

Forum: SASMUN VIII

Committee: Historical Joint Crisis Committee

Topic: The 1940 UK War Cabinet Crisis

Student Officers: Aiden Lassagne, Vivaan Gupta, Raynard Liao

Start time: May 26, 1940, 9:00 AM

Introduction

The 1940 UK War Cabinet Crisis was an extremely tense and critical moment in history, at a time when Nazi Germany was rapidly conquering Europe during World War II. The War Cabinet Crisis lasted from May 26 to May 28th, and was a period of intense debate between the members of the British War Cabinet, where parties had to decide between negotiating peace with Hitler or continuing to resist the Nazi regime. There were initially 5 members taking part in the discussions, being Winston Churchill, the newly appointed Prime Minister of the United Kingdom; Neville Chamberlain, Former Prime Minister and Lord President of the Council; Edward Wood, Foreign Secretary; Clement Attlee, Leader of the Labor Party; and Arthur Greenwood, an influential member of the Labor Party. Each of these members had different perspectives and beliefs that influenced their roles during this crisis.

Other members in this committee represent foreign ministers, who may not have actually been present in the cabinet. Delegates should consider what stance would provide the best outcome for their nation, and work with other allies to achieve that goal. For example, Italy would align itself with Germany, having been a close ally. Allied nation delegates should otherwise provide a clear stance on aligning with Chamberlain's plan of Appeasement vs. Churchill's adamant views on fighting Germany's oppression, no matter what.

In this committee, delegates should consider addressing a few major points of contention amidst this crisis and their plans on how to address them. A first example would be the Wehrmacht's encirclement of Dunkirk, where German forces surrounded Allied forces in May of 1940. From May 26 to June 4, 1940, Operation Dynamo took place where over 338,000 soldiers were successfully

rescued. Another example would be Belgium, with the Belgian army having surrendered only two days after committee's start time. Belgium would have to consider the backlash and effects of surrendering, and whether it's a necessary action, with other delegations potentially considering providing aid or peace negotiations to prevent the takeover of Belgium

Delegates should also consider any backlash or unexpected effects that come from their plan(s) of action, and should come up with ways of prevention or how to react in case of failure. For example, how allied forces would react if Operation Dynamo failed, or the state of the BEF soldiers at the time.

The UK War Cabinet Crisis was an extremely pivotal moment that changed the entire course of WWII. The decision between fighting Nazi Germany or seeking a peace deal would have changed the world, where Nazi Germany likely could've taken over even more nations in Europe and expanded its power dramatically. In this committee, delegates will have to work together to make a decision in the midst of worldwide conflict in order to ensure either the safety of their nation or a successful takeover.

Definition of Key Terms

Appeasement

Appeasement is a foreign policy whereby a nation will pacify and meet the demands of another aggressive nation to prevent violent action or war. In the case of this topic, appeasement for the UK meant giving in to the demands of Nazi Germany to avoid conflict.

Coalition Government

A coalition government is a form of government where there is no single ruling party. Instead, the government is run jointly by multiple parties. For the UK, these parties were the Conservative, Liberal, and Labour parties.

Wehrmacht

The Wehrmacht are the armed forces of Nazi Germany.

Blitzkrieg

Blitzkrieg, translating to “Lightning War”, is an attack strategy used by Nazi Germany with an emphasis on quick, precise, and heavy attacks on enemies through the use of armored tanks and air support. Its main goal is to overwhelm the enemy and infiltrate past enemy lines before the enemy can mobilize a sufficient defense, leaving them in a disoriented and defenseless position.

An example of this Blitzkrieg strategy was the breach around the Maginot Line. The Maginot Line was a French defensive barrier that withstood German attacks during World War I, cementing itself as a permanent defense fixture against Nazi Germany. Its concrete walls were thicker and its guns were heavier, but this barrier only covered the French-German border, leaving the French-Belgian border open. Noting this, the German armed forces invaded Belgium on May 10, crossed the Somme River in France near the French-Belgian border, and attacked the French town of Sedan at the end of the Maginot Line on May 12. This quick attack allowed Germany to go around French fortifications and invade France, sparing little time for France to mobilize a defence.

British Expeditionary Force

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF for short) was the contingent of the British armed forces that was deployed to France when WWII was officially declared on September 3, 1939.

French First Army

The French First Army was the contingent of the French armed forces that fought alongside the British Expeditionary Force to defend France and nearby Belgium.

