

Churchill's Radical War Leadership

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Abstract

Winston Churchill is, rightly, hailed as a great war-leader. In 1940, when the German armies were all-powerful, and an invasion of Great Britain seemed imminent, morale in Great Britain was slipping. Churchill, with nothing more than his speeches, managed to inspire the nation and prevent a collapse of morale. That he was able to do this is remarkable. Contrary to common belief, he was not a “great commoner”, he was a maverick politician who was far from the mainstream, and far from trusted. The person of Winston Churchill can hardly have been inspiring. To understand how Churchill nevertheless managed to rally the nation, his speeches are analysed from the viewpoint of Saul Alinsky’s “rules for radicals”, a method of action devised to empower powerless communities. Churchill used many of Alinsky’s rules, and this, rather than supposed inspirational leadership capabilities of Churchill, explains why he could influence morale in Great Britain.

Keywords

Winston Churchill, Saul Alinsky, World War II, Rules for Radicals, Speeches

1. Strange Success: Churchill in 1940

In the summer of 1940 Great Britain stood alone. France was collapsing, the United States seemed not interested in the war, and Russia was still a nominal friend of Germany. Great Britain’s military outlook was bleak. A German invasion was expected and it was not clear if England would be able to withstand this attack. Later accounts often portray Britain as eager to take up the “quarrel with the foe”, but this is to a large extent a myth invented in post-war Britain. Mass Observation Reports, daily surveys of the public mood taken by Tom Harrison, an anthropologist, and Charles Madge, a journalist (Moss, 2003: p. 144) analysing morale at the time show that the mood was much more volatile. Morale was crumbling, not only in the streets, but also in the Cabinet. Notwithstanding Churchill’s claim to the contrary in his Second World War-memoirs, possible terms for a negotiated peace with Germany were discussed, and at a certain time Churchill was ready to give up Malta, Gibraltar

and some African colonies to get Britain out of the war (Reynolds, 2005: p. 169ff). In the event, Churchill did not start talks with Germany and steered Britain away from the, in his own words, “slippery slope” of negotiations, but Britain came close to giving up. And the reason Churchill did not give up was not that he was certain of a British victory over Germany. He decided to hold out a while longer to be able to get better terms in case of negotiations (Roberts, 1997: p. 224). In the end, that decision paved the road to victory.

More than anything else, Churchill’s speeches rallied Great Britain. Churchill held speeches in the Commons, about which reports would appear in the press, and occasionally used the BBC to address the nation directly. These speeches, with their fight-or-die attitude, and their apparent honesty about Britain’s dear predicament, have become examples of inspirational leadership. Without Churchill, and without Churchill rallying the country behind the war-effort, Britain may have been forced to end the fight.

But how did those speeches inspire Britain? Churchill is widely regarded as an inspirational leader, but that actually tells us very little. It merely restates a state of affairs we already know: Churchill rallied Britain. It does not shed much light on the exact mechanism by which an outwardly uncharismatic man in his sixties could keep Britain from falling into despair and defeatism.

That the nation listened in the first place is a miracle. Churchill was far from trusted. There were strong reservations against him in Whitehall and Westminster, and even his own constituents had once attempted to censure him (see Jenkins, 2002: p. 530ff). Winston Churchill in charge of fighting the Germans brought back memories of the Great War, not the best of recollections. There was the reckless Antwerp-episode in late 1914. Churchill, at that moment First Lord of the Admiralty, went to Antwerp to lead the defence of that city. He apparently enjoyed himself so much with his little war and his little private army, a Naval Division, that he cabled to London that he was prepared to stay in Antwerp if he were made a general. The Secretary of State for War, Field Marshall Kitchener, was ready to make him a lieutenant-general on the spot, but Asquith, the Prime Minister, decided that a former lieutenant of the Hussars could not be made a senior general right away, and besides, he was needed in Britain (Jenkins, 2002: pp. 248-251). If this memory was amusing, Churchill dressed in a cloak and yachting cap, directing the defence of Antwerp, the memory of Gallipoli must have been devastating. The Dardanelles-tragedy was the lowest point in Churchill’s career and one that was not easily forgotten. Quite a few people solely blamed Churchill for the fiasco. “So, through a Churchill’s excess of imagination, a layman’s ignorance of artillery, and the fatal power of a young enthusiasm to convince older and more cautious brains, the tragedy of Gallipoli was born”, wrote war correspondent Bean who was present at Gallipoli (quoted in: Carlyon, 2003: p. 657). Young Anthony Eden, who was still at Eton during the Gallipoli drama, wrote home that Churchill should have stayed out of strategic decision making “of which he knows nothing at all” (Thorpe, 2004: p. 7).

