

Dunkirk: the Bravest British Retreat

Whatever one might think about the United Kingdom's recent behavior toward Europe—its antagonism toward the European Union, willingness to undermine international markets, and everlasting search for the best possible deal—you can't say it didn't help beat the Nazis. Regardless of their unwillingness to participate in the collective European post-war experiment, you can't say the UK didn't help rescue Europe from the night of Nazi totalitarianism. That the UK didn't stand for European values in Europe's darkest hour.

An upcoming movie, "Dunkirk," might change that. "Dunkirk," which appears to be a movie about the fear of death, seeks to reevaluate the UK's role in WWII, as well as its role in European affairs. In the current context. It's possible that "Dunkirk" will cause audiences to question whether the UK is capable of long-term alliance or partnership when its interests aren't at stake.

Most WWII movies confirm what people already know about WWII—who was good, who was bad, and why it was important to fight. The ideological stakes were unusually clear during WWII and it makes for a great dramatic setting. Few WWII movies communicate any urgent questions about life (a phenomenon [called kitsch](#) by some [on this site](#)). Instead, WWII becomes a superficial and emotionally vapid garden of thematic consistency, a circus freak-show of predictable actions and reactions. See! Conspicuous bad guys (the Nazis). Marvel! At clear-cut good guys (as told here, the British, the Americans). Cry! For hapless allies in need of rescue (the [French](#) and the [poor Jewish folk](#) in the Holocaust). Laugh! At dopey enemies who are easily dispatched (the Italians and, paradoxically, the Germans). At the end of the exhibit, a happy ending.

Whenever an established filmmaker decides to tackle an unheroic corner of the war, they take a big risk. Awkward stories don't fit with audience sensibilities, especially when it comes to WWII. Two of the best WWII movies—[The Thin Red Line](#) directed by Terrence Malick, and [Cross of Iron](#) directed by Sam Peckinpah—represented big gambles, which impacted both directors in the short term. These movies take unusually honest looks at war, without glamorizing it. Both movies encountered skeptical or hostile critics and audiences when they were released.

Now, the Christopher Nolan who directed Batman has undertaken to tell the story of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) retreat from France. From the West's perspective, this was one of the most significant actions of the war, and basically guaranteed a Nazi victory when the outcome of the struggle was still very much in doubt. Rather than stay and fight as they had in WWI, pinning down the German flank and giving the French Army time to regroup while landing reinforcements further down the coast, the BEF fled, and essentially doomed the French and continental Europe to four years of Nazi occupation, as well as the Holocaust. Adding insult to injury, barely a month later the Royal Navy [bushwacked and sank great portions of the French fleet](#) in North Africa without provocation or warning.

THE HISTORICAL EVENT OF DUNKIRK IS EMBARRASSING

To say that Dunkirk was an embarrassment would be an understatement. By any honest measure of evaluation, Dunkirk was a catastrophe. In other areas, the British fought doggedly to protect their Imperial interests, dedicating extraordinary resources to defend Egypt, Africa, and India. Where France was concerned, though, Great Britain was just as happy to watch its economic and colonial rival burn.

This is not to suggest that there was a British conspiracy to lose France—they committed significant soldiers to keeping the Germans out, and were legitimately hoping to avoid strategic defeat in Europe. This is only to point out that where Britain dedicated itself to fighting Nazi Germany, it did not lose (Egypt, England, India)—and places it saw as expendable (France, Norway, Greece) or where racism was involved (anywhere facing the Japanese), it did. The battle of Dunkirk is filled with incidents of apathy and inattention, missed opportunities, inaction, and half-hearted effort. The only time British officers dedicated their unmitigated attention during Dunkirk was when it came to loading their boats as quickly as possible to return to Great Britain. Had they applied a quarter of the energy expended in leaving France to staying there, it's entirely possible that World War II could have turned out differently. The French might have had time to rally, as they had in WWI. The Italians might have thought twice about entering the war on the side of Hitler (unknown to many, Mussolini did not actually commit to the Axis cause as a belligerent until 10 June, after the British flight from France).

Many, many things could have turned out differently—had the British not decided (after a week of skirmishing) that it wasn't worth defending France. Granted, this is counterfactual history (which in clumsy hands can be worse than useless), but Hitler did not cancel the invasion of Great Britain because of the British Army—they had left most of their equipment in Normandy and were viewed as already defeated. It was cancelled because the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine were unable to secure a crossing of the English Channel. Had the BEF been defeated (worst case scenario), the Nazis could not have invaded the UK.



Of course, that's not how the narrative goes. The way most people read history is that the British barely avoided total destruction at the hands of the Germans—that the German victory was inevitable, so they had to run away. In this context, the retreat was not a disaster, but some kind of miraculous victory. Viewed in its appropriate context, however, the Battle of Dunkirk reads as the version of Monty Python's Holy Grail where [Brave Sir Robin](#) was the only one who survived to tell his version of the encounter with the confused three-headed ogre.

But everyone knows that [our grandfathers weren't pussies](#). Unlike the current generation of me-first baby-boomer handout-for-free wantniks, our grandfathers were honorable and hard as nails. The ultimate proof of this, beyond teary stories of sandwiches earned by chopping wood, is how they comported themselves in WWII. Our grandfathers, you see—British and American—beat the Nazis. It was the least morally ambiguous war we'd ever seen, and the hardest war, and they were lucky to get to fight in it, and every vet since—from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan—understands that we owe an unpayable debt to those great, titanic figures looming over our shoulders. And the retreat from Dunkirk is part of that exciting, dramatic story.

