FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF the twenty-first century, the Allied victory in the Second World War seems inevitable. It is clear now that the enormous productive capacities of the Soviet and American war economies were bound to overthrow Nazi Germany eventually. And we know now that if there had been significant setbacks in this process the atomic bomb in the hands of the United States would have settled the matter sometime in 1945.

However, none of this was apparent in 1940. In that year Stalin was supplying Hitler with enormous quantities of war materiel, the United States was steadfastly neutral, and the atomic bomb existed only as an equation on the back of an envelope. In 1940 the only major power fighting Germany was Britain. Had Britain collapsed and Europe become Nazified, the future of the West would have been very bleak. This book, then, deals with that period when Allied victory looked anything but inevitable, a period indeed when the war might have been lost.

There are some excellent books on Britain and 1940 but most only deal with one aspect of the war: Stephen Bungay on the Battle of Britain, Juliet Gardiner on the Blitz, John Lukacs on Churchill.¹ There are some more general studies. There is Lawrence Thompson, 1940: Year of Legend, Year of History.² This is an excellent book but it is dated and was written at a time when many official records were not available. There is also the bilious effort by Clive Ponting, 1940: Myth and Reality, which attempts to

destroy myths but manages to mangle realities that were never mythic in the first place.³ A more modern study by Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory*,⁴ is a good social history of the period with an interesting chapter on the influence of '1940' on subsequent British history, but it does not address the military and political issues that are the focus of this book.

In this book I want to approach the period from a slightly different angle. Here I will consider only those crises in 1940 that had the potential to affect the existence of Britain as an independent state. This approach focuses attention on the possibility that if events had played out differently Britain might well have been defeated or reduced to servitude. Many events that happened in 1940 have, with this emphasis, largely been excluded. Some of these events are of minor importance anyway. Nothing much hung on the success or failure of the Dakar expedition in July of that year. The Western Desert, while it was to become significant, had not yet attained that stature by 1940.

Other exclusions require a more detailed explanation. The Norway campaign has found no place here. The chapters were written but then reluctantly discarded. The war in Norway certainly served as a reminder to Britain that the navy would find it difficult to operate without air cover, especially at a distance from British shores. It also exposed some shocking incompetence in military planning and war-making machinery. But the loss of Norway did not affect Britain directly. Its importance to this book and why a little background is given here is that it brought on a debate that ended with the ousting of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Another important exclusion is the Battle of the Atlantic. It was under way in 1940 and 1941, and Britain was starting to feel the pressure of the cargoes and ships lost to submarines. But the battle had not entered the deadly phase of 1942–3. It is dealt with to the extent necessary in the chapter on Britain and the United States with which the book concludes, because it did affect relations between the two states in our period.

The subjects dealt with here are only those that threatened to end Britain's role in the war, one way or another. These are numerous enough. I start with a depiction of the Chamberlain government, which by the lacklustre way it waged war was in itself a danger to Britain. Then I proceed through the political crises of May 1940 – the replacement of Chamberlain with Churchill

and the attack on Churchill's policy by Lord Halifax and (on occasion) Chamberlain. The next crisis concerns the fate of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Would it manage the only manoeuvre left to it – a retreat – and would it return to Britain? Then follows the threat of a Nazi invasion and the Battle of Britain, which are in many ways – but not all – interrelated. Finally the ordeal of the Blitz is investigated to examine how close British 'morale' came to collapse and whether the Germans were making serious inroads into Britain's war-making capacity. There are also two large issues regarding Britain's ally – France – and its putative ally – the United States – to be dealt with. Did Britain, despite Dunkirk, make every effort to aid France in the campaign of May–June 1940 or was it merely concerned with its own defence? And how was it that Churchill's pleas for America to enter the war fell on deaf ears? In the course of these chapters the question of whether Britain did fight this period of the Second World War alone will be addressed.

In shaping the book in this fashion I also seek to draw attention to two other issues. The first is the nature of the war had Britain been defeated or withdrawn into a sullen peace with Hitler. Without delving too far into speculation or counter-factual history, I find it difficult to imagine what might have happened. Would Hitler have defeated Russia without Britain to contend with? Would an American reconquest of Europe from the Nazis have occurred without an offshore base? Fortunately, it is not necessary to answer these questions to see how important it was that Britain continued the fight against Hitler.

