

# Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*: The outbreak of World War II without history or politics

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**“Only the hopelessly blind are capable of believing that the British and French generals and admirals are waging a war against fascism!”  
– Leon Trotsky, May 1940**

British director Christopher Nolan's new film, *Dunkirk*, is about the famed evacuation of large numbers of British and French troops from northern France in May-June 1940.

Following the German military's rapid sweep westward to the Channel that began May 10, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and its allies found themselves cut off and surrounded along a narrow strip of coastline in France and Belgium. In “Operation Dynamo,” which lasted from May 26 to June 4, some 340,000 soldiers were evacuated to Britain. Many small boats played a part in the rescue, crossing the channel from southern England and either ferrying men from the beaches and breakwater in Dunkirk—six miles from the Belgian border—to larger vessels or conveying them directly to British ports.

Nolan's film comprises three portions, “Land,” “Sea” and “Air,” which, we are told, last different lengths of time (one week, one day and one hour, respectively) and which overlap.

In “Land,” Tommy (Fionn Whitehead) is a young member of a British army unit that comes under fire from unseen German forces in the streets of Dunkirk. He is the only one to survive, and makes his way to the beach, where tens of thousands of soldiers are stranded. He eventually teams up with “Gibson” (Aneurin Barnard), who turns out to be French, and Alex (Harry Styles). This section of the film concerns the various increasingly desperate efforts of Tommy and the others to find a vessel that will remove them from danger.

Mr. Dawson (Mark Rylance), in “Sea,” owns a small boat commandeered by the Royal Navy as part of the evacuation effort. But he, his son Peter (Tom Glynn-Carney) and their 17-year-old deck hand, George (Barry Keoghan), decide to take the boat across the Channel themselves, rather than have a navy crew perform the task. En route they pick up a shell-shocked British soldier (Cillian Murphy) whose ship was sunk by a German U-boat. When he learns that Dawson is steering his boat toward Dunkirk, not away from it, the soldier grows violent.

The “Air” portion follows two Royal Air Force pilots, Farrier (Tom Hardy) and Collins (Jack Lowden), as they engage German aircraft in the skies over Dunkirk. The Luftwaffe has had a relatively free hand, attacking British ships and boats and also bombing the men on the beach. The job of Farrier and Collins is to offer protection to the forces on the ground. Collins is forced to ditch his plane in the sea and hope for the best. Farrier continues, but his fuel may be running low.

There are some visually arresting moments in Nolan's *Dunkirk*. The air battle sequences are certainly striking. The cinematography as a whole is sumptuous, the camera picks up natural and human details in great depth.

The Dawson-Rylance sequence is the film's most memorable, because it involves a certain dramatic development (and includes Rylance's own restrained, intelligent performance). There is something genuinely tragic in George's fate. Here is a young man who volunteers to help rescue

soldiers from Dunkirk, but then is seriously injured by one of those, a man who himself has been terribly damaged. ...

Aside from that, there is very little here. “Land” and “Air” have a minimum of dialogue, none that is memorable, in any case. As the film goes along, the “Land” segment increasingly (and tediously) resembles a disaster film of a formulaic type, with the characters forced to escape a series of potentially fatal situations.

The film's overall tone is inconsistent. Nolan mentions his admiration for the films of Terrence Malick. Unfortunately, Nolan does not seem to be inspired by the best of Malick's work, especially certain sequences in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), but rather by the American filmmaker's most recent films, in which characters wander around aimlessly in a desolate, Heideggerian universe. Portions of Nolan's new film reproduce that sort of ambience. Then, out of the blue, the music swells and British “pluck” and heroism saves the day. It doesn't truly add up.

*Dunkirk* is not a war drama in any traditional sense, and not simply because the 1940 incident in question was not so much a battle or series of battles, but a historic defeat, a gigantic retreat.

Numerous US and British films about World War II, for better or worse, focused on a small unit of men, generally an ethnic or class “cross-section” of the population. Frequently, such works included a character (or characters) who at first exhibits selfishness or individualism, or paralyzing fear, but who learns in the course of combat—in other words, under the most fateful conditions—the necessity of subordinating himself to the needs of the group, of self-sacrifice, if necessary, in the interests of the “greater good.” Films produced during the war or in its immediate aftermath took into account—and often shared—the overwhelming popular hostility to fascism and dictatorship by making “democracy” and opposition to tyranny the principal causes ultimately worth fighting and dying for.

