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# Refusal to Negotiate Britain's Position and Impact on the World War in 1940



*Winston S. Churchill*

WINSTON CHURCHILL  
(1874–1965)

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## Introduction

**T**HE LITERATURE on the Second World War devotes an important segment to the decision of the United Kingdom to refuse to negotiate with the Axis Powers in the summer of 1940. This represented a moment when the government in London wanted to show that it was the only actor in the former leadership of the League of Nations that was still resisting Germany's attempt to change the global order.

The Versailles peace system and the network of collective defense built in Europe, starting with the Locarno Accords (1925),<sup>1</sup> were sabotaged by a weak set of principles that were established to maintain European peace. The incoherence of the Versailles Peace favored the consolidation of some revisionist powers. The 1930s were the scene of political and ideological confrontation, as the interwar collective security system demonstrated its inability to consolidate.<sup>2</sup> Only after Germany annexed Austria (1938) and invaded Czechoslovakia (March 1939) and Poland (September 1939) did the United

Kingdom and France declare war on the aggressor state. This was a belated attempt to activate the collective peace and security system built in previous decades.<sup>3</sup>

Germany's military operations in the West annihilated Western resistance. Belgium capitulated, and France was defeated, with client regimes imposed. German expansion increasingly threatened the United Kingdom. Adolf Hitler prepared his negotiations according to the strength of his opponents. He saw in the United Kingdom, led by Neville Chamberlain's government, a state desperately trying to avoid war; in France, he saw a chaotic adversary, while the Central and Eastern European states seemed to him actors that he could rule through mediation and arbitration.<sup>4</sup> When he took over the government's leadership on 10 May 1940, Winston Churchill had few options on the table. On the brink of military defeat, France was trying to convince the British leadership to accept the involvement of Benito Mussolini as a mediator between Germany and the Western states. On the other hand, the United Kingdom did not appear to have sufficient military strength to withstand a German attack.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the British prime minister rejected the proposal to negotiate with the Axis Powers.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis of this article is that the United Kingdom's refusal to negotiate with Germany in the summer of 1940 saved Europe at the cost of a world war. From the perspective of the international order, the refusal to negotiate is equivalent to avoiding the legitimization of Germany's action in international politics.<sup>7</sup> Through the lens of international negotiations, the British decision can be interpreted as a strategy to buy time to obtain more favorable alternatives: (a) a defeat of the adversary on the battlefield or (b) a sufficient consolidation of British power towards a rebalancing of the negotiating power in front of Germany.

## Literature Review

**H**ISTORY IS written by the victors, not only through peace treaties but also through panegyrics. Winston Churchill was careful to leave to posterity his own perception of the years of World War II.<sup>8</sup> Historians and other witnesses to the events later improved the accuracy of the data in these memoirs. The British prime minister's heroic image dominates much of this war's historiography.<sup>9</sup> However, the decision in 1940 not to accept negotiations with Hitler can also be approached through the lens of strategic risk. Some skeptical authors believe that Churchill's refusal to leave open the way to negotiations was a strategic error that increased the duration and harshness of the world conflict.<sup>10</sup> Buchanan's analysis of Churchill's leadership from May 1940 to July 1945 tries to highlight mainly the failure of the British prime minister's diplomacy:

*At war's end, Hitler and his evil and odious regime had been buried, and Churchill had played a historic role in its demise. But all three of the great causes of his life—keeping socialism from Britain's door, preserving his beloved empire, and preventing any single hostile power from dominating Europe—had been lost.*<sup>11</sup>

