

Second World War: Sifting Sources



Recommended for

History, English

Learning objectives

- Gather information from a range of contemporary reports about Operation Dynamo.
- Compare and contrast sources, considering how and why their presentation of events may differ.

Time to complete

Approx. 30 minutes



Students can use contemporary newspapers to explore different interpretations of the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Summary

Historical sources provide vital information that modern-day researchers can use to understand a historical event. In this activity, students will examine contemporary British, German and French newspaper reports describing the events of Operation Dynamo, comparing and contrasting perspectives of the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Suggested approach

Give students copies of the American, British, French and German newspaper articles on pages 56–59 of this kit. These date from 30–31 May, in the middle of Operation Dynamo. You may also find it useful to provide access to maps of northern France and Belgium to help students follow the events being reported on.

Divide students into pairs or small groups of three or four. They will examine the reports for key information (successes, defeats and outcomes). They could use different colours to highlight positive and negative language and phrasing. You can extend the activity by looking for additional clues relating to each country's circumstances in 1940. For example, the United States was not yet involved in the conflict and so American newspapers weren't bound by censors and could report on events a day earlier than European publications.

Students should discuss similarities and differences between the reports before comparing them with the historical information in this kit (pages 10–17) written by English Heritage experts. You can find more detail by searching the English Heritage website for 'Operation Dynamo'.

Come together as a class to share students' findings and discuss each newspaper's national context. What influence may this have had on the way that the war was reported in the press and how could this inform how we view evidence from historical sources more generally?

More learning ideas

Students can use their source-reading skills to appraise other extracts and images in this kit.

The New York Times.

New York, Thursday, May 30, 1940

ALLIES ABANDONNING FLANDERS, FLOOD YSER AREA; A RESCUE FLEET AT DUNKERQUE; FOE POUNDS PORT; ONE FORCE CUT OFF FROM THE SEA AS LILLE FALLS

Nazis tighten trap

They drive a line across pocket, encircling foes in south

Say Ypres is taken

Zeebrugge and Ostend fall – large stores are reported seized ...

The international situation on the battle fronts

The Battle of Flanders became yesterday a wholly rear-guard action, with the Allies trying to evacuate as many as possible of the troops caught in the German pocket. The trapped men fought on “desperately but not despairingly.” Paris reported.

The port of Dunkerque was still in Allied hands (although the Germans reported its embarkation area in ruins), as was Nieuport, just above the Belgian border. Ships were said to be waiting at the coast to take off the men who could get to them, although how they stayed afloat in the torrent of German bombing seemed a mystery. The British and French fleets were furiously bombarding German forces on the Channel, hoping to cover withdrawal. The task of evacuation was made doubly difficult by a German force that, Paris reported, had straddled the Franco-Belgian

border near Cassel and Mount Kermannel. The French said that defence floodgates had been opened, inundating part of the area west of the Yser. On other fronts the French asserted that they had eliminated a German bridgehead on the Somme west of Amiens and had repulsed a German thrust near Rethel on the left flank of the invaders. The desperate situation of the Allied army of the north was made evident by Berlin dispatches telling of the success of the German effort to cut the opposing forces in two. The invaders drove a wedge between the two Allied wings to the north of Lille. Thus there are now two

pockets; the forces south of Lille are completely surrounded, in a square-shaped area whose sides measure only nine to twelve miles. The pocket above Lille was greatly reduced by German advances pressing down from the north and up from the south. Early this morning shattered remnants of the British Expeditionary Force began arriving at British ports. Most of them were wounded. To the survivors still in Flanders King George sent a message saying they had displayed “gallantry that has never been surpassed in the annals of the British Army.”

A FIGHTING RETREAT

REARGUARD ACTION CONTINUES

From Our Military Correspondent

The series of magnificent rearguard actions which will be inscribed in gold in the annals of British and French arms, continued yesterday. What so many people in this country have seen with their own eyes has now been announced – namely, that under cover of these actions troops not engaged in the fighting line have been evacuated. The perimeter around Dunkirk has narrowed, and both on and outside it *is* a number of fierce more or less isolated fights are raging.