Nolan rids himself of this burden by having no discussions about the war and its causes and legitimacy or otherwise. As young as the central characters may be, they have still lived through the Depression and other traumatic events. They would have political opinions of some kind. No character raises questions about the scale or source of the catastrophe inflicted on the British military, which had emerged supposedly triumphant from the First World War a little more than two decades earlier. In fact, nobody says much of anything.

Leslie Norman's *Dunkirk* (1958), based in part on *The Big Pick-Up* by Elleston Trevor (1955), is a stuffy, conventional-patriotic film on the evacuation, featuring a number of prominent, dependable British performers of the time, including John Mills, Richard Attenborough, Bernard Lee and Robert Urquhart. Despite its severe limitations, however, Norman's film at least feels obligated, from the opening sequence onward, to point to the unpreparedness (contrary to government and media claims at the time, which are openly mocked) and scale of the Dunkirk disaster.

The first *Dunkirk* aside, there were war films in the 1950s and 1960s (

*The Dam Busters, The Man Who Never Was, The Bridge on the River Kwai, Battle Cry, Attack, A Time to Love and a Time to Die, The Young Lions, Sink the Bismarck!, The Guns of Navarone, Hell to Eternity, The Longest Day, Merrill's Marauders, The Great Escape, The Thin Red Line, The Train* and others) that attempted, with varying degrees of success, to make political and military—and psychological—sense of the Second World War.

Contemporary filmmakers, unhappily, no longer bother themselves with mundanities such as “explanations”—one of the words generally placed in quotation marks—for historical events. They have largely moved beyond such concerns.

The German military victories in May-June 1940 over the BEF and the subsequent collapse of France's Third Republic and setting up of the collaborationist Vichy regime are not small matters.

Following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and the declaration of war by Britain and France against the Hitler regime two days later, no major operations took place in Europe until May 1940 when German forces attacked France, Belgium and Holland. British and French forces had waited passively for eight months. The French military was rampant with “defeatism,” while the British political establishment was rent by divisions. The figure most identified with “appeasement” of the Nazis, Neville Chamberlain, remained prime minister until May 10, 1940, when he was replaced by Winston Churchill.

The victory of Hitler's military forces in the spring of 1940 expressed, on the one hand, “the corruption of imperialist democracy, even in the sphere of its own tasks,” in Leon Trotsky's words. Both the British and French ruling elites were riddled with pro-Nazi elements (including the recently abdicated king of England, Edward VIII), who viewed Hitlerism as the strongest defense against Bolshevism and social revolution.

The capitulation of France, Trotsky explained, “is not a simple military episode. It is part of the catastrophe of Europe. ... Hitler is not an accident; he is only the most consistent and the most bestial expression of imperialism, which threatens to crush our whole civilization.”

On the other hand, the German military triumphs demonstrated the terrible results of Stalinist betrayals for the European and international working class. After five years of propagandizing about “people's fronts” and creating illusions in the various “democracies,” the Soviet regime shifted to Hitler's side in 1939 and “paralyzed the military power” of the Western powers, Trotsky wrote. “In spite of all the machines of destruction, the moral factor retains decisive importance in the war. By demoralizing the popular masses in Europe, and not solely in Europe, Stalin played the role of an agent provocateur in the service of Hitler. The capitulation of France is one of the results of such politics.”

It goes without saying that not merely Trotsky's surgically precise commentary, but any semi-serious approach to the outbreak of the second, calamitous imperialist war, is a closed book for most present-day writers and directors.

Nolan's silence or “abstentionism” on historical issues is not a step forward from Norman's efforts, it merely expresses incapacity in the face of complex questions.

The filmmaker has made various comments indicating his conscious decision to exclude history and politics from *Dunkirk*, to reduce it, as noted above, to the level of a banal “disaster movie.”

He told a French publication, for example, “It is less a war film than a survival driven by suspense. ... The empathy for the characters has nothing to do with their story. I did not want to go through the dialogue, tell the story of my characters. The problem is not who they are, who they pretend to be or where they come from. The only question I was interested in was: Will they get out of it? Will they be killed by the next bomb while trying to join the mole? Or will they be crushed by a boat while crossing?”

