

Glasgow 2021

Munich Conference or Finest Hour?

Adam Parr

21 October 2021

Oxford Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment | **Working Paper No. 21-06**





The Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment (SSEE) was established with a benefaction by the Smith family in 2008 to tackle major environmental challenges by bringing public and private enterprise together with the University of Oxford's world-leading teaching and research.

Research at the Smith School shapes business practices, government policy and strategies to achieve net-zero emissions and sustainable development. We offer innovative evidence-based solutions to the environmental challenges facing humanity over the coming decades. We apply expertise in economics, finance, business and law to tackle environmental and social challenges in six areas: water, climate, energy, biodiversity, food and the circular economy.

SSEE has several significant external research partnerships and Business Fellows, bringing experts from industry, consulting firms, and related enterprises who seek to address major environmental challenges to the University of Oxford. We offer a variety of open enrolment and custom Executive Education programmes that cater to participants from all over the world. We also provide independent research and advice on environmental strategy, corporate governance, public policy and long-term innovation.

For more information on SSEE please visit: www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk

Suggested citation: Parr, A. (2021). Glasgow 2021 – Munich Conference or Finest Hour?

The views expressed in this paper represent those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Smith School or other institution or funder. The paper is intended to promote discussion and to provide public access to results emerging from our research. It may have been submitted for publication in academic journals. It has been reviewed by at least one internal referee before publication.



Glasgow 2021

Munich Conference or Finest Hour?

Adam Parrⁱ

ⁱSmith School of Enterprise and the Environment / Institute for New Economic Thinking, University of Oxford

1	Introduction	3
2	Check points and tipping points	5
3	The Munich conference.....	7
4	The international conferences.....	11
5	Chamberlain: a profile of failure	14
6	Churchill: leadership from the outside and inside	16
7	Anatomy of a near-miss	19
8	Conclusion – “Action This Day!”	29
9	References and Further Reading	33



The Author

Adam Parr was born in London in 1965. He studied at the University of Cambridge before beginning a 30-year career in finance, law, industry and sport. He has lived and worked in Japan, South Africa and Australia. Between 2006 and 2012 he was chief executive and chairman of the Williams Formula One Team. Since 2012 he has completed a PhD in the history of strategy at UCL University of London and helped establish some 20 businesses as a co-founder, investor and director. He continues to study at the University of Oxford, living there with his wife and two sons.

1. Introduction

I am sitting at my desk in Oxford. It is the August bank holiday weekend in 2021. At last we seem to have blue skies. It has been a difficult summer, the second since the coronavirus pandemic broke out nearly two years ago. In a few days it will be September, the holidays will be over, students will return to their schools and universities, and many will return to work. For most, the immediate worry is what the pandemic will do this autumn. For some, the summer has brought a new concern – record temperatures set across Europe, Canada and America; and a report from the United Nations setting out the clearest possible warning of global heating. Perhaps some are aware that this November the British Prime Minister will host a climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, to address this growing threat. There are many questions and doubts about what the future will bring, but people all over the country will be putting these to one side and enjoying the last days of summer.

My mind turns to this weekend just over 80 years ago. People across Europe were also trying to enjoy the last days of summer and trying not to think about what September would bring. When they looked back through their life, a person of my age would have seen a world shaped by the conflict of 1914–1918, the flu pandemic of 1918 to 1920 that had killed at least four times as many people than COVID-19 so far, and then the financial crisis of 1929. In Britain at least, things had got a lot better by the summer of 1938. But that September of 1938 brought a conference that determined the course of history. This was the Munich conference, at which Britain and France faced Germany and Italy to try and resolve the imminent threat of war in Europe, caused by Hitler's plans to invade Czechoslovakia. The Munich conference was declared a great success and made famous by the British Prime Minister's declaration that he had secured "peace in our time."

The purpose of the Glasgow conference this November is to not to stop global heating. That is already happening, and we are on a trajectory that will lead to levels at which both the natural world and human society will collapse. Vast parts of the world will become uninhabitable, vast populations will have to migrate in order to survive. To have any chance of preventing this from happening, actions are required today that will halve global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from their present level by 2030; halve them again by 2040; and achieve negative emissions by 2050. Even with this level of action, the world will

continue to heat up until 2050, and there will be serious effects, but we will avoid the worst scenarios.

This is a brutal and bleak outlook, but it is truthful.

Truth is what matters here. In 1938, the Munich conference was hailed as a resounding success. Peace had been secured and war would not happen. In less than a year, however, the most violent war in history erupted. Yes, Britain and her allies prevailed in that war, but over 50 million people died, more than half in China and the Soviet Union. And, as we shall see, Britain only avoided being defeated by the Nazis by the narrowest of narrow margins. There is no doubt that one man, Winston S. Churchill, played a decisive role in saving Britain and the world from that fate; while many of his colleagues in the British establishment were responsible for creating the crisis. None more so than the Prime Minister who preceded him, the hero of Munich, Neville Chamberlain.

The Glasgow Conference again sees the British Prime Minister having a decisive role in history. Will he succeed this time in changing the trajectory on which humanity is once again headed? Will he truly secure the commitments that are needed, and then ensure that the necessary actions follow? Or will he achieve nothing and declare victory?

The fatal errors of Britain in the 1930s led to war, but that war was in a sense a second chance, and Winston Churchill grasped that slim second chance to save the day in 1940 – Churchill and Britain’s finest hour. This time, there will be no second chance, no such opportunity. It is now or never. Glasgow will either be our finest hour or our Munich conference. Our Prime Minister, who so admires Winston Churchill, will either rise to the challenge of leading the world to safety; or he will follow in the footsteps of Neville Chamberlain, and be remembered as one of the “guilty men.”



My intent here is to tell the story of how events led first to Munich and from there to the summer of 1940, when Britain battled for four months to protect the skies from Nazi domination, assisted by brave pilots from occupied Europe and around the world, many of

whom gave their lives. It is my hope that in understanding how it was that Britain put the world in such peril in the 1930s, how close we were to losing everything, and how the extraordinary efforts of so many people created a system of air defence that *just* managed to save the day – in understanding these events of the past, we will be inspired and encouraged to take the drastic actions we need right now to secure a future for humanity and our planet.

2. Check points and tipping points

Neither history nor nature work in straight lines. Change builds up and then a tipping point is reached. This is what we have witnessed with the pandemic: cases rise slowly and then suddenly explode; new variants constantly emerge, but only occasionally does one take hold and, like the Alpha and then Delta variants, take over because they are much more transmissible. The collapse of the Afghan government in just twenty days this summer mirrors the collapse of Poland in 1939 and France in 1940. At a certain point a government transitions from stability to collapse, like companies, species and ecosystems. With climate change the same is also true: the earth's temperature will reach a point where there will be events that accelerate heating – the melting of ice cover that reflects heat out of the atmosphere is an example.

Just before a tipping point is reached there are check points, moments when action can still be taken. The summer of 1938 was one of those moments. The Munich conference was understood by everyone to be critical because it was apparent that Hitler was about to invade Czechoslovakia, and nobody wanted this to lead to a war in Europe. But there were two ways to achieve this goal: one was to make it clear to Hitler that Britain, France and Russia would declare war on Hitler if he invaded Czechoslovakia. The other was to sacrifice Czechoslovakia and accommodate Hitler's demands. For those who wanted a strong position, Czechoslovakia was the perfect country to defend. It was the moment when Hitler's ambitions could be checked.

