

# THE WORLD IN FLAMES

HOW THE SECOND WORLD WAR BECAME A GLOBAL WAR







- A two-hour documentary for television in two parts for international broadcast.
- The most important debate in the twentieth century takes place in the British War Cabinet from May 24th to May 28th 1940. This is the 'hinge of fate', the moment the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, presses Churchill to allow him to explore peace terms with Germany - the closest that Hitler ever came to winning the war.
- The fall of France in May 1940 is depicted in all its agony: the arguments within the French Cabinet; the defeatism, verging on treachery, of Pétain and Weygand, the struggle of the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, against capitulation, and the attempts by Churchill to keep France in the war while retaining the essentials for Britain's own defence. The film will convey the shock of the French collapse. No one, not Hitler, not his generals, not the French High Command, not even the most pessimistic Englishman expected the third largest army in Europe to be defeated in just six weeks.
- Reflecting the nature of the world's only truly global war, the programme takes a full international perspective. It deals not only with the attitude of Britain towards her allies and adversaries, but also with the attitudes of France, Italy, the United States, the Soviet Union, India, China, Japan and Germany.
- These five days in May had consequences for the entire world. Britain did not and could not defeat Hitler single-handed. Yet Britain was the only country that could deny Hitler victory in that fateful summer. Without Britain continuing to fight, the entry into the war of the United States and the tens of millions of Russian soldiers would all have been too late.





## PROLOGUE

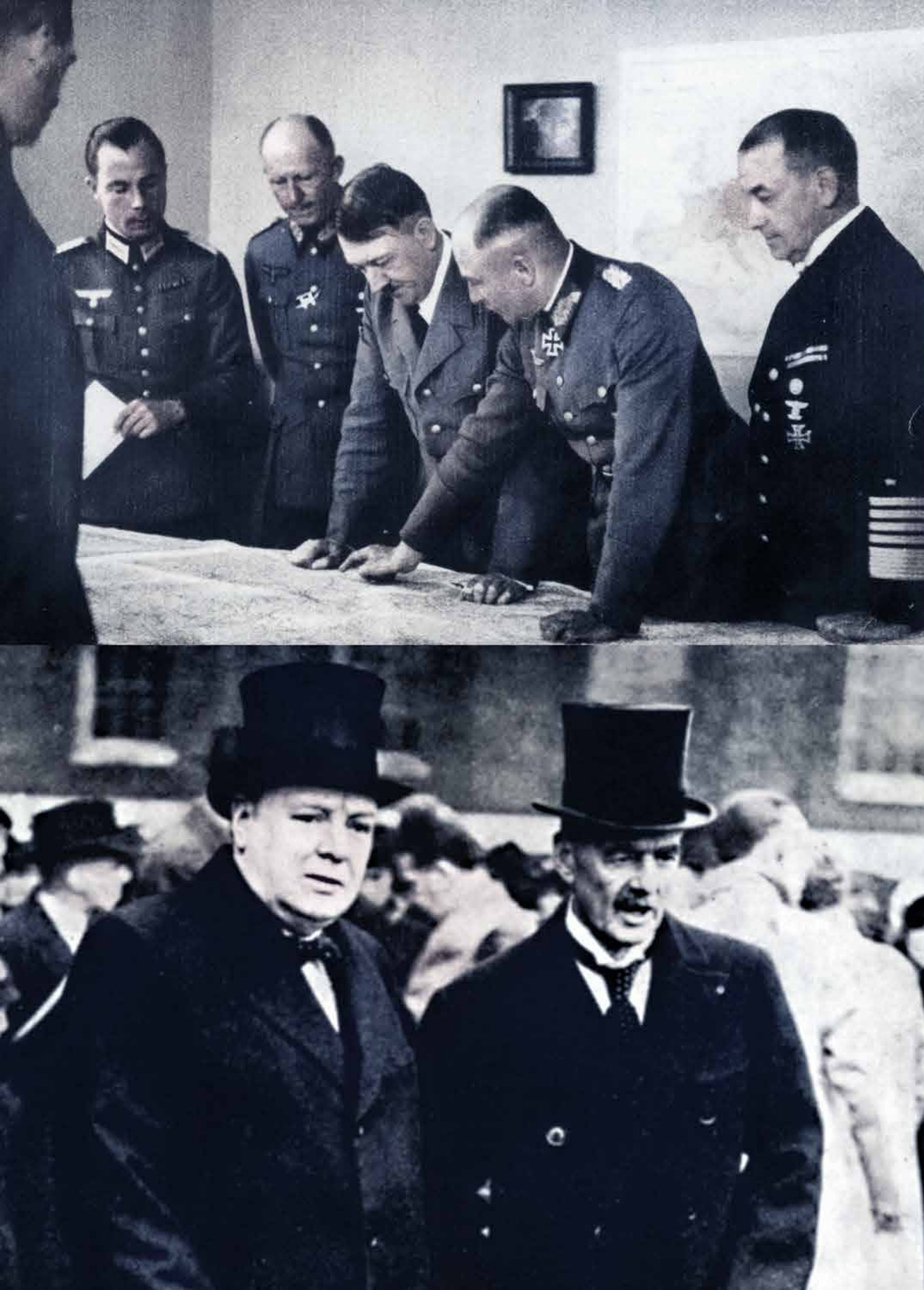
A car is speeding down a French road in June 1940. It is going dangerously fast. It is as if it is being pursued. There is a sudden sound of screeching brakes and the car drives into a tree. The beautiful companion of the driver is dead. The driver is not. The driver is unharmed.