During the 1920s and 1930s Churchill seemed to become more and more isolated. The depth of this isolation becomes clear, for instance, when reading Thorpe’s life of Eden (2004). Eden made his career in politics without ever encountering Churchill, until the very late 1930s. No mention is made of Churchill except in passing. Conservative politics in the 1930s were dominated by people like Lord Halifax, Stanley Baldwin and Chamberlain. Until the outbreak of the war in 1939 Churchill did not have a cabinet position, and when he was appointed to the war cabinet in September 1939, his “appointment was not universally welcomed. Within the government and on the backbenches the old-guard Tories viewed him as an unprincipled scoundrel whose ambition overshadowed his judgment” (D’Este, 2009: p. 382). By the time he became Prime Minister in 1940, he had not been able to rehabilitate himself fully, in spite of his months of service as First Lord. John Lukacs had a good look at private diary entries of May 1940 and concluded: “The words ‘crooks’, ‘gangsters’, and ‘wild men’ appear in many diaries and letters of the period, referring to Churchill’s new government” (Lukacs, 1999: p. 23). He was seen as a “dangerous adventurer” (Roberts, quoted in Lukacs, 1999: p. 22). Yet, in spite of Great-Britain’s unease with him, the country listened. Churchill managed to whip up support for the war, in a people whose lust for war was low, with few other means than speeches. How?

2. A Great Commoner?

Churchill could hardly claim that he was some sort of great commoner, sent to Downing Street by the people to save the country. The country, as we have seen, was very apprehensive, and Churchill emerged as PM from political machinations that are difficult to reconstruct (see Roberts, 2004: p. 93ff). No general election was held, under the circumstances that would have been unthinkable, so we do not know how much popular support Churchill actually had. Churchill may, like William Pitt the Elder before him, have thought “My Lord, I am sure

I can save this country, and no one else can” (Walpole 1985: p. 1), he was not, as Pitt was “called to supreme power by the voice of the people” (Williams, 2000: p. 375). Churchill could become Prime Minister because of Stanley Baldwin’s 1935 victory in the General Election. Yet, the myth of Churchill as a man of the people is persistent, and it is often used to explain his success in the summer of 1940. Writing about his style, one editor of a volume of Churchill’s speeches says: “The style that he adopted, and which proved so effective, was to address them not as unseen masses, but as individuals—he envisioned his audience as a couple and their family, gathered round their coal fire in the “cottage-home”. In this way he succeeded in forging a personal bond at grassroots level with the ordinary man and woman in the street’ (Churchill, 2004: p. xxvii). This analyst is a grandson of Churchill, so he may be excused for beholding this almost romantic vision, but the image of Churchill as a man of the people is persistent. But there was nothing homely about Churchill’s speeches. They were always quite factual and formal, especially in their openings. Some even lambasted them as “insincere” and “pompous” (see Roberts, 2004: p. 38). When compared to Roosevelt’s fireside chats, the difference in tone is clear. “The British Empire and the French Republic have been at war with Nazi Germany for a month tonight” (BBC Broadcast, October 1st, 1939, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 199). is a typical Churchill-opening. “I speak to you for the first time as Prime Minister in a solemn hour for the life of our country, of our Empire, or our Allies, and, above all, the cause of Freedom” (BBC Broadcast, May 19th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 207) is the opening of his first BBC-speech to the nation after becoming Prime Minister. This is very different from Roosevelt’s tone: “My friends, I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking—with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking but more particularly with the overwhelming majority who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be” (March 12 1933, *On the bank crisis*, in: Buhite & Levy, 1992: p. 12). Roosevelt’s approach is indeed homely, starting with “my friends”, and acknowledging that many people probably do not understand the banking industry, in such a way that he almost seems to admit he may well not understand it either. But even Roosevelt, of Groton and Hyde Park, was not generally accepted as a common man way for instance Harry Truman, was. In the movie *Eleanor and Franklin, The White House Years*, Roosevelt’s political adviser, Louis Howe, asks Roosevelt why he is a democrat, to which Roosevelt answers that the democratic party is the party of the people, and “I’m a man of the people”. Howe’s scathing comment: “You’re a Roosevelt. Since when does a Roosevelt know about people?” This may be Hollywood-fiction, but the sentiment is right. In class-conscious Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill, of Blenheim Palace and Harrow, would stand an even smaller chance to be a hero of the working classes.