The beginning of a conflict is like the beginning of a fire in a high wind. It may be limited at the start, but who can say how far it would spread, or how much destruction it would do, or how many may be called upon to beat it out?"

Sir John Simon, August 28, 1938

It was Hitler's annexation of Austria in March 1938 that revealed the true nature of those ambitions – at least, for those who wished to see them. Up until that point there had been plenty of evidence that Nazism was an evil doctrine and regime – but still Austria was shocking. One British journalist in Vienna wrote to his editor of the Nazis, “In my wildest nightmares I had not foreseen anything so perfectly organised, so brutal, so ruthless, so strong. When this machine goes into action, it will blight everything it encounters like a swarm of locusts ... From what I have seen of England in my last visits we have no chance of withstanding this gigantic machine when it is turned against us, and the vital thing to remember is that the ultimate object is precisely the destruction of England.”

The British government, press and establishment were firmly on the side of appeasing Hitler. They did not want to see the reality. Some admired Hitler, some simply feared the consequences of opposing his will. The leader of the resisters was Winston

We are not in a position to say to-night, “The past is the past.” We cannot say, “The past is the past” without surrendering the future.

Churchill on the annexation of Austria, March 14, 1938

Churchill, a member of the governing Conservative Party, but not a member of the government. Churchill saw Nazism for what it was he urged realism in the House of Commons after the annexation of Austria. “The gravity of the event of the 11th of March cannot be exaggerated. Europe is confronted with a programme of aggression, nicely calculated and timed, unfolding stage by stage, and there is only one choice open, not only to us, but to other countries who are unfortunately concerned—either to submit, like Austria, or else to take effective measures while time remains to ward off the danger and, if it cannot

be warded off, to cope with it.”

Churchill begged the Government not to ignore what had happened: if Britain accepted the annexation of Austria, it would send a signal to Hitler that he could safely proceed with what everyone knew would be his next step – Czechoslovakia. Churchill believed that if Hitler annexed Czechoslovakia, he would become unstoppable, and war inevitable. On the other hand Czechoslovakia was a great country to make a stand on. This newly-created democracy had natural defences, a huge army, and a strong military culture

and resources. With the Czechs and Russians on his eastern border, and France and Britain to the west, Hitler could be contained. France and Russia were already pledged to preserve Czechoslovakia's independence and integrity. It just needed Britain to join them and Hitler would have had no choice but to back down or go to war on two fronts against the three united powers. This was exactly what Germany had done in 1914 and there was no reason to believe he would be any more successful now.

During the summer of 1938, the British government wavered and took as its policy sowing doubt in everyone's minds as to what it would do. Supported by the British press, the British Government adopted precisely the policy that Churchill feared. First, the annexation of Austria was recognised. Second, in the last days of August 1938, the Government decided that it would issue no warning to Hitler about the consequences of annexing Czechoslovakia; on the contrary, all efforts would be made to force the Czechs to allow Hitler in. The British dismissed the French as warmongers, and refused to have anything to do with Communist Russia. Now it was necessary to formalise an agreement with Hitler that would allow him to move into part of Czechoslovakia in return for his commitment to take no further steps there or elsewhere. This was the British plan for Munich.

3. The Munich conference

Neville Chamberlain became Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) in 1931 and Prime Minister in 1937. In September 1938 he hatched the suitably named Plan Z, which was for him to meet and negotiate with Hitler in person. This was a very popular proposal, described by one politician as "one of the finest, most inspiring acts of all history." Hitler issued an invitation and Chamberlain flew to Munich and then to Hitler's country retreat. There Chamberlain agreed to Germany's demand to annexe the strategic German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia.

A week later Chamberlain was back in Germany where Hitler rejected Chamberlain's latest proposals and demanded the right to send his troops into Czechoslovakia immediately.

Hitler then issued a short deadline for the Czechs to cede their territory to Germany. Churchill again warned the world of what this meant. “The partition of Czechoslovakia under pressure from England and France amounts to the complete surrender of the Western Democracies to the Nazi threat of force. Such a collapse will bring peace or security neither to England nor to France. On the contrary, it will place these two nations in an ever weaker and more dangerous situation ... It is not Czechoslovakia alone which is menaced, but also the freedom and the democracy of all nations. The belief that security can be obtained by throwing a small State to the wolves is a fatal delusion. The war potential of Germany will increase in a short time more rapidly than it will be possible for France and Great Britain to complete the measures necessary for their defence.”



For a few days it appeared that Britain might stand behind Czechoslovakia. The Royal Navy was mobilised and some Londoners were evacuated in case of a pre-emptive bombing strike. In Germany, Hitler was having doubts about the wisdom of invading Czechoslovakia. Many around him were convinced it would be an act of folly that could only lead to war. Hitler sent a conciliatory telegram to Chamberlain, and called for a peace conference.

Chamberlain leapt at this opportunity, returning to Germany for the Munich Conference which took place on the last two days of September 1938. It was an amateurish, naïve and sloppy effort by the France and Britain. The Allies had conceded to Hitler that neither the Soviets nor the Czechs should be represented. Apart from the unfairness of this, it meant that there was no hardline party at the talks, just Germany and Italy at one extreme, and Britain (with France under her sway) in the middle somewhere. In addition, the British and French delegations, led by their Prime Ministers, came to the conference without discussing their strategy or agreeing tactics beforehand. Hitler came with a plan which Mussolini would present – the two dictators travelled together by train to Munich to plan their

approach and give the plan the finishing touches. Structure, process, planning and stage management are as critical to negotiation as the subject-matter that is being negotiated. The British failed in every regard to think this through.

The actual negotiations were very short by modern standards. Essentially, Italy presented Germany's plan and the reality was that the British wanted an agreement signed at any cost. (This has echoes of recent negotiations over the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban knew that the United States was pulling out. The negotiations were meaningless.) After some histrionics, at 2 am on September 30, 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed. This was what Chamberlain wanted. It was also more than Hitler could have dreamed of: Britain and France had given Hitler the rights he wanted over Czechoslovakia. The USSR and the Czechs had been side-lined and humiliated. Before Chamberlain returned to London, he saw Hitler again and asked him to sign a paper committing the two countries to working together peacefully. Hitler signed it with barely a glance.

Chamberlain flew back to London. At Heston airfield, he gave a press conference and read out the short text that Hitler had signed. "We regard the agreement signed last night," it read,

My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time ... Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.

Chamberlain,

September 30, 1938

"and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again. We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference, and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe." This commitment from Hitler was meaningless – except as further evidence that Hitler was now the most important leader in Europe, the strategic genius who could make Germany the greatest nation on earth. It was also evidence that Britain was utterly abject. Unfortunately, Hitler also

came away from Munich with the belief that Britain would never fight Germany. On this, he was wrong – but who can be surprised that this was his conclusion?

