

Penguin



Readers



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DARKEST HOUR

HOW CHURCHILL CHANGED HISTORY

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CHAPTER ONE

Searching for a new leader

It was May 1940, and the situation in Europe was extremely serious. The **Nazi dictator**, Adolf Hitler, and his armies had already **invaded** Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark and Norway. Now Hitler was preparing to attack the rest of Europe.

Britain and its **ally** France had **declared war** on Hitler eight months before, after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. But things were going badly for the Allies. The British **Parliament** and many of the British people were no longer confident about their leader, the **Conservative prime minister**, Neville Chamberlain. They did not believe that he had the ability to **defeat** Hitler and lead Britain to **victory**. On the afternoon of 7th May, a meeting of the Members of Parliament (MPs) was taking place in the Houses of Parliament in London. The meeting had already continued for several hours and was very noisy. Many MPs were so angry with Chamberlain that they could not hide their feelings. They stood up and shouted at him, excitedly, “Out! Out! **Resign!** Resign!”

Chamberlain looked sad, tired and worried. Earlier in the afternoon, he had made a speech to Parliament, but it had not gone well. The MPs knew that Britain was in terrible danger from a possible attack by Hitler. They had realized that they needed a great leader, a strong person who could prevent the Nazis

from controlling Britain and Europe. But they did not believe that Chamberlain was the right man for the job. Chamberlain had not thought that Hitler was a dangerous **threat** to Europe, and two years before, in 1938, he had tried to make a peace agreement with Hitler. Five days ago, Parliament learned there had been a terrible **disaster** for Britain in April. The Nazis had invaded Norway and attacked British **troops** there. 1800 British soldiers had died, and several warships were **destroyed**. Many people felt Chamberlain and his **government** were responsible because they had not believed that Hitler would attack Norway.

Many MPs stood up to speak against Chamberlain that day. One was Clement Attlee, the leader of **the Labour Opposition**. “The Prime Minister and his friends made a serious mistake about Norway,” he said. “Many soldiers and ships have been lost because of them. But Norway wasn’t their only mistake. They’ve been wrong about other things, too. They didn’t believe that Hitler would attack Czechoslovakia. A few years ago, they even thought we should try to make a peace agreement with him.”

The **meeting** continued long into the summer night, but Chamberlain still refused to resign. The next afternoon, Parliament met again. Meanwhile, some important members of the Conservative government talked to some Labour MPs; they thought the **Labour Party** should join the government. They thought it would be good for Britain if Conservative and Labour MPs could work together. But the Labour MPs refused. “We won’t be part of a government led by Chamberlain,” they said.

“If you want us to work with you, Chamberlain and his friends must go.” The MPs continued to attack Chamberlain. “Resign! Resign!” they shouted at him.

Then an important man stood up: the **Liberal** MP David Lloyd George, who had been British prime minister from 1916 to 1922. Everyone was silent as they listened to Lloyd George, because he had guided Britain to victory in the First World War. “You’ve put Britain in a terrible position,” Lloyd George told Chamberlain. “It’s time for you to go.” When he sat down again, the MPs shouted and cheered. Later that night, a **vote** was held in Parliament to find out whether the MPs still had confidence in Chamberlain’s government and the way it was running the war. In the vote, forty-one members of the **Conservative Party** **voted** against their own government. So, finally, Chamberlain had to accept that he could not continue as prime minister. A new leader must be found quickly, but the big question was – who could that leader be?

A few seats away from Chamberlain, one man was sitting quietly, watching and listening to everything that was happening. His name was Winston Spencer Churchill. He had an important position in the government as **First Lord of the Admiralty**, the man **in charge of** the British **navy**, but he was not popular with everyone. Jokes were made about him, and there were funny pictures of him in the newspapers. Many people did not trust him because earlier in his **political career**, he had changed his party twice. In 1904, he had left the Conservative Party and

joined the **Liberal Party**, and then in 1924, he had joined the Conservative Party again. As the top man in the Admiralty, some people also felt he was responsible for the recent terrible disaster in Norway. So when the Conservative MPs were considering a new prime minister, they did not immediately think of Winston Churchill. Instead, many people wanted the **Foreign Secretary**, Lord Halifax, to be prime minister. Chamberlain, too, thought Halifax would be a good prime minister. Other people also wanted Halifax: the King of Britain, George VI, wanted Halifax, and even the Labour Party wanted Halifax. However, there was a problem with Lord Halifax. He was a member of the **House of Lords**, and in British politics, a member of the House of Lords could not also be an ordinary Member of Parliament who was chosen in an election by the British people. On Thursday 9th May, Chamberlain invited Lord Halifax to his home at Number 10, Downing Street, and asked him to be prime minister. But to Chamberlain's great surprise, Halifax said that he did not want the job. He said that he would have no real **power**, because, as a Lord, he was not allowed to take part in meetings of the MPs in Parliament.

Chamberlain was very disappointed because he had been sure that Halifax wanted to be prime minister. But perhaps there was another reason why Halifax did not want the job. Halifax knew that Winston Churchill might cause problems for him. Winston was clever and **ambitious**, and he had wanted to be prime minister since he was a child. He had the ability to be a

good leader, and he was very good at making speeches. But in his political career, Winston had made some bad mistakes. One of his most serious mistakes had been during the First World War, when hundreds of thousands of men had lost their lives at Gallipoli in Turkey. However, Winston knew a lot more about **battles** and war than Halifax. As a young man, he had trained as an army officer and had direct experience of two important



Winston showing the “V for Victory” at Number 10,
Downing Street, 5th June 1943

wars, the Boer War and the First World War. He had fought bravely in the First World War and a war in the Sudan, and he had also worked on the front line of battle as a war journalist. Halifax did not understand war and **military** matters as well as Winston. Also, much of the British public did not trust Halifax because he had agreed with Chamberlain's idea of making a peace agreement with Hitler.

After the meeting with Halifax in the morning, Chamberlain made an important **decision**. He asked Halifax and Winston to come to the prime minister's house at Number 10, Downing Street, that afternoon. He told them he had decided to resign, but he would be happy to be in a government led by either of them. Halifax repeated that he did not want to be prime minister and said that Winston would be the right man for the job. So Winston Churchill agreed to be the new prime minister of Britain. He knew he had a very difficult job ahead of him – to save Britain and its people from the terrible threat of a Nazi attack. But Winston felt strong and confident. Later, he said, "I felt as if all my past life had prepared me for this moment . . . I was sure I would not fail." Winston had become responsible for the future of his country.