Two weeks earlier, the driver had been in London meeting members of the British Government. Just days ago, he had been Prime Minister of France. Now, he is a man on the run; and he has just crashed his car into a tree, killing his mistress.

Hélène de Portes, the driver's mistress, was a Fascist sympathiser, who had helped sabotage her Prime Minister lover's attempts to persuade the French government to accept Churchill's last-ditch plan to unite France with Britain and work with Charles de Gaulle. According to Walter Thompson, Churchill's bodyguard, de Portes once attacked Churchill's throat with a knife.

The crash occurred just one week after the surrender of the French armies to the German blitzkrieg and the fall and subsequent defeat of France. Britain was now the only country left in the world, with its Empire, prepared to fight the Nazis.





# PART ONE

*Part One covers the events after Dunkirk when the British Cabinet considered negotiating a peace settlement with Hitler's Germany until Britain decided to carry on alone with its imperial allies. The leader of the group that favoured a settlement was Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, who went on to be British Ambassador to the United States. With use of the cabinet papers this story will be told in a dramatic way.*

Europe has fallen. The British Expeditionary Force - 235,000 men - is about to be cut off and defeated in Northern France. A huge French army is about to surrender. The British have been defeated in Norway. Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, was largely to blame.

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain is overthrown by a parliamentary vote, despite a huge Conservative majority. Halifax, a friend of the King and the choice of the Conservative Party, is expected to become Prime Minister. But ... before Halifax visits his dentist and calls Baba Metcalfe, his beautiful mistress ... he turns it down. Extraordinarily, Winston Churchill, sometimes called 'a gangster', sometimes a 'warmonger', becomes Prime Minister of a National Government with Labour Party support. Halifax, the King, and others now fear invasion and defeat. They want to explore a peace treaty with Hitler. The army in France may be lost.