Neville Chamberlain proceeded immediately from the airfield to Buckingham Palace, where he saluted the adoring crowds from the balcony alongside King George VI. The Prime Minister then drove back to Downing Street where he later appeared at the window, waving the paper signed by Hitler, and making one of the most misguided statements ever given by a politician: “peace for our time.”

The press and the public were ecstatic at Chamberlain’s achievements. Churchill was more isolated than ever when he said of these events: “I do not grudge our loyal, brave people, who were ready to do their duty no matter what the cost, who never flinched under the strain of last week—I do not grudge them the natural, spontaneous outburst of joy and relief when they learned that the hard ordeal would no longer be required of them at the moment; but they should know the truth. They should know that there has been gross neglect and deficiency in our defences; they should know that we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel far with us along our road; they should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged ... And do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time.”

As Churchill observed, a check point had been neglected and a tipping point reached. The truth was unpalatable and unwelcome, but reality prevailed over fantasy. Six months later, Hitler took over the remainder of Czechoslovakia and eleven months later he invaded Poland. It fell to Chamberlain to declare war on Hitler in September 1939. Soon after he resigned as Prime Minister, and within a year he had died. A pamphlet published a year after his death named him one of the “Guilty Men” who had led the world to the second world war.

But it was not just Chamberlain who was misguided. For twenty years the world floundered in the illusion that good intentions and activity are a substitute for decisive and meaningful action. The main manifestation of this was the phenomenon of the international conference.

4. The international conferences

The Munich conference was not the first international conference between 1918 and 1939, it was the last of many. This is an important lesson for us also, because much of those two decades were spent on multilateral and then bilateral efforts to secure peace through disarmament.

In the appalling slaughter of the first world war, every British, French, German and Russian family had lost people close to them. Even today, few can explain why it even happened. And it achieved nothing, except a commitment that it should never happen again. That commitment was expressed in the creation of the League of Nations – the predecessor of the United Nations – and its covenant that an attack on any member nation was an attack on all. Like the UN, the League was charged with missions that appeared to need international agreement. The view was that collective security meant the protection of the smaller nations from attacks by the more powerful. This broad structure accompanied the Treaty of Versailles which set out the terms of reparations after the war and also prevented Germany from ever being a military threat to peace in Europe.

Every country in Europe was struggling financially after the war, and there was also a flu pandemic and then later the financial crisis and Great Depression. Disarmament seemed a logical response to the peace, a way to save money and to avoid future war. Through the 1920s and 1930s, there were numerous and extended disarmament conferences, some led by the League of Nations, others through the initiative of individual countries. What is remarkable, however, is that so few people saw that these efforts were neither working nor could ever work. In 1928, Churchill gave a speech on disarmament in which he told a fable.

Once upon a time all the animals in the Zoo decided that they would disarm, and they arranged to have a conference to arrange the matter. So the Rhinoceros said when he opened the proceedings that the use of teeth was barbarous and horrible and ought to be strictly prohibited by general consent. Horns, which were mainly defensive weapons, would, of course, have to be allowed. The Buffalo, the Stag, the Porcupine, and even the little Hedgehog all said they would vote with the Rhino, but the Lion and the Tiger took a different view. They defended teeth and even claws, which they described as honourable weapons of immemorial antiquity. The Panther, the Leopard,

the Puma and the whole tribe of small cats all supported the Lion and the Tiger. Then the Bear spoke. He proposed that both teeth and horns should be banned and never used again for fighting by any animal. It would be quite enough if animals were allowed to give each other a good hug when they quarrelled. No one could object to that. It was so fraternal, and that would be a great step towards peace.

Churchill was not sceptical about the value of international collaboration, which was one of the defining qualities of his political approach throughout his life. And he believed that the League of Nations was “a priceless instrument of international comity.” He did, however, believe, as his fable suggested, that the understandably different positions of the parties inevitably meant that each and every conference was doomed to failure. The last, and most ambitious, interwar conference took place in Geneva between 1932 and 1934. Everyone agreed that countries should abandon offensive weapons, and retain only defensive ones. But, of course, no one

I hope that the League of Nations is not going to be asked now to do the impossible ... He is a bad friend to the League of Nations who would set it tasks beyond its compass.

Churchill, 1932

could agree on the definition. This conference achieved only one thing of significance – the adoption by Britain of a policy that it was only fair for Germany to be allowed to rearm to achieve equality with other nations. Needless to say, this was fiercely contested by France and other countries who saw the insanity of Britain’s approach. It was, again, Churchill who drew the big picture in a speech to the House of Commons in November 1932. “We have had a year of conferences. There have been quite a number when one comes to think of them,” he pointed out, and of all but perhaps one, “I am bound to say that they all seem to me to fall under the criticism of trying to pay off realities with words.” In spite of the lack of results, the Prime Minister had been quick to claim success. “If we look back on those July days, when the Prime Minister was welcomed in triumph on his return, with all the Cabinet and Under-Secretaries drawn up at the railway station like a row of Grenadiers of varying sizes, we can see how absurd were the claims which were then advanced that Lausanne had “saved Europe,” and that a “new era” had opened for the world. There is quite a lot still

to be done to save Europe, and for many people it is very much the same old era in the world.”

Churchill describes the melancholy scene in Geneva, where any scheme of any kind put forward by any country is cheered so long as it is surrounded by suitable phraseology. “Why,” he asked, “do they not look down beneath the surface of European affairs to the iron realities which lie beneath?” He continued, “I am afraid that a large part of the object of every country is to throw the blame for an impending failure upon some other country while willing, if possible, to win the Nobel peace prize for itself ... The process is apparently endless, and so is the pathetic applause with which it is invariably greeted.”

Hitler, of course, saw the reality of these conferences for what they were. Perhaps a better strategist would have stayed with the League precisely because it was allowing Germany to rearm and to break international and domestic laws. But in 1933, Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations, perhaps because he could not tolerate any constraints on his activities, however theoretical.

Churchill’s scepticism about the conferences should ring warning bells to anyone who has watched the climate conferences of the past 26 years. Each one has been declared a success and yet GHG emissions have risen like a metronome ticking away. At the time of the first conference in Berlin in 1995, emissions were 36 billion tonnes; today they are 50 billion. As Churchill said in 1932, “I am sorry to be so pessimistic, but really it is absolutely a duty to put the rugged facts as I conceive them before the House.”

As Churchill’s animal fable captured, it is simply not possible to reach agreement amongst all emitting countries to take the measures necessary to address global heating. The reasons are the same now as they were in 1932. Different countries have different interests. Russia, for example, has an economy largely based on fossil fuels; it has everything to lose by actions to decarbonise the global economy – but what does it have to fear from climate change? On the contrary, the inevitable chaos across the rest of the world might be seen as benefiting Russia. China will undoubtedly suffer from climate change, and has set a goal of addressing the problem, but it wants 40 years to do this, presumably in order to manage the economic, social and political risks of rapid decarbonisation. Perhaps some in China might recall that the Ming dynasty collapsed in the seventeenth century

because it failed to take adequate measures to address the impacts of the climate change that occurred then. History would suggest that delay is not an effective response to a growing crisis.

It is not just China that needs to learn the lessons of history. But such lessons are not easily learnt, as Churchill observed in 1935. “When the situation was manageable it was neglected, and now that it is thoroughly out of hand we apply too late the remedies which then might have effected a cure. There is nothing new in the story. It is as old as the sibylline books. It falls into that long, dismal catalogue of the fruitlessness of experience and the confirmed unteachability of mankind. Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.”

