and on other English-speaking audiences too.”<sup>17</sup> Ramsden’s observation reveals that Churchill’s myth was partially self-created, as the Prime Minister intelligently utilized contemporary technology to his advantage in encouraging the people and gaining sympathy. Churchill gained public approval in the fall of 1940 through his broadcasts, in which “he could appeal to the general public in a fashion not open to his predecessors, and the BBC Listener Research Section reckoned that his broadcast on July 14<sup>th</sup> was heard by over 64% of the adult population.”<sup>18</sup> Ever an excellent orator, Churchill’s humble yet confident diction connected him to the ordinary listener.<sup>19</sup> Churchill cultivated his public image by

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<sup>14</sup> Pelling, *Winston Churchill*, 455.

<sup>15</sup> Garfield, *We Are at War*, 342.

taking advantage of the opportunities radio broadcasts provided him.

The myth of Churchill can distort the full scope of public opinion towards him, as many common people remained unconvinced of the Prime Minister's greatness. Indeed, many found his speeches were ungrounded and lacked traditional British poise. In a letter by Pam Ashford, a thirty-seven-year-old secretary in a coal exporting firm dated Monday, November 13, 1939, one Miss Bousie is recorded as having said that "I don't like the hard things he says."<sup>20</sup> Ashford herself defended Churchill, retorting that "it is the only way to handle the Nazis. It is the language they understand."<sup>21</sup> Miss Crawford sided with Miss Bousie, and Mr. Hutchinson claimed that Churchill's address was "a most unfortunate speech. It smelt too much like their own methods. He should have kept his dignity."<sup>22</sup> However, Ashford summarized her own opinions by noting excitedly "I myself enjoyed it thoroughly!"<sup>23</sup> Churchill, in his youth, was a war correspondent and was held prisoner during the Boer War. This early incident earned Churchill both respect and skepticism. Christopher Tomlin reflects on his father's thoughts of Churchill, who claimed that he, "never had any time for him."<sup>24</sup> Tomlin's father resented Churchill for his dramatic storytelling about his past, stating, "he hid under a tarpaulin and said the Boers prodded with their bayonets between his legs and hands and left thinking he wasn't there. What a tale to tell! He has always been too theatrical."<sup>25</sup> Clearly, some did not affirm Churchill's idealization.

Despite his detractors, Churchill remained incredibly popular during the first two years of World War II. As Roberts notes in his biography of Churchill, "by early August [1940] Churchill's popularity was confirmed by a Gallup poll, published in the *News Chronicle*. Asked whether they approved or disapproved of his leadership, 88% of the sample replied in the affirmative, and only 7% were hostile and 5% doubtful. The proportion of approval was far higher than anything that Chamberlain had attained."<sup>16</sup> John Lukacs notes a similar trend toward Churchill's vast approval since his appointment as Prime Minister. He claims that "ever since Churchill's assumption of the premiership on May 10 his leadership of the nation was not only popular but unquestionable and unquestioned."<sup>17</sup> Churchill's myth was already significantly established mere months into his premiership, and his

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, 459.

<sup>17</sup> John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (Carlton North: Scribe Publications, 2014), 163.

inclusive language and clever utilization of radio and broadcasting overpowered the relatively few Churchill skeptics who existed.

Churchill maintained his popularity by attempting to control the press' criticism. Daniel Todman notes that Churchill sought to increase censorship of the press after they questioned the effectiveness of his government in the Battle of Britain and the early days of the Blitz. Although these attempts at censorship largely failed, "the prime minister had not given up on his belief that the *Pictorial* and the *Daily Mirror*'s criticisms were unpatriotic subversion, nor on his desire to see the radical papers suppressed."<sup>18</sup> Churchill attempted to maintain his public image by pressuring the press. This demonstrates Churchill's intention to maintain the myth of his impeccable leadership. Martin Gilbert corroborates the idea that Churchill was concerned with the impression of negative press on public morale. After hearing about the possibility of a future heavy bombing by Germany, Churchill was diligent in prohibiting such fear-inducing news from reaching the public.<sup>19</sup> Churchill and his government carefully crafted their presentation of the war to the British people during the summer of 1940. Todman notes that, "the belief that their country was hitting back, as well as taking it, was a crucial part of how the war was presented to the British people during that 'Spitfire Summer.'"<sup>20</sup> Churchill had a role in framing events for the public. Churchill's media manipulation successfully managed to conceal some events he believed too damaging to civilian morale, which remained high.