Andrew Roberts portrays a pragmatic leader, showing that Churchill struggled to deal with the geopolitical complexities that World War II brought to the world stage.<sup>12</sup> However, David Reynolds cautions that the British prime minister's decisions must be seen in the context of his era, because decision-making is often influenced by the amount of information available at the moment and the pressure created by the dynamics of international politics.<sup>13</sup> This global dynamic reveals a period of confrontation between the superpowers in the international system,<sup>14</sup> and Churchill's decisions had an impact on small states or outside Europe.<sup>15</sup> For example, the refusal to negotiate hastened the geostrategic movements of Germany and the Soviet Union in Central and Eastern Europe, and states such as Romania were left without the power to resist. The evolution of May and June 1940 events led the Bucharest government to abandon the Franco-German security guarantees and create a new foreign policy strategy.<sup>16</sup>

This article focuses on the perspective of wartime strategic negotiation and its impact on the geopolitical dimension of international politics. We can consider Churchill's refusal to negotiate with the Axis Powers as part of a strategic geopolitical calculation, despite the impulsive and stubborn temper that made him famous. The minutes of the War Cabinet meetings in London (May–June 1940), together with Churchill's famous public speeches and the memoirs of the British leader's contemporaries, reveal a careful calculation that we can judge through the lens of international negotiations and international conflict management.

## Analysis of the Negotiation Environment

**W**INSTON CHURCHILL came to head the British government in the context of a power vacuum created by the resignation of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax's refusal to succeed him. This situation smoothed Churchill's entry into 10 Downing Street. Not being unanimously approved even by the MPs of his own party, the new prime minister created a War Cabinet of five people: three Conservatives (Winston Churchill, Lord Halifax, Neville Chamberlain) and two Labour (Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood).

Churchill's leadership was consultative and delegative, not authoritarian and rigid. He understood that the context in which he exercised his premiership required pragmatism and flexibility, along with resistance to pressure and the ability to manage crises. That is precisely why he focused on creativity and risk in formulating decisions.<sup>17</sup>

Churchill knew in the most profound detail the evolution of the previous years' events, being actively involved in the government of the United Kingdom starting from September 1939 in his capacity as First Lord of the Admiralty. He had a crucial say in his country's military strategy from this all-important position. However, in the eight months that preceded his premiership, Churchill had a poor performance, marked by hesitations and miscalculations. The most resounding failure of the British Admiralty was the Norwegian problem, when the British government underestimated the strength of the German naval forces.<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of British diplomatic evolution, starting from 1938, London's actions were far below the level of the commitments assumed resoundingly in the interwar period, when it portrayed itself as one of the significant guarantors of the European defensive security system. The occupation of Czechoslovakia, days after the signing of the Munich Agreement, showed the leaders at 10 Downing Street that Hitler had no regard for international commitments and could not be considered a credible dialogue partner. However, the British and French reaction to the developments of 1939 was disappointing from the perspective of the alliances they had previously promoted and of how they understood to defend the principles of the international order created after 1919. In the case of Poland, invaded on 1 September 1939, the government in Paris hesitated to take an immediate firm position, delaying by two days the joint Franco-British reaction to declare war on Germany. It was just a statement, without any concrete action; it was valuable time for the armies of Germany and the Soviet Union to deploy in Eastern Europe. The worst geo-strategic error committed by France and the United Kingdom was not engaging in the activation of the European defense system and allowing Hitler to open a war front on their borders.<sup>19</sup>

Encouraged by the lack of real reaction from the Western powers, Germany began to direct its military action towards them. The German Blitzkrieg assault on Holland, Belgium and France destabilized the European balance of power, pushing the United Kingdom into isolation from the continent. The Maginot Line, which should have provided France's land security, was bypassed by Germany through Belgium and the Netherlands, surprising Paris with no effective resistance. The approach of the German troops to the English Channel announced the imminent capture of the British troops. In this context, the

Dunkirk evacuation (Operation Dynamo) was presented as an organized retreat and the beginning of British resistance.<sup>20</sup>

The Italian government, which until then had not been directly involved in the events of the previous eight months, expressed its willingness to mediate an armistice between Germany and the Allies. The French prime minister handed this message to Lord Halifax (then foreign secretary). The new government in London was faced with a diplomatic offer to which it had to give an immediate response.<sup>21</sup>

## Analysis of Options and Choice of BATNA

**N**EGOTIATION IS a common practice in international politics, reflecting a circular process that repeats almost rhythmically. Rare are the situations where the negotiation ends with the conclusion of a treaty or agreement. From the negotiation theory perspective, negotiation planning is one of the most critical stages (see figure 1).