5. Chamberlain: a profile of failure

The world’s faith in international peace initiatives was an important factor in Chamberlain’s thinking in the 1920s and 1930s. Like anyone, Chamberlain was shaped by a combination of his experience, his character and the world around him. His upbringing had instilled him with a strong character and work ethic. He dreaded failure and wanted to be admired and respected. Those are healthy attributes. But Chamberlain’s letters to his sisters reveal that these attributes had evolved into a vanity, pride and lack of self-awareness that are often the downfall of strategy. Hitler shared these attributes.

Chamberlain writes often of how popular he is, how much Churchill admires him, how he understands the dictators and they respect him, how he has the upper hand and (of course) how he has secured peace. A letter in 1938 shows his belief that he has an insight into the psychology of dictators and an ability to manipulate them. “The dictators are too often regarded as though they were entirely inhuman. I believe this idea to be quite erroneous. It is indeed the human side of the dictators which makes them dangerous, but on the other hand, it is the side on which they can be approached with the greatest hope of successful issue.”

A few months later, when he had been ticked off by a Cabinet colleague, Chamberlain wrote to his sister Ida that he was immune to criticism when he knew he was right and, “I know that I can save this country and I do not believe that anyone else can.”

Chamberlain was indeed popular through the 1930s, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer and then as Prime Minister. The crash of 1929 and Great Depression, coming on top of huge war debts, had put Britain in very difficult financial circumstances. Chamberlain was admired as the finance minister who put Britain back to financial health in the early 1930s. As Prime Minister, people were desperate to believe in him as much as he believed in himself – this is one reason that leaders have such power. Above all, both Chamberlain and the British people wanted to believe that he had indeed secured peace. No doubt he sincerely wished for peace – but he also had a desire to be popular which was greater than his willingness to be honest with himself or others.

Chamberlain’s vanity also manifested itself in arrogance and inflexibility. Unlike Churchill Chamberlain made no effort to build relationships across politics. A previous Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, had begged Chamberlain to treat the House of Commons with respect, saying that he looked on the Labour Party as “dirt.” Reporting this advice to his sister Ida, Chamberlain ignored the advice. “The fact is,” he wrote, “that intellectually, with a few exceptions, they are dirt.”

Churchill remained on friendly terms with Chamberlain to the end, even though Chamberlain feared and disliked him, and actually had him bugged. But Churchill knew only too well where Chamberlain’s weaknesses lay. As Hitler entered Czechoslovakia, Churchill met the future spy, Guy Burgess, and told him that traditional English foreign policy had been “blandly set aside to suit the vanity, the obstinacy, & the ignorance of one man, no longer young. We shall be told he has saved the peace, that anything is worth that. This is not true. He has made war inevitable, & lost it ... It is not 30 divisions that have been given to Hitler, but Germany itself—and a Germany that he will in future and for the first time, be able to lead into war with the possibility of success ...”

Finally, there was Chamberlain’s inflexibility. And this is especially relevant today. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Chamberlain’s job included keeping a tight control over spending. Someone in the Cabinet had to argue against the limitless demands for spending

by all the ministries and that is the job of the Chancellor, then as now. When Churchill was Chancellor for five years in the 1920s he did the same – including arguing for stiff limits on military spending.

But when a Chancellor becomes Prime Minister, they must change their approach and take on a new role. It is for the Prime Minister to listen to all the arguments and decide how much will be borrowed and where limited resources will be invested. Chamberlain did not make that change. He continued to be the Chancellor in spirit just as he also took upon himself to be Foreign Secretary in all but name. He could not bear to see money spent on rebuilding Britain's military strength, in part because he believed in his own abilities to secure peace, in part because he believed that rearmament would lead to war, but also because he could not bear spending the money.

6. Churchill: leadership from the outside and inside

In history, Chamberlain is the bad guy to Churchill's good. Of course, Churchill helped write that history, and he had his own flaws, but we can say that he was very different to Chamberlain in many important ways. The two men actually worked well together in Cabinet in the 1920s when Chamberlain pursued a radical and enlightened social policy as health minister, and Churchill supported him as Chancellor. Both men left government when their party lost the 1929 election after the Wall Street Crash.

The Labour Party lost power in 1931, and Churchill had hoped to be invited to join the coalition government that took over. He was disappointed then; as he was again after the Conservatives' landslide victory in 1935 (which he had contributed to); and yet again when Chamberlain became Prime Minister in 1937. But neither Baldwin nor Chamberlain wanted Churchill back in Government.

Churchill's unpopularity with them, and with many others inside and outside the Conservative Party, was his own doing. Between 1931 and 1935, he had fought to stop India being granted even the most basic democratic rights. This was the adopted policy of all the parties and Churchill made many enemies relentlessly promoting his views on this subject. His eloquence and feel for the House of Commons were seen as negative and unattractive qualities when deployed in such a cause; his judgement was questioned; and his disloyalty

notorious. Had Churchill not espoused such a bad cause so relentlessly at such a crucial moment, he might have retained more influence on other matters. As it was, he spent over a decade outside power – his “wilderness years” – and it was all too easy for the Government to dismiss his views on the crisis in Europe. Indeed, the fact that Churchill took a position positively convinced some people to move in the opposite direction.

In spite of this, through the 1930s an increasing number of *insiders* came to see that the *outsider* Churchill was the only person they could trust to tell the truth about the growing threat of Nazism and Britain’s dangerous lack of security. These people contacted Churchill to provide inside information on the true weakness of the Royal Air Force and the growing strength of the German Luftwaffe. Over time, Churchill built up a network of people who entrusted their careers and even lives to him, men such as Desmond Morton in Intelligence, Ralph Wigram in the Foreign Office, and Torr Anderson in the RAF. Churchill used their information and insights to develop a much more honest and accurate picture of the facts than that presented by the Government. Churchill absorbed every detail and his deployment of these facts in his speeches and articles during the 1930s was masterly. Over time Churchill convinced the House of Commons and the British public of the true situation, although the Government never admitted it.

Churchill is now remembered for his leadership during the war, and for the great speeches and broadcasts that he made as Prime Minister. But these were the fruit of his labours. He derived his success from the remarkable way that he worked and lived. His speeches were the product of deep research and endless attention to detail. He demanded as much information as was available, he sought out new sources of information, he loved to listen to people who offered experience or expertise, or just passion and enthusiasm. He read, listened, debated, absorbed and synthesised vast amounts of information.

Churchill had no time for leaders who did not pay the same attention to detail. In 1933, Churchill excoriated the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald for telling Parliament that he had put forward disarmament proposals to the Geneva Conference while stating that “I cannot pretend that I went through the figures myself.”

Churchill’s attention to detail was matched by his disciplined use of time. His days were structured to the minute, so that he could not only do his work as a member of

Parliament, but write his books, carry on a vast correspondence, and live a very full social life. During the 1920s and 1930s, Churchill wrote many volumes – a history of WWI, an account of his early life, a history of his ancestor the Duke of Marlborough, and a history of the English-speaking peoples. He corresponded with, and met, leaders in Europe and North America, and started a correspondence with President Roosevelt that proved to be of the utmost importance. Churchill was full of energy and curiosity, and thrived from being with people. He was deeply loyal to anyone who had helped him, and he was forgiving even to those who had done the opposite – including Chamberlain.