Weygand Plan

The Weygand Plan, developed by Maxime Weygand, was a counter-offensive strategy that never took place. In short, the plan aimed to flank both sides of the German Panzer contingent that was making its way up to the English Channel through France. The plan was for the BEF and French First Army to attack and push down the Panzers from the north, while the French army stationed in the south attacked and pushed the Panzers up to corner them.

10th Panzer Division

The 10th Panzer Division was a contingent of the Nazi Wehrmacht that drove Panzers, German tanks, and attacked the French cities of Boulogne and Calais.

Luftwaffe

The Luftwaffe are the air force of Nazi Germany.

Wehrmacht

The Wehrmacht was the German name for the Nazi German military. The Wehrmacht consisted of three main branches: the Heer (army), the Luftwaffe (air force), and the Kriegsmarine (navy). Approximately 18.6 million personnel served in the Wehrmacht across these three branches. Together, the German military was able to execute its precise, swift, and targeted attacks (Blitzkrieg). Oftentimes, the Heer would launch attacks on the ground while the Luftwaffe provided support in the skies.

The Wehrmacht was significantly larger than its British counterpart. The Wehrmacht had 100 infantry divisions and six armored (Panzer) divisions, while Great Britain had 10 infantry divisions and no armored divisions. Specifically, the 10th Panzer Division was the main armored division of the Nazi Wehrmacht that drove Panzers, German tanks, and attacked the French cities of Boulogne and Calais. A division consisted of 12,000 to 25,000 personnel. Additionally, the Wehrmacht was also superior in terms of the quality of its machinery. A typical infantry division of the Wehrmacht consisted of 442 machine guns, 135 mortars, 72 antitank guns, and 24 howitzers. In contrast, a typical British infantry division was only a slight improvement from what they had in WWI. Combined, the sheer strength of numbers and quality of the German Wehrmacht made it the strongest military in the world.

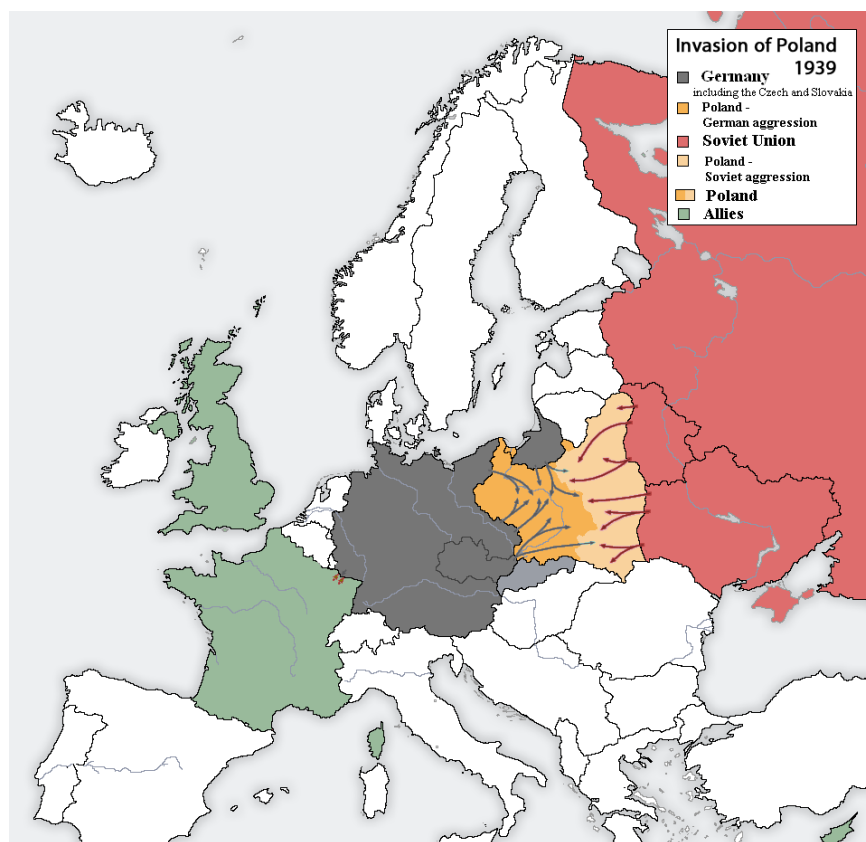
Background Information

The Fall of Chamberlain and the Rise of Churchill

From May 1937, Neville Chamberlain took over the position of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom after his predecessor, Stanley Baldwin, retired. In the face of German, Italian, and Japanese aggression during that time, Baldwin maintained a policy of **appeasement**, which Chamberlain continued to uphold. Chamberlain went on to sign two important documents. In

September 1938, Chamberlain signed the **Munich Agreement** with Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany, aligning with Chamberlain's appeasement policy. Later, in August 1939, Chamberlain also signed the **Anglo-Polish Alliance** with Poland.