3. A Powerless Nation

Any answer to the question why Churchill was successful should include the state and the morale of Britain in the summer of 1940. The speeches, after all, had a receptive audience and an effect on that audience. As we have seen, morale and mental strength were sliding, and many Britons were close to giving up. By the end of May 1940 the Ministry of Information used terms like “considerable depression”, and “stunned, bewildered, anxious, recriminatory” to describe the public mood (quoted in: Moss, 2003: p. 144). “The public mind is in a chaotic condition and ready to be plunged into the depths of an utterly bewildered, shocked, almost unbelieving dismay. The whole structure of our national belief would seem to be rocking gently”, said the Mass Observation Report on May 25th (quoted in: Moss, 2003: p. 144). The capitulation of France in June was a further blow to British hopes. Talk of capitulation was rampant. One Mass Observation Report mentioned that “15% of direct interviews did not expect the war to continue, while only about 50% contemplated with confidence fighting alone” (M.O. 181, 19-6-41, page 1), so without any allies. Remarks were overheard that “reveal more despair, defeatism, disunity”, like “It looks all we can do is give up” (M.O. 181, 19-6-41, page 6) and “It doesn’t look as if this war will last much longer” (M.O. 181, 19-6-41, page 8).

The feelings are understandable. Great-Britain stood alone, the German war-machine was all powerful at that moment, and the British army was beaten. And there loomed the threat of an invasion. People felt powerless to change the situation, they were being tossed around by powers and events far greater than themselves. Under the circumstances this was understandable, but what is more interesting is that this state of mind is not unique. More nations and groups have gone through similar states of disenfranchisement and disempowerment, and the leadership-success with similar groups can give important clues to Churchill’s leadership.

One of the most famous students-and practitioners-of empowerment of disenfranchised communities is Saul

Alinsky. Alinsky, an American community leader organized his ideas for empowering and organizing disenfranchised urban communities into a number of simple rules, mainly do's and don'ts, together called the "rules for radicals". There are many similarities between Alinsky's so-called "rules for radicals" and Churchill's actual leadership, so many, that Churchill's leadership can rightly be termed "radical". Intuitively—it is impossible that Churchill knew of Alinsky's methods as they were only published after World War II—Churchill applied many of the tenets of Alinsky's model for action, and thus transformed powerless Britain in a fighting community. Looking at Churchill's leadership through the lens of the rules for radicals will give a better explanation for his success in 1940 than the "man of the people" and "great commoner" class of explanation.

4. Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals

Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) was an American community organizer. In the 1930s he had set up community-organizations in underprivileged neighbourhoods in Chicago. In 1945 he published *Reveille for Radicals*, in which he showed what methods could be employed to energize poor communities. They were "David-and Goliath struggles, marked by colourful, confrontational tactics: dumping a mound of garbage in front of a tavern owned by the wife of an alderman, to protest his unresponsiveness to complaints of inadequate garbage pickup, or dispatching black tenants of a run-down tenement to picket the white suburban home of the slumlord who has refused to make necessary repairs. He also pioneered the use of stockholdings by churches and others to help promote socially responsible policies on the part of corporations" (Horwitt, 1992: pp. xiii-xiv).

Alinsky was no mere rabble-rouser. He could be "intuitive and shrewd, nervy and aggressive" but "he was also reflective, interested in ideas, even intellectual, an urbanized Russian Jew educated in the University of Chicago's renowned sociology department" (Horwitt, 1992: p. xiv). But he was convinced that the urban poor were not powerless. "Not only can they beat City Hall, but they must, they will, and they'll have a ball doing it" (Horwitt, 1992: p. xiv).

The rules for radicals are the synthesis of a lifetime of community-organizing experience. They are somewhere between rules of the thumb and an ideal-type. They have been validated in Alinsky's practice, but not in any rigorous, scientific way. Alinsky never conducted experiments, and neither did he keep records of his observations that meet the demands of modern social science. There has been some research in which the efficacy of Alinsky's approach was evaluated. For instance, a study in which Alinsky's methods are compared with the methods of Chicago settlement houses in relieving urban poor concludes: "Alinsky succeeded where settlements failed-in giving the apathetic poor a sense of power through direct action and confrontation tactics, tactics generally avoided by the settlement houses" (Trolander, 1982: p. 362).

The rules are:

- 1) Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
- 2) Never go outside the experience of your people.
- 3) Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.
- 4) Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.
- 5) Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.
- 6) A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.
- 7) A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.
- 8) Keep the pressure on
- 9) The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.
- 10) Major premise for tactics is development of operations that will maintain constant pressure upon the opposition.
- 11) If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counter side.
- 12) The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.
- 13) Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

Taken together the rules reduce fear and uncertainty and create a sense of action an initiative, and aim at hiding weakness in the face of the opponent. Looking back on one of the many community organizations he founded, Alinsky said that they "gave people a sense of identity and pride" (Reitzes & Reitzes, 1987: p. 281).

5. Churchill, the "Radical"

Unconsciously Churchill employed many of Alinsky's tactics. Of course the circumstances were vastly different.