Churchill believed in working with people who had experience and also people who were determined and effective. During the summer of 1940, there was a row about the appointment of a General Hobart, a soldier who had retired and who some did not want to see returned to active duty. Churchill believed that he should be brought back and he wrote, “We are now at war, fighting for our lives, and we cannot afford to confine Army appointments to persons who have excited no hostile comment in their career. The catalogue of General Hobart’s qualities and defects might almost exactly have been attributed to most of the great commanders of British history [many of whom] had very close resemblance to the characteristics set down as defects ... This is a time to try men of force and vision and not to be exclusively confined to those who are judged thoroughly safe by conventional standards.”

Churchill’s work ethic, curiosity, openness and sociability kept him going through the wilderness years. He never despaired, even though he was at times deeply depressed by the want of foresight that he observed around him. After Munich, as the Nazi tanks rolled into

Never must we despair, never must we give in, but we must face facts and draw true conclusions from them.

Czechoslovakia, he wrote, “It is a crime to despair. We must learn to draw from misfortune the means of future strength ... It is the hour, not for despair, but for courage and re-building; and that is the spirit which should rule us in this hour.”

When Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, and the utter failure of appeasement became apparent to all, Churchill was finally invited back into Government as First Lord of the Admiralty – the post he had held in the previous war – and as a member of the War Cabinet. Such was his energy and drive that in

March 1940 he was given responsibility for co-ordinating Britain's defences; and on May 10th, 1940, as Hitler invaded France and the Low Countries, Churchill became Prime Minister.

Churchill was 65 years old when King George VI asked him to become Prime Minister. He was not the first choice of either the King or the outgoing Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, for the job. In fact, he was still deeply unpopular in many quarters, mistrusted by many for many different reasons. But in May 1940, Britain's Conservative party was out of leadership options and so the lot fell to Churchill, who immediately formed a National Government of Conservative, Labour and Liberal ministers. His choices also provoked controversy. But Churchill persisted and, within a few weeks, even his critics were forced to acknowledge that he was the right man to lead the country in its darkest hours.

As they drove back from Buckingham Palace, Churchill's body guard wished the new Prime Minister the best with this "enormous task." With tears in his eyes, Churchill replied, "God alone knows how great it is. I hope that it is not too late. I am very much afraid that it is. We can only do our best."

7. Anatomy of a near-miss

Churchill knew only too well the enormous task that faced him, because he had studied the numbers like no other politician for the previous decade. To understand the situation in 1940, we must look in more detail at the Government's actions during those years.

The British Government began to take its first steps to invest in the air force in 1934, as a result of the failure of the Geneva conference. The target set in that year's Budget was to build up to 84 squadrons (about 1,000 aircraft) for home defence by March 1939. The Government claimed at the time that it had already had a much stronger air force than Germany, and that this plan, known as Scheme A, would maintain Britain's advantage. The timing was based on the view that Germany would not be in a position to start a war until 1939. But this budget was largely a sham, designed to impress the British public and wider world.

In the House of Commons, the Labour party – who opposed any expenditure on rearmament at this point – censured the Government even for this increase. Churchill, however, warned that it was inadequate. It was simple mathematics.

If Germany continues this expansion and if we continue to carry out our scheme, then, some time in 1936, that is to say when this Government will be giving an account of their stewardship, Germany will be definitely and substantially stronger in the air than Great Britain ... and this is the point which is causing anxiety, once they have got that lead we may never be able to overtake them. If these assertions cannot be contradicted, then there is cause for the very grave anxiety which exists in all parts of the House not only because of the physical strength of the German air force, but I am bound to say also because of the character of the present German dictatorship. If the Government have to admit at any time in the next few years that the German air forces are stronger than our own, then, they will be held, and I think rightly held, to have failed in their prime duty to the country.

Over the following years, as the situation became more concerning, air force spending was increased with new Schemes. Each time, the amount that needed to be spent was greater because the gap was widening and time was running out. But it was the decisions in 1934 and earlier that meant that Britain could never catch up, as Churchill had predicted.

The significance for today is threefold. First, the threat was simply a question of mathematics: Germany and Britain were each starting at a certain point and growing at a certain rate. If Churchill was right – and he was – then Germany would have air superiority within two years. At that point, as everyone understood, the Nazis would be in a position to dictate terms over any single country in Europe, unless everyone stood together. Second, there was the problem of time: the earlier action is taken, the less it costs and the greater its benefits. By 1934, Britain simply did not have time to catch up and the gap grew wider each year. However, even had there been more time, the reality was that Britain did not have the capacity to build these new aircraft, and Chamberlain vetoed efforts to dedicate more

manufacturing capacity to the production of aircraft, believing that it would damage the economy.

The bottom line was that by the autumn of 1938, when the Munich conference was held, Britain had no air force to speak of. The 18 or so months between Munich and the first deployment of the RAF in the Battle of France in May 1940 provided a breathing space that allowed much of the Britain's air defences to be built. Even though Germany actually increased its lead over Britain that year, Britain went from essentially nothing to having something that was – just – sufficient. Not sufficient to win the war, but just enough to hold out for the six months needed to see off the immediate threat of an invasion.

Today, we are looking again at the simple but brutal realities of time and mathematics. Each year, we are pumping about 50 billion tonnes of GHGs into the atmosphere, adding layer after layer of insulation, like blankets around the earth. The earth is getting hotter and we are already seeing the effects of this around the world. The more blankets we put on, the faster the world will heat. The only way to get this situation back under control is to take blankets off, which means not just *reducing* emissions, but going negative: taking more carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere each year than we put in. This is completely feasible: we just have to cut our emissions quickly while helping nature to do what she does – absorb carbon from the air into healthy soil and growing vegetation. But we have to start now, not develop scheme after scheme that are mere shams, as was done in the 1930s.

Churchill's first six weeks as Prime Minister was all the time it took for Germany to overwhelm France. France had feared this for twenty years and had on many occasions begged Britain not to pursue policies that would make this inevitable. The armistice signed on June 17, 1940, gave Hitler control over most of Europe. Meanwhile Russia, whose attempts to join forces with France and Britain had been treated with contempt, had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. Hitler had no enemies left in eastern Europe, America was neutral, and Japan was the dominant force in the Far East. (How Japan, which fought with Britain in the first world war, came to change sides, is another story of failed leadership.) All that was required now for Hitler to achieve complete mastery of Europe, was to take Britain out of the war.

Hitler's plan was first to achieve air superiority, then to destroy the Royal Navy from the air. This would leave the British Isles defenceless. Operation Sealion – the invasion of Britain – was already being formed along the coast of France. After a week's sight-seeing holiday in France at the end of June 1940, Hitler was ready to administer the coup de grâce to the country that he held responsible for the unjust defeat and humiliation of Germany.