Also in August 1939, Germany and the USSR signed the **Molotov-Ribbentrop pact**, leading to the invasion of Poland in September 1939. Germany attacked western Poland while the USSR attacked eastern Poland. In response, Chamberlain issued an official declaration of war on September 3, 1939, including the creation of his war cabinet. This cabinet included Winston Churchill and Viscount Halifax, now two crucial voices in this war cabinet crisis.



Map of the 1939 German and Soviet invasion of Poland (Wikipedia)

Chamberlain's appeasement style of leadership later came into question after the **German invasion of Norway**, which was seen as a major failure for the Allies. In a debate in the House of Commons regarding this defeat, many members of parliament expressed their loss of confidence in Chamberlain's leadership. In an attempt to maintain (some) leadership, Chamberlain urged for the creation of a **coalition government** between the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal parties, even

offering to resign from his role as Prime Minister to achieve this goal. In a private meeting on the 9th of May, 1940, Chamberlain spoke in private with Halifax, attempting to convince him to be Chamberlain's successor. However, Halifax turned this offer down.



Map of the 1940 German invasion of Denmark and Norway (Holocaust Encyclopedia)

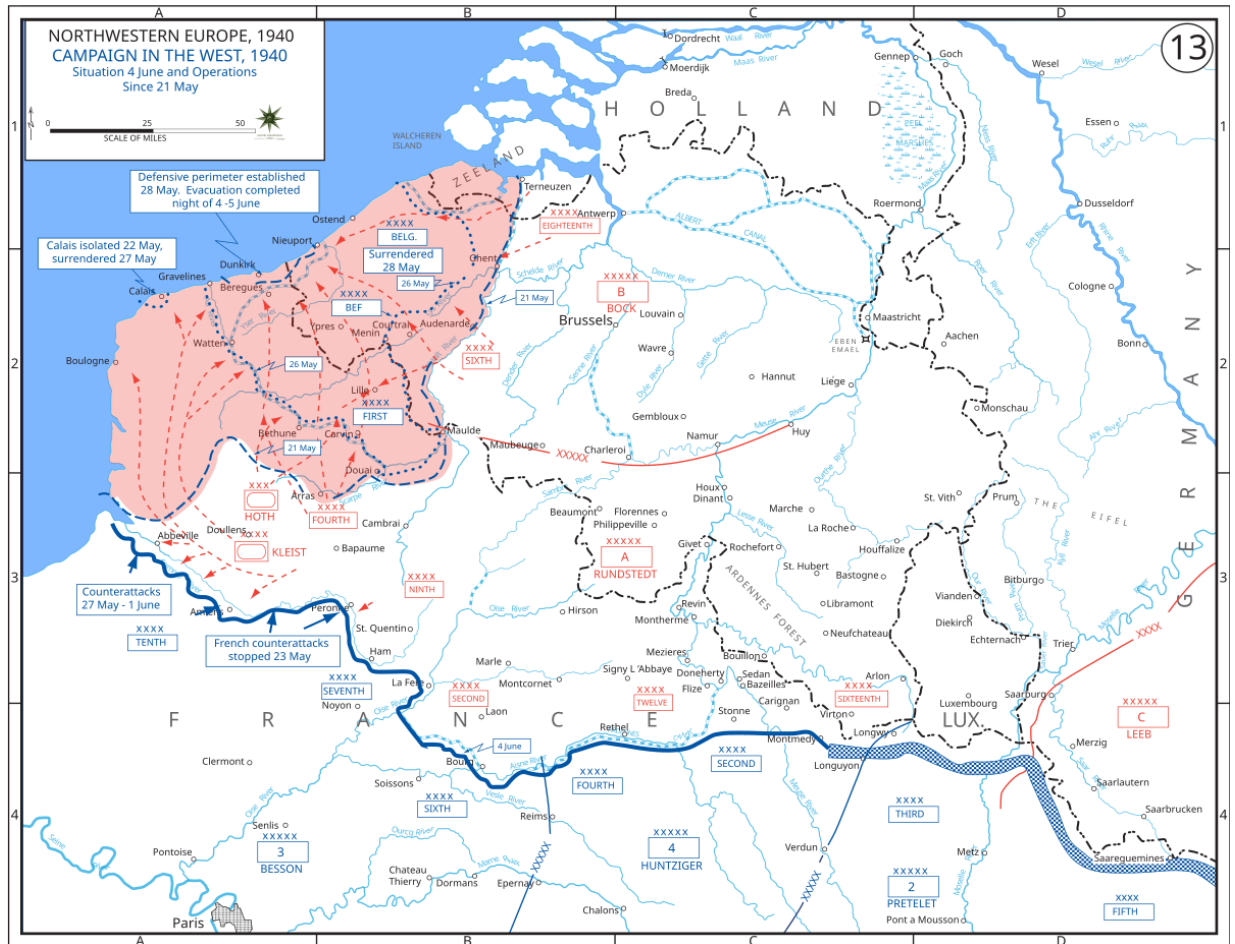
The next morning, on the 10th of May, 1940, the **Wehrmacht** launched its **blitzkrieg** **invasion of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands**. Noting this newfound crisis, Chamberlain first said he would remain as PM, but this was only temporary. Later that same day, the leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee, confirmed that the party would join the coalition government on the condition that Chamberlain would not remain as leader. Hence, Chamberlain handed his letter of resignation to King George VI, citing Winston Churchill as his successor and new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. However, Chamberlain continued to serve as the leader of the Conservative Party and a member of the war cabinet.