Where Alinsky could speak with the members of the community, and they could talk back to him, Churchill's "community" was the British Empire, and communication was necessarily more limited and one-sided. In fact, the only tool Churchill had at his disposition was the possibility to speak out, on radio or in the House of Commons. It is a well attested fact that he used this limited means exceptionally well-to many contemporaries the speeches were inspiring moments that kept them from reaching breaking-point. By putting the speeches in the framework of Alinsky, we can understand why.

Rule 1: Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.

This was Alinsky's most basic rule. "If your organization is small in numbers then do what Gideon did: conceal the members in the dark but raise a din and clamour that will make the listener believe that your organization numbers many more than it does" (Alinsky, 1971: p. 126). This is exactly the situation Churchill found himself in, in 1940. The German armies were on the march on the Continent and forces that could have been of help, the Dutch, Belgian and French armies, were lost in quick succession. In about six weeks, Britain faced Germany alone.

In most of his speeches for the Commons and the BBC around this time Churchill was frank about the losses and the difficulty of Britain's position. But he also made clear-to Hitler as much as to Britons-that an attack on the British Isles was an attack on a much larger military alliance. In his speech of June 18th he mentioned that Canadians actually took part in operations in France and that "very high-class forces from the Dominions will now take part in the defence of the Mother Country" (speech in House of Commons, June 18th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 222). In addition, "Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians have joined their causes to our own" (speech in House of Commons, June 18th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 229). And he rattled with sabres not even in the war yet. In his July 14th BBC broadcast he mentioned the New World "from whom, as the struggle deepens, increasing aid will come" (BBC Broadcast, July 14th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 234). The naval and air war on the Atlantic, Churchill continued, had hardly been a success for Germany, for "is it not remarkable that after ten months of unlimited U-boat and air attack upon our commerce, our food reserves are higher than they have ever been, and we have a substantially larger tonnage under our own flag, apart from great numbers of foreign ships in our control, than we had at the beginning of the war?" (BBC Broadcast, July 14th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 234). The message was clear. England was not a small island at the end of its tether; it was merely the outpost of a large and widening alliance of forces that was gaining in strength.

This was nothing more than a show of force. The Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, and Belgians Churchill mentioned did not land in Britain with trained and organized armies. They were hardly more than refugees in uniform, members of beaten and disbanded armies that washed up in England. They, and the members of Dominion forces had to be equipped by Britain, and Britain's reserves and war fortunes were dwindling very fast. By December 1940 Churchill had to write to President Roosevelt that the situation was critical, and that Britain was nearing the end of its financial reserves (Sherwood, 2001: p. 218). Given his honesty about losses and the general war situation one could be inclined to believe that everything in the speeches was truthful. Churchill never sought to hide Britain's losses. In his speech after Dunkirk he frankly mentioned the loss of 30.000 men (Churchill, 2004: p. 215) and his June 17th broadcast opens with the disheartening "The news from France is very bad" (Churchill, 2004: p. 218). But in June 1940 Churchill was creating an image of strength that did hardly match reality. This was conscious policy, and he encouraged others to do the same. While the evacuation of Dunkirk was underway he sent all members of Cabinet and all senior civil servants a memo that asked them to "maintain a high morale in their circles; not [by] minimizing the gravity of events; but [by] showing confidence in our ability and inflexible resolve" (quoted in: Roberts, 2004: p. 121).

The speeches were successful. Writer Vita Sackville-West said that "one of the reasons why one is stirred by his Elizabethan phrases is that one feels the whole massive backing of power and resolve behind them, like a great fortress: they are never words for words' sake" (quoted in: Roberts, 2004: p. 39). The resolve was there, but the powerful fortress did not exist in military terms. But the speeches had the desired effect.

Rule 2: Never go outside the experience of your people.

Unfamiliar tactics lead to "confusion, fear and retreat" (Alinsky, 1971: p. 127). Churchill managed to put the current experience of retreat and invasion-threat in a more familiar historical context. Time and time again he stressed that there was really nothing new, that Britain had gone through similar experiences, and that the outcome would be familiar too: the Empire would survive. There were many references to both the Napoleonic wars and the Great War in the speeches. In addressing the Commons on June 4th after Dunkirk he said: "We are told that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles. This has often been thought of before. When

Napoleon lay at Boulogne for a year with his flat-bottomed boats and his Grand Army, he was told by someone: ‘There are bitter weeds in England’. There are certainly a great many more of them since the British Expeditionary Force returned” (speech in House of Commons, June 4th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 216).

The actual tactics of Britain in this time strengthened this “Napoleon-era” feeling. When the French forces threatened the British isles around 1800 volunteer regiments sprung up to resist the French. Even sickly former Prime Minister Pitt the younger volunteered as a colonel (Hague, 2004: p. 520). Defence Minister Anthony Eden’s call to arms, aimed at those too young or too old to serve in the regular forces resulted in the mobilization of over a million men (Holmes, 2003: p. 411), later to be called Home Guard. It was a repeat of the familiar story of the defence of England.