By taking this approach I also want to highlight the nature of the struggle in 1940. Britain was a class-ridden society with many imperfections. It was also a liberal democracy that stood for the rule of law, representative institutions, tolerance or 'decency' to use George Orwell's word. And Britain was all that stood between Hitler and at the very least the domination of Europe.

On the other side, the Nazis had stamped out the rule of law in Germany, based their policy on racial hatred, wiped out minority dissent, and excluded altogether groups such as Jews, Romani, communists and homosexuals from civil society. If it stood for anything in 1940, Germany stood for war and aggression even against those it had already conquered. And the more it conquered the more it could persecute and spread its vile policies throughout Europe.

The war in the West is not usually portrayed in such black and white terms. It is not that historians have identified any aspects of Nazi Germany that are laudable. It is more that in 1940 the full horror of Nazi policies had not yet revealed itself. But the snuffing out of Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands and most of France was atrocious enough. And the persecution of groups within all those countries was well under way in 1940. This was already not just an old-fashioned war for the acquisition of territory – it was racial war as well.

In 1940 the West stood on the brink of oblivion and perhaps this is the place to say what I mean by the West. It is, in general terms, the group of countries where the state seeks to uphold these values of the Enlightenment – political diversity, freedom of speech, the rule of law, tolerance of minorities. These states are not ruled by religious dogma but are largely secular in outlook. That these states contain many imperfections is beyond question. Some groups within the West have never accepted the values of the Enlightenment. Aspects of the secular state are under attack at present. The West has also made many egregious errors in the fields of foreign, environmental and humanitarian policy, any one of which may yet destroy it. But the West has also been the location of Churchill's 'broad sunlit uplands', the only region in the world where a relatively decent life can be lived free from fear and oppression.

Could it be argued that Germany was still fundamentally part of the West? I reject this view because I believe that it seriously underestimates the almost inconceivable horror lying at the heart of Nazi Germany. Britain was not fighting the land of Goethe, Kant or Beethoven. It was fighting Nazism, and Nazism was not merely a perversion of the Enlightenment like communism; it was its negation. Hitler well understood this. He often referred to 'the West' in entirely oppositional terms. He did not consider Germany to be part of this entity, nor did he want his regime to be thought of as Western.

The sources that underpin the writing of this book represented a considerable challenge. They are immense. The War Cabinet Conclusions and those of its affiliated committees (especially the Defence Committee and the Chiefs of Staff Committee) and the papers that are attached to these committees alone would fill a small room. In addition we have the Admiralty Papers, vital for invasion policy and Dunkirk, the War Office Papers that are also vital for invasion preparations, Dunkirk and the retreat

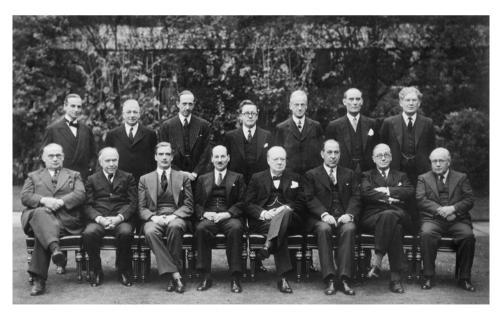
of the BEF, and the papers of Fighter Command which in their detail threaten to overwhelm any study of the Battle of Britain. For the Blitz the papers of the Home Security Department are voluminous but essential, as are the myriad of diaries and letters of those who lived through it. The papers of the Ministry of Information and those of Mass Observation are also essential to gauge at least how public officials and professional snoopers thought 'the people' were coping with the bombing.

In addition to these official or semi-official papers are collections of private papers of individuals. The huge collection in the Churchill Papers is thankfully online but time-consuming to use. There are also large collections of private papers associated with figures such as Eden, Chamberlain, Roosevelt and many others identified in the bibliography.

Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming nature of the sources I can claim that most of this book is based on their solid foundation. Where possible I have used original documents in preference to published collections. An exception is the Roosevelt–Churchill correspondence, which has been so expertly edited by Warren Kimball. This study also owes a debt to the labours of many other historians on whose work I have frequently drawn. Their contribution to this book will, I hope, be obvious from the endnotes.



 $1\,$ Chamberlain and Halifax with the Italians at Munich, 1938. This was the group that Halifax wanted to meet in 1940 to discuss peace terms.