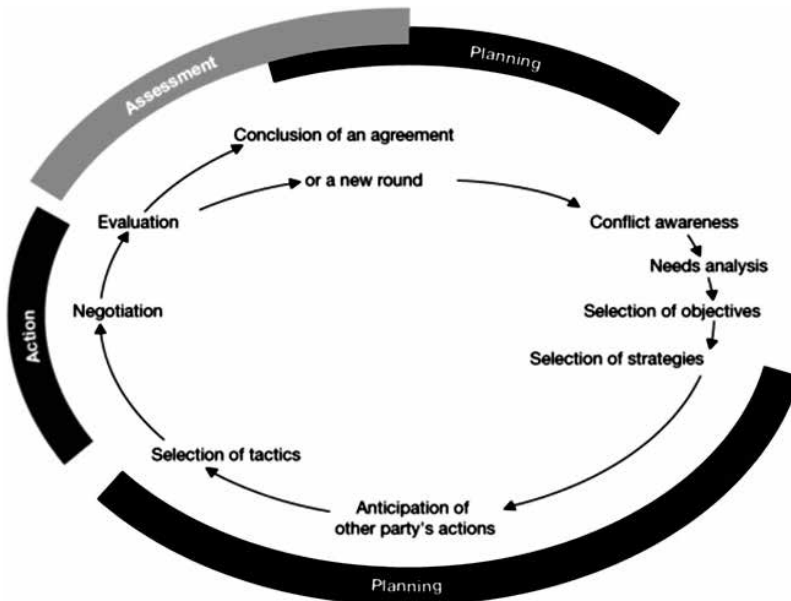


FIG. 1. THE NEGOTIATION LIFE CYCLE

SOURCE: Raymond Saner, *The Expert Negotiator: Strategy, Tactics, Motivation, Behaviour, Leadership*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Leiden–Boston, 2012), 37.

However, in an international environment characterized by a violent conflict, the planning stage suffers massively because it complicates the decision-making process. Time pressure and the impossibility of having all relevant information in creating negotiation options affect negotiation strategy and tactics. Conflict resolution is achieved between two extremes: conflict avoidance (accommodation) or violent confrontation (illegal actions). Between these extremes, there is an extensive palette of intermediate forms (see table 1).

TABLE 1. FORMS OF APPROACHING A CONFLICT

Negotiations			Administrative decisions		Legal decisions		Extra-legal processes		
			Government/administration		Third party decisions		Coercion/violence		
Conflict Avoidance (accommodation)	Informal meetings (discussions and problem solving)	Negotiation	Mediation (third party, no legal implications)	Administrative decisions (decrees)	Arbitration (involvement of an arbitrator)	Decision of a Court (public or private law)	Parliament (new rule or norm)	Peaceful confrontation (illegal actions)	Violent confrontation (illegal actions)
Increasing the level of coercion									

SOURCE: Saner, 35.

Mediation is an intermediate form of dispute resolution. It can take three different shapes: facilitation, formulation, and manipulation.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of its forms, mediation offers the opportunity for amicable reconciliation based on equity and equality before the law. The year 1940 witnessed the escalation of conflict where decisions were made based on relative knowledge of dynamic data about the adversary’s actions. Heuristic approaches (prejudices and intuitions) dominated decision-making processes in such fluid and uncertain terrain. For example, what we know today, after eight decades, gives us a picture of the tension experienced by the five members of the War Cabinet in London.<sup>23</sup>

In the stage of preparing a negotiation position, the team involved must identify the Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA). However, this objective requires an analysis of the negotiation environment, projecting costs and benefits, and internal debates to accommodate the option. In May 1940, Churchill had two real options: negotiation with Hitler or resistance.