Churchill went beyond the Napoleonic context. The Dunkirk-speech contains one particularly masterful segment, in which the threat of invasion becomes the natural plight of the islander: “Turning once again, and this time more generally, to the question of invasion, I would observe that there has never been a period in all these long centuries of which we boast when an absolute guarantee against invasion, still less against serious raids, could have been given to our people. In the days of Napoleon the same wind which would have carried his transports across the Channel might have driven away the blockading fleet. There was always the chance, and it is that chance which has excited and befooled the imaginations of many Continental tyrants” (speech in House of Commons, June 4th 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 217). The threat of invasion came with the territory. Yet, as long as Britain had a strong navy there would be no real threat. So whatever Hitler did, whatever army was being built up on the French shore, it was nothing new. Great Britain had had to live with that precise threat since times unknown. It was the essential British experience.

Rule 3. Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy.

Germany obviously had the initiative in the summer of 1940, so there was not too much Churchill could actually do but respond to German actions. Hence, there are not that many instances where Churchill could go outside the experience of the enemy. One clear example though is the attack he ordered on the French fleet in North-Africa (see: D’Este, 2009: p. 534ff). After the French-German armistice that fleet was under control of Vichy-France, and would remain so under the terms of the armistice, but Churchill feared that at some point the French ships would be added to the strength of the Kriegsmarine. Hence he decided to first send the French an ultimatum, and when they did not respond, to attack that fleet. The attack took place on July 3rd. The French fleet was put out of action, at the cost of 1297 French sailors killed in action or missing. The wisdom of the attack is still debated. It did much to make the Vichy-regime acceptable to many French in the early war-period, while it was not really necessary, as Hitler did not have any intention to put the fleet to use-of which Churchill was unaware (D’Este, 2009: p. 534).

Yet, the action is a typical example of the unorthodoxy of Churchill’s mind, and an example of an Alinsky-esque radicalism. As one of Churchill’s biographers, Jenkins, notes: “Nearly anyone else would have let sleeping ships lie, and hoped vaguely for the best” (Jenkins, 2002: p. 624). Hitler was surprised. He had still hoped for some sort of an arrangement with Britain, but the attack on the French fleet was “clearly not the action of a beaten foe seeking rapprochement” (D’Este, 2009: p. 534). A speech Hitler had planned for July 6th, in which he would offer Britain one last offer of peace, was postponed. Hitler was unsure about whether he should make the offer at all. In the end the speech was planned and cancelled three times, an indication of Hitler’s uncertainty. It was eventually held on the 19th (Kershaw, 2000: pp. 300-301), an example of Churchill’s bold action derailing Hitler’s planning.

Rule 4. Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.

England was not in a position to make the enemy do much-Germany had the initiative. Yet, when he could Churchill made Germany live up to its own rules, or at least stressed the thought in his speeches. The idea of this rule is of course to show the weakness and/or stupidity of some or all of the enemy’s strategies, and let him live with the consequences. After all, few things are more encouraging than seeing a mighty opponent shoot himself in the foot because he religiously follows his own rules.

A very clear example of the application of this rule is Churchill’s attitude towards the German naval blockade. In the famous “The Few” speech Churchill announced Germany’s plan as follows: “I read in the papers that Herr Hitler has also proclaimed a strict blockade of the British Islands. No one can complain of that. I remember the Kaiser doing it in the last war” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 240). The reference to the Kaiser is to show that this is familiar terrain, and that it has been tried before, without much success. And then Churchill goes on to show that Germany herself would be the one at the receiving end of the

blockade: “What indeed would be a matter of general complaint would be if we were to prolong the agony of all Europe by allowing food to come in to nourish the Nazis and aid their war effort, or to allow food to go in to the subjugated peoples, which certainly would be pillaged off them by their Nazi conquerors?” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: [Churchill, 2004: p. 240](#)). Why let food and supplies reach the Continent if it prolongs the war? In answer to those who would counter that this would not just hurt the Nazi’s, but every European, Churchill said: “There have been many proposals, founded on the highest motives, that food should be allowed to pass the blockade for the relief of these populations. I regret that we must refuse these requests. The Nazis declare that they have created a new unified economy in Europe. They have repeatedly stated that they possess ample reserves of food and that they can feed their captive peoples. In a German broadcast on 27th June it was said that while Mr. Hoover’s plan for relieving France, Belgium and Holland deserved commendation, the German forces had already taken the necessary steps” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: [Churchill, 2004: p. 240](#)). If Hitler is so good at managing Europe’s for supplies, Churchill argued, then let him do it. Or, as Churchill put it: “let Hitler bear his responsibilities to the full” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: [Churchill, 2004: p. 240](#)). Implying of course that Hitler could not do that.