With northern France under German control, the Luftwaffe (German air force) was now able to move its forward bases to the coast of France where it was within 21 miles of England. The Luftwaffe had a strong numerical advantage in modern fighters and pilots, which the battle for France had demonstrated and increased. While the evacuation of British and French forces at Dunkirk in early June had been an unexpected success, the RAF had paid dearly: 100 RAF fighters and 80 pilots were lost protecting the troops and the flotilla of boats that took them across the Channel. In total the RAF had lost nearly 1,000 aircraft in May and June, of which 450 were the critical Hurricane and Spitfires fighters able to take on the best German aircraft. There was also a serious shortage of pilots: nearly 1,000 British air crew had been lost in France. As a result, in June 1940, Fighter Command had roughly 1,100 pilots and less than 500 serviceable aircraft, of which only 331 were Spitfires or Hurricanes. The Luftwaffe had about 1,300 serviceable fighters – two to three times as many. Worse still, the Luftwaffe's Messerschmidt Me 109 was the most effective of all fighters at the time.

Through the 1930s it had become clear that the first duty of Britain's Royal Air Force would be to defend Britain against attacks from the air; and that the fighter would play a defensive role. In 1932, Stanley Baldwin had declared that "I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through." Churchill had attacked this attitude at the time on the basis that it "led to no practical conclusion. It created anxiety, and it created also perplexity. There was a sense of, what shall I say, fatalism, and even perhaps helplessness about it, and I take this opportunity of saying that, as far as this island is concerned, the responsibility of Ministers to guarantee the safety of the country from day to day, and from hour to hour, is direct and inalienable." While Baldwin's government saw appeasement as the only way to protect people from bombers, Churchill argued that what was needed was modern fighters.

Given the RAF's significantly inferior numbers, how was it that Britain was not overwhelmed as Hitler intended and quite reasonably expected she would be during the long summer of 1940?

The answer is that many people took actions between the wars that resulted in the creation of a system of air defence which, together with the exceptional courage, skill and resilience of the pilots, was *just enough* to hold the Luftwaffe at bay until the end of October 1940, at which point the weather made an invasion impracticable. In addition, and this is important, the Luftwaffe made several mistakes, while the British *just* managed to avoid other mistakes, the combined effect of which tipped the balance in favour of the RAF.

The authoritative account of the Battle of Britain is entitled *The Narrow Margin*. Reading the history of these events, one appreciates that this was the *narrowest* of margins. There was nothing inevitable about Britain's victory – if anything, it was close to miraculous. So, the following account needs to be read, not as a vindication of Britain's destiny, or that somehow "we will be alright." It is a demonstration that our island story, as Churchill called it, could have ended that summer. The actions and inactions of British politicians between 1918 and 1939 had put us onto a path towards a future in which Nazism ruled at least the whole of Europe. In that future, the British way of life and values of democracy, liberty and tolerance would have been industrially exterminated, along with millions of people who had no place in a Nazi world.

When we look at the past, and at our future now, we must understand that we have been living on borrowed time since the summer of 1940, and that we will now need the same spirit, urgency and *plain good luck* if we are to escape again the future we have built for ourselves. How then did we escape our fate last time?

The first point is *strategic focus*. In part because of the need to economise, the British government invested whatever resources it had available in the 1930s on the RAF. Budget after budget prioritised the air force over the army and the navy. Of course the other services argued for more resources, but the air force was the cheapest, and so that was where the money was spent, such as it was. Today, we have to prioritise. Climate change is by far the most serious strategic threat to Britain and the world, and it is where we need to focus our efforts.

The second point is that during the 1930s, Britain built *a system of air defence* which, as a whole, enabled the RAF to target its fighters and pilots very effectively. This concept had several critical elements. The first was radar, which originated in 1934 when A. P. Rowe at the Air Ministry advised H. E. Wimperis, the Director of Scientific Research, that any war within 10 years would be lost without improved air defence. Wimperis decided to look into every possibility, and he contacted Robert Watson-Watt on his idea of “death rays.” From this A. F. Wilkins saw the potential of rays as a way of detecting aircraft. In the Battle of Britain radar was crucial in giving Fighter Command warning of incoming raids, as well as their scale and direction of travel, while they were still some way off.

Once raiders had crossed the coastline into Britain, there was a network of observer stations run by the Observer Corps across the country. Their role was to track the raiders as they moved across the country, identifying aircraft types, numbers, height and direction. These observers were unpaid volunteers who began as special police constables. They were so proud of their volunteer status that they objected to being paid when drafted in 1938.

The third element was *information management*: the ability to process all the streams of data coming in from the radar stations and Observer Corps and turn it into information that Fighter Command could use to scramble intercepting squadrons. This system evolved through trial and error, with regular exercises and constant improvements. For example, to begin with, the flow of information was overwhelming and often contradictory, so a Filter Room was created. A second problem was how to calculate the right angle of climb for the interceptors which was solved with a simple rule of thumb known as the Tizzy Angle.

The fourth element was *integrated leadership*. In some respects this system was built organically, from the bottom-up, through the enterprise and initiative of thousands of individuals. But there was also top-down leadership which was in a way about encouraging the right initiatives and helping them to integrate with each other. The responsibility for building these elements, and many others, into a unified defence system fell to Sir Hugh Dowding, who built Fighter Command from scratch in 1936 and led it through the Battle of Britain. It is extraordinary to think that he had less than four years to complete this system.

Every single component of this system was crucial. All of these efforts, for example, would have meant nothing if Britain had not developed the Hurricane and Spitfire, both

powered by the Rolls Royce Merlin engine, during the 1930s. The story of these two aircraft is extraordinary in itself. The Spitfire originated in Britain's entry for the Schneider Trophy air race in 1922. In 1931, there was no funding available for Britain to compete, so Lady Houston donated £100,000 – the equivalent of about £100 million today. In May 1935, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, admitted that his assessment of Germany's air strength, given to Parliament the previous November, had been wrong. (In the same speech he had rejected Churchill's correct numbers.) Now, he committed to building up the RAF to 1,500 first-line aircraft as soon as possible. The following month the first Hurricanes and Spitfires were ordered.

From that point onwards, it was a race against time between Britain and Germany to be able to manufacture airframes, engines, and spare parts, and to build the capacity to repair damaged aircraft, and salvage parts. In Britain, there was a very slow start, but gradually a network of shadow factories emerged, where the original designer (Rolls Royce, Hawker or Supermarine) would license other manufacturers (like the Morris car company) to make engines or parts. Later a Civilian Repair Organisation was created to ensure that no part was wasted and that every damaged fighter was returned to service as fast as possible. Organisations like the Great Western Railway and London Transport were engaged in manufacturing parts.

Following his appointment as Prime Minister, Churchill invited the owner of the *Daily Express*, Max Beaverbrook, to take over as Minister for Aircraft Production. This is instructive because Lord Beaverbrook had been a consistent supporter of appeasement and critic of Churchill. Following the General Election in 1935, Beaverbrook had met Hitler and reassured him that Churchill would not be invited into the Government. After Munich, Beaverbrook had personally assured his readers of "peace in our time" because Hitler was an astute man. Nonetheless, Churchill entrusted this crucial job to him, and Beaverbrook rose to the challenge, increasing both aircraft production and the turnaround of repairs. Beaverbrook worked so quickly that Britain was able to produce over 450 fighters a month during the Battle. In addition, more than one in three aircraft issued to Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain were repairs. Similarly, as soon as he was back in government, Churchill had reached across the political divide to achieve a vast expansion of the war effort, "we must especially count for aid and guidance upon our Labour colleagues and trade union leaders."