Map of the German invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg (BBC)

The Germans Attack Boulogne

Almost ten days later, the Germans led an advance toward the coastal French city of Boulogne (formally Boulogne-sur-Mer). About 400,000 French and British soldiers under the **British Expeditionary Force** (BEF) and **French First Army** were stationed in the coastal region of France, including Boulogne, and the threat of a German attack was growing rapidly. Preparations began for a potential evacuation, but the evacuation itself was held on pause with hopes resting on the **Weygand Plan**. This plan was another failure and was never executed. Lord Gort, the leader of the BEF, determined that the failure of the Weygand Plan left no choice but to evacuate Boulogne across the Strait of Dover.



Map of the Battle of Boulogne (Wikipedia)

Italy Divides the Cabinet

At the same time, the war cabinet became divided about the role that Italy should play. Until now, Italy had not yet entered the war, and the cabinet wanted it to stay this way. But on the 24th of May, 1940, Halifax received an important **telegram from the French government**. The French had an idea to create a dialogue between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. This was an opportunity for the US, the UK, and France to hear Italy's concerns before taking military action.

On the 25th of May, the cabinet continued discussions on the topic. Halifax viewed this dialogue as a golden opportunity that needed to be taken. He believed that Mussolini could serve as a negotiator with Hitler. In his eyes, it was a chance to secure world peace and the sovereignty of Great Britain, even though it might give Hitler control of almost all of Europe. It was a way out and

a way to end the war. Halifax stipulated, however, that this talk between Roosevelt and Mussolini must come personally from Roosevelt himself.

On the other hand, Churchill saw this very differently. Churchill believed that any attempt to negotiate with Hitler would be seen as negotiating with the enemy, leading to further glorification of Hitler and a loss of national morale.

Calais and Dunkirk: The Final Straw

The German Wehrmacht, led by the **10th Panzer Division**, and the **Luftwaffe** strengthened their attacks as they advanced along the French coast to Calais. But in a surprise announcement, Hitler commanded the Panzers to stop their advance. Many historians believe that this command provided the UK with crucial time to think about a potential evacuation out of Dunkirk. This halt was only short-lived.

As the Germans continued their attacks and the cities of Boulogne and Calais both fell into German hands on the 25th of May, Dunkirk remained as the last standing port of evacuation. Churchill, realizing the potential defeat looming, called for a meeting on the 26th of May at 09:00 AM (the time this debate starts). In his agenda, Churchill included two main items: an order for Lord Gort to lead the remaining BEF soldiers and march to Dunkirk, fighting any adversaries along the way, and to create Operation Dynamo, a plan for the Royal Navy to assemble all possible means of evacuation from Dunkirk's port and beach. Along with the question of evacuation, another question weighs heavily on the cabinet: should the UK negotiate with Hitler by engaging Mussolini?

Actions of the Future

Although the starting time of this debate is set as 9:00 AM on May 26, 1940, it is important to discuss the events that took place soon after. It is important to note that delegates must assume that any event after 9:00 AM on May 26, 1940, is considered as the future and, therefore, has not yet happened.