Rule 8. Keep the pressure on, and 10. Major premise for tactics is development of operations that will maintain constant pressure upon the opposition.

There seems to be little substantive difference between rule 8 and 10, so we will treat them as one. The period of the *drôle de guerre* is incomprehensible in tactical terms; the inactivity of the French and British army gave the German forces the opportunity to prepare for battle on their terms, to reconnoitre enemy plans and defences, and to refine plans and hold exercises. Churchill hated the inaction. As his military biographer, Carlo D’Este, writes: “inaction was a form of military heresy to Churchill” (2009: p. 395). D’Este calls a French attack on Germany in 1939 one of the great what-ifs of the Second World War, and mentions that generals Jodl and Keitel both testified, at Neurenberg, that “their handful of divisions manning the Siegfried Line would have been no match for the 110 French divisions” (D’Este, 2009: p. 407), and Churchill seems to have felt the same way at the time. From the moment he entered the Admiralty in September 1939 he kept pushing for action. “Churchill never lost his appetite for the attack, disdaining defence as an occasional necessary evil” (D’Este, 2009: p. 394). Already as First Lord of the Admiralty, he was full of plans, but most of them came to naught because they were too impractical or dangerous or both. But his presence at Admiralty House had an electrifying effect on the previously dull and not yet too war-minded navy brass (D’Este, 2009: p. 383). When he became Prime Minister he went in full attack-mode. He took the offensive, fighting the Germans where he could, even when the military rationale was questionable. But he was intent on keeping up the pressure.

In one of his first speeches after becoming Prime Minister he explained: “You will ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, by land and air, with all our might and with all the strength God can give us” (speech in House of Commons, 13 May 1940, in: [Churchill, 2004: p. 206](#)). When Churchill held the speech, on May 13th, bombing of military and industrial targets was already underway (the first raids would be carried out on May 15th). Options for strategic bombing of Germany (read: civilian targets) were under consideration, and started in June. Also in June, Churchill gave orders to organize commando-raids against German targets in occupied Europe. The goal of the raids was to keep the pressure on the Germans, but also to end British passivity in the conduct of war. The raids would be a “visible reminder” (D’Este, 2009: p. 516) that Britain was fighting. And June was also the month in which fighting in North Africa started. Following Italy’s declaration of war on June 10th, the British army moved into Libya to capture the Italian fort of Capuzzo, which led to an Italian counteroffensive, kicking off the war in the Mediterranean, a “militarily rich mother lode that provided Churchill with an endless list of possibilities, leading him to behave, in the words of one cynic, ‘like a puppy in a fire-hydrant factory’” (D’Este, 2009: p. 552). The Mediterranean was an ideal theatre of war for Britain in the early war. This was where Churchill could fulfil his promise to fight, but without too much actual danger because in the area England had, in [Douglas Porch](#)’s words: “little to lose by fighting [...], and much to gain” (2004: p. 7). As Porch explains, a defeat in the Mediterranean would not bring Britain on its knees, while any victory would boost morale.

July 1940 saw new action, this time the already mentioned action against the French fleet anchored at Mersel-Kébir. Jock Colville noted in his diary that the reactions were “favourable”, and that there was a “strange admiration for force everywhere today” (Colville, 2005: p. 153), a sentiment that Churchill had apparently picked up.

Churchill’s military strategy-fight, even if only for the sake of the fight-was what Britain needed in the summer of 1940. It kept pressure on the Germans, but it also electrified the country. When the Blitz came, it hit a

people in a fighting mood, rather than a frightened mass, which may have made all the difference. The official analysis of wartime social policy mentions a “tough resilience” during the blitz (Moss, 2003: p. 334), which is a marked difference with the morale during the early days of the 1940 offensive. The British were holding out because Churchill had given them something to hold out for: to fight and beat the Germans.

Rule 11. If you push a negative hard and deep enough it will break through into its counter side.

While there is a debate about the actual troop strength, and strategic and military superiority at the beginning of World War II (e.g. May, 2000: p. 6), there can be little debate about how the German war-machine was held in awe. Dunkirk made it very clear who ruled on Europe’s mainland. And Churchill even mentioned the possibility that the British isles would be run over by the Germans, and that the struggle had to be continued from “the Empire beyond the seas” (speech in House of Commons, 4 June 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 218). Churchill was always clear about the strength and superiority of the German forces. But at the same time, he presented the German strength as a fleeting thing, that would turn against itself. The speech during the Battle of Britain, on August 20 1940, offers some very good examples of this way of reasoning.