After receiving the letter from the French government, there followed five days of heated debates between the impulsive Churchill and the much more calculated Lord Halifax. The British prime minister believed that the United States president should have been the one to approach Mussolini and not London through the French government, as it was a real sign of vulnerability to Hitler. On the German side, Churchill would have accepted the restitution of German colonies and the acceptance of German domination over Central Europe as a negotiation offer. Everything else was non-negotiable.<sup>24</sup>

In reality, the context of May 1940 left Churchill with only two options: (a) *armistice*, which meant a weakened United Kingdom, lacking sovereignty and under German influence, which would have led to its exclusion from the European balance of power, and the disappearance of the liberal democratic system; (b) *resistance*, which could have become a model of national but also international inspiration and mobilization, as well as the prospect of creating a possible international front against Germany. In other words, the British prime minister had to choose between an uncertain peace and a risky war. In the logic of the negotiations, the British government's BATNA was based on the fundamental interest of national survival and maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom. This analysis was based on the awareness of a low ability to use the Royal Air Force, which had been poorly trained in previous decades.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the best alternative to negotiation with Hitler was continued struggle and British independence.<sup>26</sup>

## Impossible Negotiation. Refusal to Negotiate

**C**HURCHILL'S REFUSAL can be analyzed through the lens of the range of strategic options available to the United Kingdom in May 1940 and a rational calculation: cost–benefit. Negotiation theory shows that effectiveness is measured by the ability of actors to identify their fundamental interests and avoid positioning themselves on flexible principles.<sup>27</sup>

In May 1940 Churchill spent three days debating with members of his Cabinet whether to negotiate with Germany or not. About these debates, neither the prime minister nor the foreign secretary admitted, in their memoirs, that they had taken place. Only in 1990, five decades later, did the British Archives reveal the secret minutes of the War Cabinet, and 'CAB 65' covers the complex and intense debates of 26–28 May 1940.<sup>28</sup>

The five days of deliberations in the British War Cabinet are an illustration of the prisoner's dilemma. In the absence of sufficient information and under time pressure (two elements essential to defining "bounded rationality"<sup>29</sup>), Churchill

relied on intuition when he assumed that rejecting negotiations with the Axis Powers might have led to a better long-term outcome.<sup>30</sup> Equally, the British leader believed that accepting the negotiations would have meant a betrayal of fundamental values and national integrity, too great a cost for any possible temporary benefit.<sup>31</sup>

War can be interpreted as a form of disturbing the balance of power whereby the adversary is forced to return to the negotiating table. This meaning existed in the political thinking of Winston Churchill, but Adolf Hitler did not have the experience of the British leader. Negotiation was a form of tactical delay for the German chancellor, just as it was for Joseph Stalin. As a result, this process had to be adapted to the new diplomatic semantics. The interpretation of the objectives and actions of the adversaries had to be passed through the filter of the intelligence action. It was precisely this paradigm difference that Churchill sensed when he refused to negotiate with Hitler. Weakening the adversary and its allies was becoming essential for the postwar balance of power to be as favorable as possible to Great Britain. The end of the United Kingdom leader's speech in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940 can be interpreted in this key. In this logic, the British leader considered it useless to sacrifice the British alongside France, and the best message would have been that London would continue the fight against Hitler for the liberation of Europe.

*Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands.*<sup>32</sup>

Churchill's intuitive decision meant a paradigm shift from a disadvantageous positional negotiation for the United Kingdom to a principled negotiation that involves a focus on mutually beneficial options.<sup>33</sup> In this case, "mutual" should be replaced by "Allies," because the prospect of resistance to the negotiation was to increase the bargaining power of the allied states.