Empathy for a character “has nothing to do with their story”? The problem is not “who they are”? So one ought to feel the same for an SS

man waiting for transport, fresh from the massacre at Le Paradis or Wormhoudt, as one does for an English or Scottish youth, a victim of the Depression and the global ambitions of British imperialism, in a similar situation? Nolan ought to be embarrassed for having said that the “only question I was interested in was: Will they get out of it?” but he probably is not.

Joshua Levine's *Dunkirk: The History Behind the Major Motion Picture* has been published to accompany the release of Nolan's film. Levine explains that assistant director Nilo Otero thinks “the fact that Chris [Nolan] has not chosen to give a history lesson and has told the Dunkirk story as a survival movie, adds to its impact. ‘When you're in the middle of what turns out to be history, you don't know it's history.’”

“Chris hopes,” writes Levine, “that by distilling history into a personal experience for the audience, the film will become something of a Rorschach test. He does not want political interpretations to be forced on the audience. That is not something that interests him. ... [H]e wants to make a universal film that places us in the shoes of the protagonists. That way, he says, ‘people will find the Dunkirk that they want to find.’” What about finding the real Dunkirk?

Of course, many of the participants in the Dunkirk drama *did* know what they were doing, or had some idea of it. Many ordinary Britons were reacting to the threat from Hitler and fascism while their government and the establishment as a whole were downplaying the dangers. After all, the British working class had suffered horribly at the hands of its own ruling class during the 1930s and was malnourished, rebellious and hostile.

Indeed, one of the questions about the Dunkirk episode that has never been satisfactorily answered is why Hitler ordered a halt for several days to his tank attacks, which very likely could have annihilated the British forces. There are those who argue the fascist leader felt it was not in the Nazis' long-term interest to wipe out the British army, both because he still had hopes of reaching an accommodation with London and because he feared the possibility of social revolution in Britain.

In the *Telegraph*, Nolan comments, “I knew I didn't want to make a film that could be dismissed as old-fashioned, something that wasn't relevant to today's audiences. ... What that ruled out for me immediately was getting bogged down in the politics of the situation. We don't have generals in rooms pushing things around on maps. We don't see Churchill. We barely glimpse the enemy.”

Again, one has to rub one's eyes. The Battle of France was one of the first great episodes of World War II, a titanic political event of the twentieth century. One of the most popular aphorisms about war, widely treated as a truism, belongs to Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” For Nolan, however, war represents no continuation whatsoever, it exists in a separate realm.

Unseriousness about history combines with lack of knowledge, all of it justified on the grounds that only individual, subjective perceptions of reality are possible.

In his book, Levine comments, “For every individual who stood on the beach [at Dunkirk] or on the mole [breakwater], or retreated clinging to a cow, there was a different reality. Set side by side, these realities often contradict each other.” Nolan adds, “I think the film is very much based on that same assessment of the illusive nature of individual subjective experience defining objective reality. Which is a connecting thread with all the films I've ever made. They are all about individual experiences, potential contradictions with objective reality, and the film tries very strongly to leave space for the seemingly infinite number of experiences and stories that would contradict each other or comment on each other in different ways.”

In other words: history-telling is the summing up of individual experiences or narratives, each of which potentially contradicts all the rest. Each is equally valid and presumably invalid. No one can know he or she is making history at any given moment, or even know where he or she

is politically or historically located. “History” forms itself afterward through the impositions of ideologues. Attempts at writing objective history are often actually malicious, aimed against “ordinary people” whose lives and feelings are dismissed. The most profound approach is history through anecdote, presenting as accurately and sincerely as possible individual experiences.

Inevitably, the “timeless” approach results in abstract, formless human characters and events. It helps explain the generally tepid, dull character of the drama. When all else fails, and the filmmaker senses that audiences might lose interest, he turns to misanthropy and violence, at least on the part of the lower ranks. Meanwhile, Kenneth Branagh as Commander Bolton, the “pier-master” during the evacuation, remains cool and serene, pledging in the film’s final moments to remain at his post and oversee the departure of the remaining French forces.

Conventionality all down the line. Contemporary subjectivism, the film’s “innovative” characteristic, in fact, co-exists comfortably with the most conformist and nationalistic views. This even extends to the decision not to represent any German soldiers, as though they were aliens and this were a horror film.

In sum, *Dunkirk* is a film from which one learns next to nothing about the eruption of World War II. It has been shot and released at a time of extraordinary global tension, when the outbreak of a third world war is the most serious threat facing humanity. Does that not seem intellectually irresponsible?



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