In the beginning of the speech, Churchill painted the bleak picture of total war: “The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women, and children. The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets. Every village is fortified. Every road is barred. The front line runs through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage. These are great and distinctive changes from what many of us saw in the struggle of a quarter of a century ago” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 237). Churchill manages to turn this into a positive by saying: “There seems to be every reason to believe that this new kind of war is well suited to the genius and the resources of the British nation and the British Empire and that, once we get properly equipped and properly started, a war of this kind will be more favourable to us than the sombre mass slaughters of the Somme and Passchendaele. If it is a case of the whole nation fighting and suffering together, that ought to suit us, because we are the most united of all the nations” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 237). Hitler, Churchill seems to imply, has taken on a nation eminently capable of total war. And that is not his only mistake: “Since the Germans drove the Jews out and lowered their technical standards, our science is definitely ahead of theirs” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 237). In the same vein, Dunkirk created a military advantage, because it brought the army back in Britain: “The fact that the invasion of this Island upon a large scale has become a far more difficult operation with every week that has passed since we saved our Army at Dunkirk” (speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 245).

Throughout the speeches British blessings in the disguise of German military success can be found, but Churchill used them sparingly. If every German success would be converted into a British advantage it would soon become a cheap rhetoric trick. But by using the trick in moderation, it created the semblance of a balanced and forthright account.

Rule 13. Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

Churchill’s speeches made one thing very clear: the fight was with Hitler personally. “If Herr Hitler does not make war, there will be no war. No one else is going to make war. Britain and France are determined to shed no blood except in self-defence or in defence of their Allies” (broadcast to the US from London, 8 August 1939, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 193). This was always the typical counterpoint in Churchill’s speeches: England versus Hitler, not England versus Germany or England versus the German people. Alinsky’s intention with this rule was that it prevents the players in complex organizations like modern governments to shift blame elsewhere. In Churchill’s case, the focus on “Herr Hitler” was a consequence of his view on German politics, or politics in general for that matter. The writer of two major biographies, and of multiple biographical sketches, Churchill was a follower of Carlyle’s, who famously said that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men”. For Churchill it was Hitler, and Hitler alone, who steered Germany’s course. So, targeting Hitler was not really a conscious choice, but followed from Churchill’s own premises. Yet, the effect was that Hitler became a frozen target, with unprecedented benefits for wartime propaganda. As any other war, the Second World War was a complex geopolitical event, but Churchill removed all the politics—and with it all possible debate—from the war, and gave it a simple goal: to remove Hitler. That the Second World War seemed such a simple, just war in Britain has much to do with Churchill’s focus on Hitler alone. It even gave Churchill a possibility to explain away what could be a politically damaging move, accepting the Soviet Union as an ally after Operation Barbarossa, the German attack on Russia. Churchill said that “if Hitler invaded hell, I would at least make a favourable

reference to the devil in the House of Commons” (Jenkins, 2002: p. 552). Hitler was worse than the devil; it was as simple as that. The attractive simplicity of this position can only be appreciated in comparison with the political mood in other countries. In the United States Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union forced politicians and the public to choose between Hitler and Stalin, and not every American instantly favoured Stalin (Doenecke, 2000: p. 212). Germany’s fight against communism was also an important reason why collaborationist regimes, such as Petain’s in France, retained support until the very end. But in Britain, thanks to Churchill, the war seemed depoliticized. It was all about removing Hitler, the carpet-eating madman, the former lance corporal with one testicle (as a popular wartime song claimed).

Rules not followed

Of course, as with most ideal-types, there is no perfect match. Not all “rules” can be found in Churchill’s speeches. Most unexpected is this for rule 5, which states that ‘Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon’. Although Churchill’s wit and sarcasm are widely known, ridiculing and mocking Hitler is a strategy he starts to employ relatively late in the war. In the early speeches there is an occasional “Herr Hitler”—of course Hitler was not a gentleman—or “corporal Hitler”, but usually descriptions of Hitler and his politics are descriptions such as this: “Hitler is a monster of wickedness, insatiable in his lust for blood and plunder. Not content with having all Europe under his heel, or else terrorized into various forms of abject submission, he must now carry his work of butchery and desolation among the vast multitudes of Russia and of Asia” (BBC broadcast, June 22nd 1941, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 290), said Churchill on June 22nd, the day after Operation Barbarossa had started. That can hardly be described as ridicule. Later, mockery would enter the speeches, like in a speech after operations in North Africa ended: “the African war is over. Mussolini’s African Empire and Corporal Hitler’s strategy are alike exploded” (speech to Joint Session of Congress, Washington D.C., 19 May 1943, in: Churchill, 2004: p. 351). But overall, especially in the early war period, ridicule was not a weapon Churchill employed. Perhaps Churchill thought the situation too serious to use humour as a weapon (which could explain why he started using it later in the war). Churchill was also more a master of the impromptu riposte, which one does not find in prepared speeches of course.