## The Impact on Europe

**B**Y REFUSING to negotiate with Hitler, Churchill extended the war to Germany's disadvantage, but at great risk to the United Kingdom and the Central and Eastern European countries. The move of the British government forced the German leader to accelerate the processes of influencing the governments of the Central European states.



A week after Churchill's speech in the House of Commons, French resistance was crushed, not even 46 days after the assault of German forces had begun. Officially, the security system envisioned in the 1930s has collapsed. Just as in 1812, when Tsar Alexander I, faced with the imminent danger of Napoleon's invasion, hastened the peace with Turkey and annexed Bessarabia, in 1940 the fall of France led Moscow to rush the eastern plan of Soviet geostrategy.<sup>34</sup> Within weeks, through fierce coercive diplomacy, the Soviet Union implemented the secret provisions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and annexed the pre-World War I territories that had been under the rule of the Russian Empire. Germany had to concern itself with a geopolitical adjustment of its interests in Central Europe in such a way that its Soviet partner did not obtain a position that was too advantageous. In this logic, Hitler became the guarantor of border changes regarding Romania, maintaining both the Bucharest and Budapest governments in check.<sup>35</sup>

Viewed from a broader perspective, the British refusal to come to terms with Hitler also represented a signal to the other states to begin a collective resistance against Germany. Thus, London became the headquarters of resistance for numerous exile organizations in Europe: the Polish government in exile, the Czechoslovak government, the Yugoslav government, the Free French government.<sup>36</sup> In fact, a true center of European anti-fascist resistance was created in London.

## Final Remarks

**I**N THE long run, the refusal to negotiate strengthened Britain's position as the main bastion of resistance to German expansionism in Central Europe. This gesture encouraged other states to enter the war alongside the Allies. Hitler's Blitzkrieg was slowed considerably by the British resistance and the strengthening of the Alliance.<sup>37</sup> This persistence in the war led to the defeat of the Axis Powers and the definition of a new world order. Keeping the United Kingdom in the war showed that Europe could not be dominated by a single pole of power, which had a major impact on the balance of power on the continent. This decision preceded the later involvement of the United States and the Soviet Union in the war.<sup>38</sup>

The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (23 August 1939) was the founding act of a world order in which the Soviet Union and Germany divided Europe into spheres of influence. Hitler's geopolitical calculations included the annihilation and domination of the Western powers so that he could then exercise control

over Central Europe, a space he shared with the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> However, less than a year after the signing of the Pact, the United Kingdom decided to defy the emerging world order in 1940 and refused to accept an unfavorable and humiliating negotiation with Germany. The refusal to negotiate was an act of delegitimization of the Soviet-German understandings and their actions on the international stage.

Winston Churchill's gesture marked the beginning of building an alternative world order. The main tools used by the British leader were the negotiations (with the Allies) and the war speech, through which he always emphasized the values that had to shape the new postwar world order. However, in the new global construction, new spheres of influence were redrawn, and the Central-Eastern European states that, before 1938, had received security guarantees from France and the United Kingdom were handed over to the Soviet sphere of influence in exchange for a new international peace system. Therefore, Churchill's refusal saved Europe from a global order and paved the way for an alternative. □

## Notes

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## **Abstract**

### **Refusal to Negotiate: Britain's Position and Impact on the World War in 1940**

In 1940, amidst World War II, the United Kingdom, under Prime Minister Winston Churchill, decisively refused to negotiate with the Axis Powers. This article explores the strategic implications of this refusal, arguing that it prevented the legitimization of Germany's aggressive policies and altered the war's course. By analyzing the Versailles peace system's failures, Churchill's leadership, and the geopolitical shifts resulting from the United Kingdom's stance, the article highlights how this decision shaped the postwar world order, influencing Europe's geopolitical landscape and setting the stage for an Allied victory.

## **Keywords**

World War II, Winston Churchill, UK foreign policy, Axis Powers negotiations, Central Europe