Britain's system of air defence consisted of many elements, and had been put together by a combination of the inspired leadership of people like Dowding, and the individual efforts of thousands of engineers, mechanics, civilians and volunteers working in many different ways for many years. Practice, exercises, improvements, statistics, and a sense of purpose kept everyone going, whether the politicians were claiming that peace was secure or war inevitable. Without the efforts of these individuals, the system would not have come together in time.

There is a lesson for us here. Our system of air defence today needs to have two really critical components. The technology component is renewable energy. Solar panels and wind turbines can today generate clean energy that is cheaper than fossil fuels. We must replace fossil fuels as a source of energy as soon as possible. That means building the factories we need to manufacture the panels, the turbines and the energy storage to back them up; investing in research to improve them, and training people to install and maintain them. If we can replace fossil fuels with renewable energy, we address about three quarters of greenhouse gas emissions.

The second element of our air defence system is on the ground. It is the way we use land. At the moment the way we farm and eat, and otherwise use land is generating about a quarter of our emissions. But farms and forests should be drawing carbon out of the



atmosphere. Healthy soil, trees and plants all suck carbon dioxide from the air and use it to grow. We have to change the way we eat and farm, and we have to preserve forests, not destroy them. In World War II, people learnt to “dig on for victory”, not just by growing vegetables, but by saving energy, food and generally doing more with what they had. They ate less meat because meat needs a lot of land. Three quarters of all land that humans use is for growing or feeding animals. If, like our parents or grandparents, we are willing to eat less meat (especially beef) then we can make a huge contribution to addressing climate change. And, in general, we have to consume less and waste less. Like

the war generation, this is not a sacrifice that we have to make forever. But we need to make an effort now and over the next few, critical years so that our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy the world that we were given by our parents and grandparents.

Time and timing are everything. The history of the modern world was decided in just 100 or so days. This was the Battle of Britain between July 10th to October 31st, 1940. During those 100 days, the Luftwaffe lost 1,733 aircraft and the RAF 915. Britain lost 415 pilots. It was a time of great loss and sacrifice for Britain and for the other countries whose pilots flew for the RAF. The life expectancy of an RAF fighter pilot was just 87 flying hours. Pilots rarely got more than 24 hours off in seven days. The lack of sleep and constant action were draining, while newly-trained pilots were especially vulnerable. In August 1940, 260 new RAF pilots were turned out, while 300 were killed. Each squadron should have had 26 pilots, but the average was sixteen.

The intensity of the Battle was extraordinary. Given the Luftwaffe's numerical superiority, it just needed to tip RAF losses over a certain point in order to overwhelm it. The Luftwaffe had many targets – RAF airfields, the factories and railways used to support the war effort, radar stations, and the fighters themselves. Disabling any of these would have brought the RAF to its knees. Day after day, the Luftwaffe threw hundreds of bombers and fighters at Britain.

On August 13th, known as Eagle Day, the Luftwaffe made 1,485 sorties. On that day, as on most, the Luftwaffe suffered greater losses than the RAF. This in itself was not enough to see off the threat, but as the RAF was just able to maintain enough aircraft and pilots to meet the needs of each new day, so the Luftwaffe became frustrated and impatient – and made strategic errors. On September 1st, the decision was made to shift the attacks from RAF airfields to civilian centres like London. This was the Blitz, which began on September 7th, 1940. While many civilians died as a result, and 30,000 Londoners lost their homes, this was a terrible strategic error, which gave the RAF a much-needed reprieve and bought time. The RAF's unexpectedly effective response to the raids on September 9th convinced Hitler to postpone Operation Sealion, which had been scheduled to begin preparations on September 11th (coincidentally, or otherwise, 9/11). But Hitler still believed that just a few extra days would be needed to achieve air superiority, and so he planned to launch Sealion



on September 17th, following a big push by the Luftwaffe the day before. This set the scene for Battle of Britain Day, Sunday September 15th, 1940.

That Sunday, the Luftwaffe launched four waves at 11 in the morning, and at one, three and six in the afternoon. Churchill was in the Operations Room, 50 feet below ground at No. 11 Fighter Group HQ at Uxbridge and later gave a powerful account of the day in his history of the war. During the course of these raids, the Luftwaffe lost 60 aircraft, while the RAF lost 26 aircraft, with 13 pilots saved.

The following day, Hitler deferred Operation Sea Lion indefinitely, but the air battle continued for six more weeks and it was not until late September that the RAF reached its lowest points in terms of aircraft and pilots. The Luftwaffe changed tactics with formations of 30 bombers being escorted by up to 300 fighters. But by then the RAF had itself improved its tactics. The last daylight battle was on September 30th. As the Luftwaffe entered the final phase it had lost over 1,650 aircraft. In October, the Luftwaffe changed tactics again and started launching continuous waves of attack that were hard to counter, while British intelligence was predicting an invasion on October 19th. Right up until the last days of October, there was every risk of defeat.

The Battle of Britain was Churchill and Britain's finest hour. Churchill's famous words about it emerged after an intense day observing the conflict at Fighter Command on August 16th. General Ismay was with Churchill and he recalled, "There had been heavy fighting throughout the afternoon; and at one moment every single squadron in the Group was engaged; there was nothing in reserve, and the map table showed new waves of attackers crossing the coast. I felt sick with fear. As the evening closed in the fighting died down, and we left by car for Chequers. Churchill's first words were: 'Don't speak to me; I have never been so moved.' After about five minutes he leaned forward and said, 'Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few.'"

The finest hour was only possible due to a decade's efforts by a large network of ordinary but courageous and creative women and men who had built an exceptional air defence system. This system protected the world from the threat of annihilation at the hands of the Nazis. It is we who owe those people so much. And now we must do our duty to their descendants and ours.

8. Conclusion – “Action This Day!”

During the 1930s, there were many people across Europe who shared Churchill’s dark view of the situation, together with his belief that the situation was not hopeless. They, like him, looked the facts in the face and took whatever action was within their power.

The fundamental flaw in British policy in the 1920s and 1930s was allowing the desire for peace to obscure the reality of the situation, and to dictate a series of policy decisions that actually produced the opposite result to what was intended. The desire for peace led to the accommodation of

German and Italian demands for rearmament and increasingly bold acts of aggression; it led to a blind faith in the League of Nations, without giving the League the support it needed to be effective; it led to an unjustifiable mistrust of France and Russia; and then it led to bilateral agreements such as at Munich, which counted for nothing. Worse still, while Britain’s foreign policy was to rearm Nazi Germany, domestic policies were to reduce Defence spending as far as possible. This was the case both before the financial crash of 1929, and in the years of Depression that followed. During the 1920s, when Churchill himself was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and therefore responsible for the country’s financial situation, spending was cut across the Navy, Army and Air Force. The Labour government that took power in 1929 was hit with the worst two years of the financial crisis and did the same. Then in 1931, there was a Conservative-led national government in which Neville Chamberlain was Chancellor until he became Prime Minister in 1937. During those six years, the Government not only resisted all efforts towards rearmament, but also deliberately misled Parliament and the public about the relative strength of the British and German air forces. At first the Government argued that Britain had great superiority in the air, then that parity would be maintained between the two, and finally that air parity was not a question of numbers of aircraft and pilots, but also intangible factors such as tradition and organisation.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

F. Scott FitzGerald, 1936

It was by virtue of the lack of foresight, inability to face the facts, and inaction of Britain's political leaders that war again descended on Europe only 20 years after the war to end all wars had ended. In spite of the best efforts of the League of Nations, multinational efforts and numerous peace conferences failed. No precautions were taken against the possibility that men such as Hitler and Mussolini could not be trusted. The few men and women who argued for a more prudent and realistic policy were kept out of government. Steadily the countdown to war ticked, month by month.