Other rules that do not seem to be applicable are the following. Rule 6: a good tactic is one that your people enjoy. Of course no tactic in war can, in the end, be enjoyable. The military was fighting, or shipping out, and the able part of the population was volunteering as Air Raid Wardens and Home Guards, children were evacuated. There was presumably very little to be enjoyed. Rule 7: a tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. The timing, nor the actual choice of tactics, was under Churchill’s exclusive control. Rule 9: the threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself. In the sense that action was to be preferred over the long wait of the Phony War, this might be applicable, but Churchill did not make the decision to start the war—that choice was Hitler’s. Rule 12: the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative. Given Britain’s predicament in the summer of 1940, there were not, many opportunities to develop alternative courses of action.

6. Churchill’s Effectiveness

The speeches worked. The Mass Observation Reports occasionally asked people to respond to a speech. “He was real [sic] good, wasn’t he? Makes you feel strong, that’s what I like about him” (M.O. report 16-7-1940) said one woman. Another commented: “I did feel we won’t cave in” (M.O. report 16-7-1940). There was a difference in response between men and women. While men were generally positive, women also made negative comments: “He made me miserable and he’s depressed everyone I know” (M.O. report 16-7-1940).

In further Mass Observation Reports there is, however, an important indication that not only the speeches were an important source of his success. Also his political independence was an important resource. In November 1940 Churchill accepted the leadership of the Conservative Party. Up to that moment he had just been the head of the national government. And before that he had been a maverick politician for most of the 1930s. Apparently this independence was a source of trust. The loss of independence, as it was perceived, was negatively commented on: “Bad. He could do much more without being shackled by politics” (M.O. Report 20-11-1940, page 5). And: “He was much better independent-head of the National Government. He should have stayed that way” (M.O. Report 20-11-1940, page 5).

7. Conclusion

Churchill did not knowingly use Alinsky’s rules, nor could he have. They were not formulated and published

until the publication of *Rules for Radicals* in 1971. Yet, the congruence in method between Churchill's speeches and Alinsky's rules is too large to ignore, and one could conclude that Churchill in 1940 acted as Britain's "community-organizer-in-chief".

In a way that is not surprising, as the psychological states of Britons in early 1940 and of Alinsky's disenfranchised communities were similar. Of course the scale was vastly different, a country versus urban communities, but the sense of desperation, powerlessness and resignation were similar. Churchill's speeches lifted Britain from this state and created a sense of defiance. Of course this is widely acknowledged, but looking at Churchill's speeches through the lens of Alinsky's rules shows how this worked in detail.

Most important is that Churchill created a familiar experience out of an unprecedented disaster. Britain had not experienced the threat of war and invasion at home, but Churchill made it seem a common British experience. Islanders were always under threat of invasion, and in the case of Britain it had always failed, was his message. Churchill also broke through the mental stalemate of the Phony War. War meant action, attack, wherever the enemy could be hit at a given moment.

It is tempting to see Churchill as a political genius, or to call him a great communicator. He was of course an unusual politician, but the strategy he used was neither conscious nor planned. It must have come intuitively. Furthermore, the success of his speeches was more like a very lucky coincidence. In the 1930s Churchill, with the same opinions, and the same tone and technique in his speeches, had been banished to the political wilderness, because he was hopelessly out of touch. He warned that Germany was rearming, and that a new war was unavoidable, and he was right, but he wasn't listened to. That did not prompt him to change his style of communication; he probably couldn't, because he was just being himself. And once the initial shock of the German attack and threat of invasion in the summer of 1940 wore off, people began becoming more critical of Churchill. The criticism was related to Churchill becoming the leader of the Conservatives, so he was less trusted from the moment he became more of an ordinary politician. His outsider-status in the summer of 1940 was an important asset; after all, the "ordinary" politicians had ignored the German threat and created Munich. But one cannot stay a maverick and run the government at the same time. That was a fundamental problem Churchill could not solve. So when he was new and fresh, and did not seem to be a party-politician people trusted his words. But that was a fleeting moment. The circumstances for Churchill as a leader were perfect in the summer of 1940. After that it went downhill, all the way until the post-war general election, when there was no need for a maverick anymore.

What this case makes clear is that successful leadership is tied to circumstances. Churchill in 1940 was not that much different from the earlier or the later Churchill. His low tolerance of military inaction was as big in 1915 as in 1940. In 1915 it led to the disastrous Gallipoli-campaign. In 1940 his military activism electrified the nation. In 1915 it finished him as a politician, in 1940 it made him as a politician, because this time his voice had the tone that matched the situation. Same man, same action, vastly different circumstances. It is hard not to conclude that there are no great leaders, just great circumstances.

8. Archival Material

M.O.: Mass Observation Reports, kept in Mass Observation Repository at the University of Sussex.

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