2 The key players in the Cabinet Crisis of May 1940, apart from Churchill are Attlee, Greenwood, Halifax and Chamberlain, with Archie Sinclair having a walk-on part. Note the absence of Chamberlain and Halifax.



3 Bren Gun Carriers of the 13/18 Hussars near Arras.



 $4\,$ Matilda Tanks of the 4th Royal Tank Regiment. This unit would shock the German command in the Arras counter-attack on 21 May.



 $5\,$ British Tanks cross into Belgium, $10\,$ May 1940 thus implementing the first phase of the disastrous Plan D.



6 Lord Gort and his nominal superior, General Georges inspect British troops. Gort soon found the French command structure chaotic and ineffectual.



7 Devastation at Dunkirk. Nevertheless, the bulk of the BEF escaped capture.



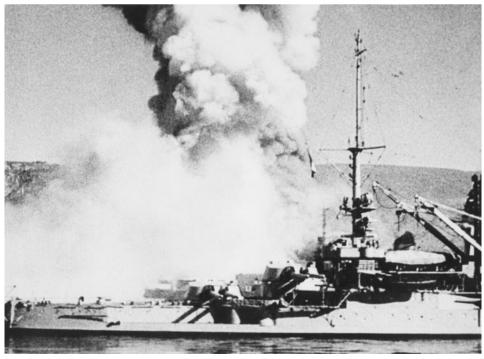
8 Officers of the Royal Ulster Rifles awaiting evacuation from an improvised pier at Bray Dunes.



9 British troops boarding a destroyer at the Mole, Dunkirk.



10 Paul Reynaud in 1940. The French Premier was overwhelmed by the crisis that destroyed the Third Republic.



11 The destruction of the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kebir.



12 Concrete blocks at a bridge on the GHQ Line.



13 Britain's answer to a Panzer Division, June 1940.



14 How British ships were guarded whilst in port.



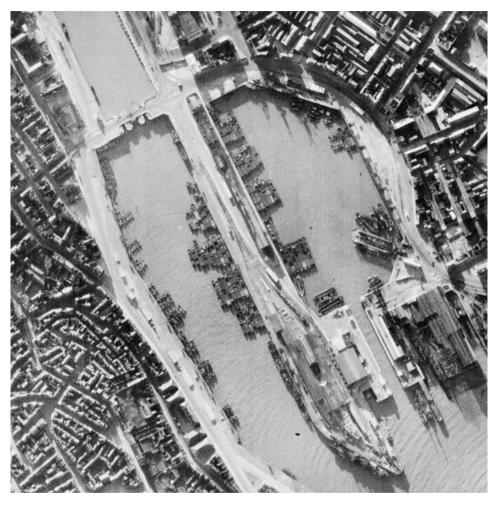
 $15\,$ Winston Churchill meets in fantrymen manning coast defences, July 1940. No aspect of invasion planning escaped the eye of the Prime Minister.



16 Invasion Planning Conference at the Berghof, July 1940. Hitler and Admiral Raeder in discussion with Field Marshal Brauchitsch and General Jodl.



17 Troops of the Australian 6th Division cross Westminster Bridge, June 1940. Troops from Australia, Canada and New Zealand were given key roles in British invasion planning.



18 Sea Lion: a chilling photograph of German invasion barges at Boulogne.



19 Hurricanes of 85 Squadron. Note the three plane 'Vic' or 'V' formations.



20 Spitfires of 65 Squadron taking off from a grass strip at Hornchurch, August 1940.





21 Sir Keith Park. His tactical genius ensured that his pilots won the Battle of Britain.

22 Sir Hugh Dowding. His cautious strategy meant that the Battle of Britain could not have been lost.



23 After the raid on Coventry, 14/15 November 1940.



24 Defiance in the London Blitz.



 $25\,$ Normal services will be resumed. Men of the London Electric Supply Corporation at an air raid site.



26 A defused parachute mine in Glasgow, March 1941. Its great size made this one of the most feared German bombs.



27 Herman Goering addresses German pilots during the Battle of Britain. The head of the Luftwaffe failed to develop a plan to defeat the RAF.



28 Henry Morgenthau Jr. Roosevelt's treasurer demanded all aid for Britain but at a price.



29 Harold Ickes. Roosevelt's Minister for Labor was shocked at his chief's supine attitude towards aid to Britain.



30 Not yet a Special Relationship. Roosevelt talked tough but did little to aid Britain in this period.