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN DOES WELL WITH MORAL COMPLEXITY

Christopher Nolan's success as the director of the Batman

trilogy should not be understated. The Dark Knight is worth watching and rewatching, filled with interesting and well-presented individual and philosophical clashes. And while Batman: The Dark Knight Rises veers into parody, it is still far superior to most of the other superhero offerings of today—it is not superficial in places where the Spider Man franchise has always bowed to temptation, it is not wanton or spuriously violent where Marvel's Iron Man and Avengers franchises embrace violence as a justifiable means to an end. Nolan may or may not be consciously aware the Hegelian dialectic, inevitable conflict between ideas, and the ways in which competing ideologies twin and intersect and [depend on each other for definitional integrity](#) but he espouses those themes with admirable consistency. If you're going to make a serious movie about serious heroes, Nolan's the person to do it. His Batman villains were tasteful and appropriate as these things go (Raz-Al-Gul, The Joker, Two-Face, Bane). The heroes were complex and accessible. This is likely true in part because Nolan's world is a human world, not supernatural—episodes have logical (if unexpected) explanations. The enemy is not a [silly robot](#) or a [magic alien](#)—the enemy is us, an exaggerated, intentionally distorted vision of our potential for causing harm to each other, for making mischief on a grand scale.

Hence Nolan's unique suitability to direct a great WWII movie. The way we read about it in the history books, WWII is basically a superhero fairy tale, starring knowable humans in the heroic roles, and engagingly inscrutable humans as the villains. Our grandfathers don't (or didn't if, like mine, they're dead) talk about what they did, except when they get drunk, and then the stories are a mixture of horrifying and pathetic, comical. In graphic novels and movies, though, as I mentioned earlier, WWII is a morality tale—the good, handsome officer. The loyal sergeant. The conflicted soldier. The bad officer. And—of course—the strong and untrustworthy SS guy to be defeated at any cost. Even—especially—if it means [turning](#)

[into the SS guy](#). That's the lesson we learn from WWII movies. Weakness is bad. Killing is necessary. Necessary is good. An elliptical but pleasant logic that generates the same satisfaction in English and in Russian.

There's another level to Dunkirk, and it's worth mentioning, because stories go deep when one pulls back the curtains of history. All the significant British and German leadership had direct experience with World War I, and were responding in various ways to that war. The Germans and British leading the fight in and around Dunkirk all recalled what had happened the last time their armies had thrust and parried in a total blind as to what was going on. Both sides had come of age during the age of trench warfare. Both craved certainty, needed to understand their lines—the destruction of which on both sides (deliberate on the part of the German blitzkrieg, unintentional on the part of the Allies) had resulted in an unseen opportunities and great anxiety. In that chaotic tempest, the British and Germans lost their nerve at the same time, in different ways. When the French line collapsed and the German armor started rolling south, flanks exposed, the British leadership continued to decide against an unequivocal and powerful counterattack (which might have defeated Nazi Germany or at least given the beleaguered French a chance to catch their breath) until flight by sea was the only option left. And the Germans chose to allow the Luftwaffe an attempt to destroy the British (not the last time a military would [hopefully but unwisely and unsuccessfully](#) entrust operational [victory to its Air Force](#)). Both militaries were led by veterans of World War I. Neither were willing to risk everything against one another. Into this decisional vacuum, the British High Command chose flight.

It was possible to [accurately and correctly review Fury](#) from its original [two-and-a-half minute preview](#), but Dunkirk's preview lasts [one minute and seven seconds](#) and involves precious little to evaluate save Nolan's deft use of sound and

physical gestures to convey dread. It doesn't look bad. In another director's hands, I'd worry that the movie would retread tired tropes like Allied heroism (rather than cowardice) in the face of inevitable Nazi victory and thousands of Nazis killed while stalwart British defenders did their duty. I'd be waiting for that inevitable exemplar, a brave NCO expiring on his dead crew's hot machine gun having single-handedly saved the British Empire. Knowing Nolan's accomplishments, I'm hopeful that he's going to pull a Peckinpah or Malick instead. Contrary to popular belief, humans don't need unrealistic and ahistorical monuments to psychotic excess—no, humans seem constantly in want of reminding that actions have consequences. The consequences of Dunkirk were simple: France was destroyed, and the Jews annihilated.

EMPIRES ALWAYS FALL

Then, within fifteen years, Great Britain's empire collapsed anyway. And no matter how much the current British would like to deny it—their history, the world's history—abandoning one's allies leads to horror, death, and bloodshed. The USA (mostly) the USSR (some) and China (a little) stepped into the vacuum created when colonialism collapsed, while those nations freed from Great Britain attempted to make their way in the world despite having been intentionally and systematically hobbled. Many of those countries—hundreds of millions of people—suffered through savage, bloody wars of independence, accustomed as they were to the implicit and direct threat of violence behind British rule. One British retreat occasioned its most spectacular retreat of all—that which left the United Kingdom a sliver of its former self, and its citizens pining for independence from Europe.



Whatever direction we learn Nolan decided to take Dunkirk—kitschy, hackneyed morality tale or counterintuitive evaluation of a desperate and rather despicable (again, talking about the UK here) Empire on decline, it deserves a well-educated evaluation. The UK—or Great Britain—or England—whatever it's called—has a long history of interfering with European affairs to its advantage when that interference is unnecessary, counterproductive, or self-interested (Hundred Years War, WWI), then taking off when it's needed most (Dunkirk, Brexit). This movie is an excellent reminder of that pattern, at a time when we're watching it unfold again in real time.