The support given to the beleaguered B.E.F. and its French comrades in arms by naval and air forces has been stronger and more effective than ever. In particular, the action of the Defiants, the

latest and most powerful of our fighters, has been devastating to the German aircraft. Nevertheless, in spite of heavy losses, the hostile bombers, escorted by fighters, returned again to the assault and it is not to be hoped that our naval and land forces can have escaped casualties.

On the southern front the Allies are still engaged in minor “mopping-up” operations, notably on the lower Somme, where the enemy still hold a bridgehead, but no large-scale attacks have taken place on either side. There are further British troops within the main French Armies south of the Somme, and, as is well known, the original bases of the B.E.F. lie behind their front and are not threatened by the German drive to the Channel ports.

Evidence continues to come through of the courage with which French civilians have faced danger and in many cases death itself in the performance of their duty during the invasion. The telephone operators stuck to their posts as long as their services were required, whatever the consequences to themselves, and many women as well as men were killed at their switchboards. The Paris buses which drove north into the war zone to bring back refugees are now mostly back on the streets, and many of them carry honourable scars in the shape of bullet holes. The veteran drivers and conductors of these vehicles are cheered by the public and given the “thumbs up” sign which the French have borrowed from us.

THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS

Last night's press release presents us with a striking picture of the heroic struggle currently being waged by the magnificent British and French troops south of Dunkirk. It would be superfluous to add anything to it.

A glance at the map allows us to appreciate the extent to which the situation of the Northern Army Group became critical when the Belgian front suddenly collapsed, and to understand the meaning of the current fighting.

The enemy found the entire plain between the coast and the Lys free. The road to Dunkirk, via Ypres and Poperinghe, was open to them. On this side the only natural obstacles are the Yser canal, punctuated by Duixmund and Ypres localities, immortalised by the admirable resistance of the Anglo-French forces in 1914, and the very course of the Yser, which passes through Rousbrugges. This surge of water only takes on a great defensive value when their valleys are flooded, but the opening of the floodgates only allows the water to spread widely after a certain amount of time...

Facing the south, the line of the Lys, which, to the north of the vast agglomeration of Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing, forms a good line of resistance, was overwhelmed to the east, in the Menin-Courtrai sector. The only position on this side for covering the direction of Dunkirk is the rectilinear line, directed from west to east, from the mountains of Flanders to Mount Cassel, to Messines ...

Dunkirk is organised as an entrenched camp. We know that the navy is doing its best, with magnificent dedication, to come to the aid of the land troops. Many small tonnage ships are cooperating in resupplying and evacuations. Although the official communiqué did not mention it, we learned from intelligence that on many occasions the warships opened fire on enemy formations advancing near the coast.

All the testimonies show us that the troops, both French and British, endured the ordeal with splendid courage. The merit of our soldiers, like those of our allies, increases as the difficulties increase ...

BRITISH AVIATORS VERSUS THE LIES ABOUT AIR COMBAT SUCCESSES

Berlin, 31. May. On the evening of May 30th Reuter London reported that more than 70 German aircraft had been destroyed and numerous others had been damaged. A bomber is said to have destroyed 35 German aircraft in two flights ...

ONLY THE RUBBLE OF FLANDERS HELL ESCAPED

Despite the destruction of the expeditionary force, London speaks of the "greatest military battle in history".

While the London intelligence service calls the fighting in Flanders the greatest military manoeuvre and while King George, who seems not to have the faintest idea of what really happened, attests to the destroyed military force's bravery, "the like of which cannot be found in the history of the British Army", the terrible extent of this tragedy becomes clear from the mouths of survivors.

An eyewitness report from a trained English soldier distributed by United Press from London provides eloquent testimony to the resilience of the German victory.

Battered wreckage of the British Expeditionary Force, the report says, began to arrive in the English harbour.

Most of the soldiers were wounded and looked pitiful. Like sleepwalkers, they made a pilgrimage to the country, bloody, covered in dirt, in torn uniforms, sometimes without shoes, shocking evidence of struggle and retreat, although the enemy had given them time to rest.

"In my worst dreams I never imagined anything like that," a soldier explained, "it was hell." During the entire battle he only saw tanks, bombs, flamethrowers and planes. "God only knows how I got back." Days after the escape, he saw that his hair had turned white.