The first of such events is Churchill's meeting with the French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud. France was beginning to fold under the pressure of German land and aerial attacks. Germany managed to advance into the French open country, leaving them with a largely undefended path to Paris. Reynaud telephoned Churchill, informing him of the situation and the possibility of a French

collapse and global defeat without British aerial reinforcements. Churchill demanded that France must continue to fight until the very end, to which Reynaud agreed; however, Reynaud told Churchill that he was simply stating the facts. Additionally, Reynaud sent a telegram to the White House, urging the US to provide aircraft and destroyers to support the situation in France. US Ambassador to France William Bullitt responded that there were no aircraft available to support France, but Reynaud persisted for support to be sent, citing the urgency of the situation. Lastly, Reynaud informed the US and UK that Italy seemed to be mobilizing to join the war. Back in the UK, Reynaud flew to London for a midday meeting with Churchill on May 26, 1940, to discuss how the UK could support France.

The second significant event is Operation Dynamo. As stated above, Operation Dynamo was a plan for the British Royal Navy to evacuate all soldiers from Dunkirk. This was supplemented by air support from the Royal Air Force (RAF). The evacuation started on May 26, 1940, and ended on June 4, 1940.

The third significant event is the Belgian surrender to Germany. For 18 days, Belgium fought to keep Germany at bay, but persistent attacks weakened the Belgian army. With options running out, King Leopold III surrendered to Germany on May 28, 1940. Due to its proximity to Dunkirk, it became all the more important for the evacuation to be completed as soon as possible before Germany struck Dunkirk, leaving troops with no way back to the UK.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

- **Munich Agreement, September 30, 1938.**

Under threat of an all-out European invasion, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and France agreed to surrender the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany after significant coercion from Britain and France. This not only allowed for Nazi Germany to gain more power and influence while failing to appease Hitler, but also showcased the weakness of Western powers.

- **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, August 23, 1939**

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was an agreement to a temporary partnership between Germany and the Soviet Union, agreeing to refrain from any hostile attacks between themselves for 10 years. This pact included a secret clause where the Soviet Union would be given control over the Baltic States, Finland, and Bessarabia, while Germany would be given

Western Poland and part of Lithuania, while also dividing Polish territory between the two. This strategic action taken by the Soviet Union and Germany allowed for each nation to gain much more control and is often considered the catalyst for the start of WWII.

- **Anglo-Polish Alliance, August 25, 1939**

Just prior to World War II, a military pact was signed between the UK and Poland to ensure mutual defense in case of aggression from Nazi Germany. This was a significant alliance, as when Germany invaded Poland on September 1st, a declaration of war was made on Germany by both the United Kingdom and France just two days later, honoring their agreement. Nonetheless, both nations failed to prevent the invasion of Poland.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event
September 30, 1938	The Munich Agreement between Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and France was signed, forcing the German annexation of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia.
August 25, 1939	The Anglo-Polish Alliance was signed, pledging that the UK would defend Poland if Germany were to attack.
August 23, 1939	The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the USSR was signed, a non-aggression pact that also created areas of control for the two parties across Eastern Europe.
September 1, 1939	Germany attacked Poland
September 3, 1939	Chamberlain issues a formal declaration of war, officially declaring WWII.
April 9, 1940	The German invasion of Norway began.
May 10, 1940	- The German invasion of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands began. - Chamberlain resigns and Churchill becomes PM
May 24, 1940	- Hitler ordered the Panzers to halt their advance. - Halifax received a telegram from the French government detailing a dialogue between President Roosevelt of the US and Musollini of Italy.
May 23-24, 1940	British troops were evacuated from Boulogne

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| May 25, 1940 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Boulogne surrendered, and the Panzers attacked Calais- Churchill calls for a meeting for the next day at 9:00 AM |
| May 26, 1940 ¹ | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Churchill meets with Reynaud- Operation Dynamo begins the evacuation from Dunkirk |
| May 28, 1940 ¹ | Belgium surrenders to Germany |

¹Considering that this debate starts on May 26, 1940 at 9:00 AM, the events of this day have not technically occurred in the context of this debate. These were, however, crucial events that delegates may take into consideration when determining how to proceed.