In 1936, Churchill summed up the wasted years, quoting from the Bible. First, he attacked the idea that the government had no mandate to invest in the country's defence. "Such a doctrine is wholly inadmissible. The responsibility of Ministers for the public safety is absolute and requires no mandate. It is in fact the prime object for which Governments come into existence. The Prime Minister had the command of enormous majorities in both Houses of Parliament ready to vote for any necessary measures of defence. The country has never yet failed to do its duty when the true facts have been put before it, and I cannot see where there is a defence for this delay." Then he attacked the Government's argument that it was reviewing the position and that everything is entirely fluid. "I am sure that that is true," Churchill responded. "Anyone can see what the position is. The Government simply cannot make up their mind, or they cannot get the Prime Minister to make up his mind. So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent. So we go on preparing more months and years—precious, perhaps vital, to the greatness of Britain—for the locusts to eat."

*And I will restore to you the years
that the locust hath eaten, the
cankerworm, and the caterpillar,
and the palmerworm, my great
army which I sent among you.*

Joel 2:25

There is, however, no possibility for us to restore the years that the locust has eaten. All we can do is to undertake the personal and collective effort needed to avert the very worst consequences of our actions and inactions over the past years. It is meaningless to ask whether that effort is large or small. We have to do what is necessary or we will pay an unimaginable price. We are not being asked to make the heroic sacrifices and superhuman efforts of the generation who fought Nazism. We are simply being asked to moderate our

lifestyles – lifestyles that no previous generation of Britons could have imagined possible. But, like the war generation, we can be confident that if we act now then these sacrifices are not forever. Can we do that? How will we be remembered? The generation that squandered its children's futures. Or the generation that understood that this was their finest hour and rose to the challenge?

Many people in Britain will say that we cannot do this alone. That is true, but it is no excuse for inaction. Then as now we must play our part, and we must also ask the United States of America to take the lead. The United States alone can force the world to address climate change. A plan exists, developed by a bipartisan group known as the Climate Leadership Council and led by the Republicans James Baker III and George Schultz. This plan calls for America to set a price for carbon internally and to impose a carbon price on imports. The revenues from such taxes are to be distributed to American families so that no one suffers. Using the leverage of trade is the only viable way to force the world's biggest emitting countries to take urgent action themselves.

What can we do as a country and as individuals? First, we have to save energy in everything we do. Second, we have to move our electricity generation to renewables (and if necessary nuclear) as soon as possible. Third, we have to change the way we produce food. Currently, the way we use land generates about a quarter of GHG emissions. If we move to *more* of a plant-based diet, and to ways of farming that capture carbon in soil, we can not only reduce emissions, but we can take carbon out of the atmosphere. We can also improve our health and preserve the biodiversity on which human life depends. So, eat healthier, and waste less energy are the two things we can do as individuals. And urge our political leaders to take strong action; and our business leaders to be bolder and faster in decarbonising.

I end on a personal note. I was born in 1965, the year that Churchill died. In that year President Lyndon Johnson's White House issued a report which accurately identified the cause, future trends and effects of global heating, as well as other negative side-effects of modern technologies and industries on the environment. In an address to Congress, the President called for a "creative conservation of restoration and innovation whose concern is not with nature alone but with the total relation between man and the world around him. Its object is not just man's welfare but the dignity of man's spirit." I believe that this would have been a call that Winston Churchill would have answered.

Since 1965, however, not only have we failed to achieve any progress whatsoever towards addressing the problem of global heating and the broader issues raised by President Johnson; but we have made them even worse than he foresaw. In spite of new United Nations bodies for climate change, thousands of scientific reports, 25 UN climate conferences and targets from Kyoto to Paris, emissions have steadily risen, the earth's temperature has risen and today we are living in a world whose climate is visibly changing around us.

I have personally contributed to this problem as much as anyone else, even though I have been aware of it for decades. That is true of almost everyone who is in a position today to change the course of history. Therefore it is absolutely critical that, whatever we have done in the past, we think only of the future now, and do not allow our past to limit that future.

Churchill used to mark important instructions with the words "Action this day!" We must take drastic action, today. Emissions have to start falling sharply in 2022. They have to halve by 2030, halve again by 2040 and be negative by 2050, at the latest. Even then we will see the world warmed by at least 1.5 degrees in the next decade or so. But we may avoid the worst effects which can only be described as lying in the terrifying realms of science fiction.

From the day he took office, Churchill was in touch with President Johnson's predecessor, President Roosevelt, seeking his help in Britain's efforts. He knew only too well that Britain could not defeat the Nazi threat without America, just as we cannot address climate change today without American leadership. On October 27th, as the Battle of Britain drew to a close, Churchill signed off a message to Roosevelt with words which are true of America today, of all of us, and of the British Prime Minister as he prepares to host the Glasgow Climate Conference. To each and everyone, we can say,

"The World Cause is in your hands."

9. References and Further Reading

This pamphlet draws heavily on the work of others in exploring the extensive documents relating to the events of 1918 to 1940. There are many original sources such as the diaries and correspondence of Churchill and his contemporaries, his own writings, and official records including the Cabinet and Hansard. The diaries of people like Harold Nicholson, Chips Channon and Alan Brooke are in themselves fascinating. Historians from Martin Gilbert to Tim Bouverie have turned the multitude of sources into gripping accounts of the times.

As noted above, Churchill led Britain in a very precise and practiced way. There is a lot that anyone can learn from him about not just leadership, but management. For anyone wishing to do so, I would highly recommend Martin Gilbert's pamphlet, *Continue to Pester, Nag and Bite: Churchill's War Leadership*.

The following are the books I have relied on and would recommend.

Alanbrooke, Lord. *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*. Edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman. Phoenix Press, 2002.

Bouverie, Tim. *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the road to war*. Random House, 2019.

Gilbert, Martin. *Continue to Pester, Nag and Bite: Churchill's War Leadership*. Pimlico, 2004.

Gilbert, Martin. *Winston S. Churchill: The Prophet of Truth, 1922–1939*. Rosetta Books, 2015.

Gilbert, Martin. *Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939–1941*. Rosetta Books, 2015.

Rhodes James, Robert. *Churchill: A Study in Failure 1900–1939*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970.

Wood, Derek, and Derek Dempster. *The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain & the Rise of Air Power, 1930–1940*. Pen and Sword, 2010.