As the Battle of Britain raged on and soon gave way to the Blitz, Churchill went into the streets of Britain, where he surveyed the effects of the war and spoke with members of the public.<sup>21</sup> These visits greatly enhanced his myth, and as a *Times* report said:

In one village through which he passed the people about quickly recognized him, and raised their hats or waved their hands. Mr. Churchill, who seemed to be in the best of spirits, acknowledged their greeting and smiled... if Mr. Churchill's smiles were a measure of his satisfaction he was indeed satisfied... The Prime Minister also visited

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<sup>18</sup> Todman, *Britain's War*, 496.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 602.

<sup>20</sup> Todman, *Britain's War*, 454.

<sup>21</sup> Pelling, *Winston Churchill*, 453.

a North-East England shipyard. He spent an hour there, and was quickly recognized and loudly cheered... Workers' wives gathered at the gates of the shipyard, and Mr. Churchill, impressed by the warmth of his welcome, shouted "Are we downhearted?" The women-folk responded with a roar, "No."<sup>22</sup>

His public appearances cemented his image as a leader for the people, not just an aristocratic bigwig who was unconcerned by the commoners' tribulations. Churchill's regular tours of recently bombed areas boosted public morale as people saw him as a valiant man who looked out for them. Roberts comments, "these visits to bomb-sites proved extraordinarily good for public morale. In his memoirs, Churchill wrote of a visit to Peckam in south London, where the crowd shouted, 'let them have it too!' He wrote, 'I undertook forewith to see their wishes were carried out; and this promise was certainly kept.'"<sup>23</sup>

Roberts addresses that although Churchill had dissenters, they were relatively few. "On a couple of occasions there were angry shouts directed against Churchill for the devastation wrought, against the hundreds of times when he was cheered; similarly some people looted neighbours' empty, bombed-out houses and businesses, but these instances of opportunism were few and in no way overshadowed the many thousands of daily acts of heroism, selflessness and community solidarity."<sup>24</sup> Churchill was also favored for his economic contributions toward the struggling public: "Churchill tried to get compensation for destroyed homes raised to 1000 pounds. As well as housing, Churchill paid very close attention to rationing throughout the war, recognizing how closely related food was to morale."<sup>25</sup> The Prime Minister's genuine concern for the poor and his thoughtful actions won him the general respect of the lower class.

Churchill also made visits to the frontlines. One French Major-General, Sir Edward Spears, noted that Churchill, visiting an evacuation site, saw himself equal to the soldiers. Speaking with a French soldier, Spears observed that Churchill "felt every indulgence

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<sup>22</sup> Pelling, *Winston Churchill*, 453.

<sup>23</sup> Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, 593.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, 593.

<sup>25</sup> Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*, 594.

must be shown to people so highly tried, undergoing so fearful an ordeal. He looked very sad, and as he spoke a wave of deep emotion swept from his heart to his eyes, where tears appeared not for the only time that afternoon.”<sup>26</sup> Churchill then said to the soldier, “we are companions in misfortune,” and, “there is nothing to be gained from recrimination over our common miseries.”<sup>27</sup> The effectiveness of Churchill’s inclusivity is demonstrated in his high public approval ratings from 1940 to 1941, proving that most appreciated his sentiments. In a public opinion poll from July 1940, 87.36% of people approved of “Mr. Churchill as Prime Minister.” A poll taken in October of the same year reported that 89.02% of people approved of “Mr. Churchill as Prime Minister.”<sup>28</sup> Many British people idealized Churchill for his unifying language and public displays of commonality.

Winston Churchill’s myth was the product of honest dedication to the welfare of the common people, his inclusive language, and manipulating the press and media technologies to maintain public approval. Incredibly, Churchill’s supporters seemed to easily overlook his past mistakes as Home Secretary and First Lord of the Admiralty. Before serving as Prime Minister, Churchill was seen as an indecisive, untrustworthy character who was responsible for several significant political blunders. When he became Prime Minister at the onset of the Second World War, his approval ratings skyrocketed, and the concerns of the present seemed to overcome Churchill’s historical shortcomings. The first two years of the war demanded a confident, effective leader, which the public appeared to find in Churchill.

Churchill’s skeptics are still notable, as the perspective of Churchill as an infallible, universally loved leader is narrow and inaccurate. Some of his contemporaries regarded him with distrust and disagreed with his public presentation style. Some believed that Churchill was too animated and distracting in his speeches, disregarding the British poise that they believed was crucial to adept leadership. Still, the years 1940 and 1941 serve as Churchill’s primary mythmaking years, as the Prime Minister’s inclusivity, public appearances, and preservation of morale resonated with most of the

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<sup>26</sup> Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 439.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 439.

<sup>28</sup> “British Institute of Public Opinion Polls, 1940 Documentation,” UK Data Service, <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=3331> (Accessed April 17, 2024).

population. Churchill was revered by most of the British public for his considerate and cunning leadership during World War II's most difficult years.