Bibliography

- “Anglo-Polish Agreement - Hansard - UK Parliament.” Parliament.uk, 2025, hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1944-03-09/debates/249c966f-a0bd-4a60-85b7-73a3d45d1314/Anglo-PolishAgreement#:~:text=Volume%20397:%20debated%20on%20Thursday%209%20March%201944&text=The%20text%20on%20this%20page,it%20may%20contain%20typographical%20errors.&text=asked%20the%20Secretary%20of%20State,its%20expira tion%20in%20August%2C%201944.&text=Article%208%20of%20the%20Anglo,the%20A greement%20at%20that%20time. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- “Anglo-Polish Alliance - Wikiwand.” Wikiwand.com, 2021, www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Anglo-Polish_military_alliance. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- “Battle of France - Wikipedia.” Wikipedia.org, 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_France#Weygand_plan. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- Britannica. “Appeasement | Definition & Facts.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 19 Feb. 2009, www.britannica.com/topic/appeasement-foreign-policy. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- “Coalition Government.” Parliament.uk, 2019, www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/coalition-government/. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- Contributors. “1938 Cession of German-Speaking Czechoslovakia to the German Reich.” Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 18 Dec. 2002, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munich_Agreement. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- Contributors. “1940 Battle for the Port and Town of Boulogne-Sur-Mer during the German Blitzkrieg.” Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 13 Mar. 2013, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Boulogne. Accessed 19 July 2025.
- Contributors. “1940 British War Cabinet Crisis.” Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 6 Oct. 2005, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1940_British_war_cabinet_crisis#Events_of_Saturday,_25_May. Accessed 19 July 2025.

Contributors. "1940 Code Name for Germany's Assault on Denmark and Norway during the Second World War." Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 17 July 2003, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Weser%C3%BCbung. Accessed 19 July 2025.

Contributors. "Evacuation of Allied Soldiers from the Beaches and Harbour of Dunkirk, France, between 27 May and 4 June 1940." Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 27 June 2003, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunkirk_evacuation. Accessed 19 July 2025.

Contributors. "Formation of the French Army (1914-1993)." Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 30 Jan. 2005, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Army_%28France%29. Accessed 19 July 2025.

Contributors. "Wehrmacht." Wikipedia.org, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 18 Jun. 2001, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wehrmacht>. Accessed 10 August 2025.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Maginot Line." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 July 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maginot-Line>.

"Historical Documents - Office of the Historian." State.gov, 2025, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v01/d180. Accessed 19 July 2025.

HISTORY.com Editors. "Blitzkrieg: Definition, London & World War II - HISTORY." HISTORY, 14 Oct. 2009, www.history.com/articles/blitzkrieg. Accessed 19 July 2025.

"How Britain Hoped to Avoid War with Germany in the 1930s." Imperial War Museums, 2018, www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-britain-hoped-to-avoid-war-with-germany-in-the-1930s. Accessed 12 Aug. 2025.

Hughes, Thomas A., and John Graham Royde-Smith. "World War II." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 Aug. 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II/Forces-and-resources-of-the-European-combatants-1939>.

"Invasion of Poland - Wikipedia." Wikipedia.org, 2022, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasion_of_Poland. Accessed 19 July 2025.

International Churchill Society. "We Shall Fight on the Beaches." International Churchill Society, 4 June 1940, winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/. Accessed 12 Aug. 2025.

"Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact - Wikipedia." Wikipedia.org, 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molotov%E2%80%93Ribbentrop_Pact#:~:text=The%20Molotov%E2%80%93Ribbentrop%20Pact%2C%20officially,and%20France%20had%20broken%20do
[wn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molotov%E2%80%93Ribbentrop_Pact#:~:text=The%20Molotov%E2%80%93Ribbentrop%20Pact%2C%20officially,and%20France%20had%20broken%20do). Accessed 19 July 2025.

"Munich Agreement." Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2022, [encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1933-1938/munich-agreement#:~:text=September%2029%E2%80%9330%2C%201938%3A,Sudeten%20region\)%20to%20Nazi%20Germany](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1933-1938/munich-agreement#:~:text=September%2029%E2%80%9330%2C%201938%3A,Sudeten%20region)%20to%20Nazi%20Germany). Accessed 19 July 2025.

"Nazi-Soviet Relations 1939-1941 : Documents from the German Foreign Office." Yale.edu, Washington, DC : Government Printing Office, 1948, 2025, avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/addsepro.asp. Accessed 19 July 2025.

Ragozhina, Nadia. "Fleeing Dunkirk: A 1940 Holiday in Hell." Bbc.com, BBC News, 15 July 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40428015. Accessed 19 July 2025.

White, Frances. "The 5 Longest Sieges in History | All about History." All about History | All about History Magazine, 28 May 2014, www.historyanswers.co.uk/ancient/the-5-longest-sieges-in-history/. Accessed 19 July 2025.