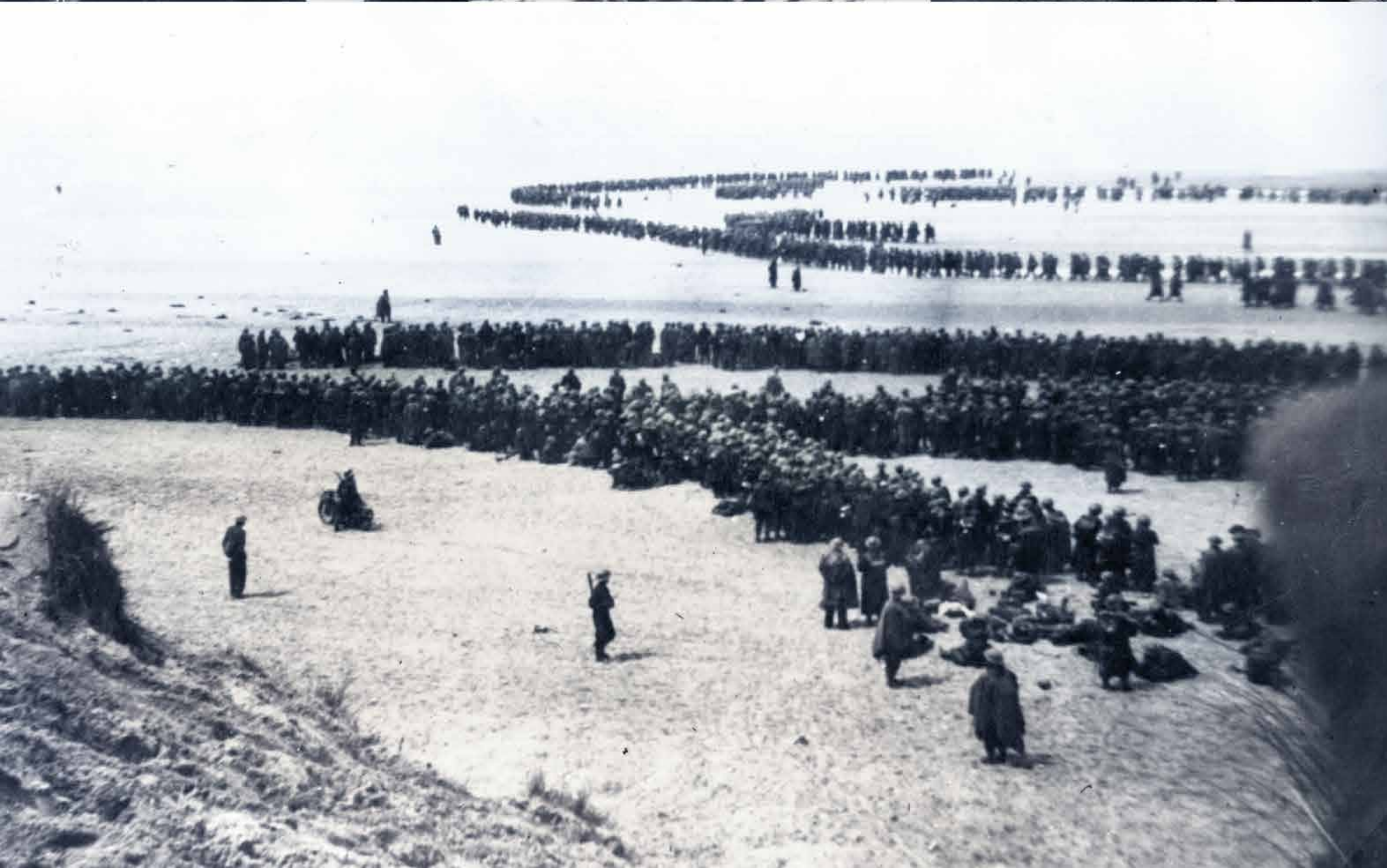


Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister on 10th May 1940. During the first six weeks of his premiership, he shuttles backwards and forwards to France, desperately trying to stiffen French resolve and plans for a joint defence, ultimately ending in the extraordinary offer of a complete Anglo-French political union.

The First World War had destroyed much of Britain's economic strength. Now the British government and British nation must decide whether to fight to the finish to save Britain - and Europe, and perhaps the rest of the world too - from a barbarous Nazism. The most important debate in the twentieth century is about to take place in the British War Cabinet. It took just five days.

The crucial meetings in the British War Cabinet - from May 24th to May 28th, 1940 - happen on the eve of Dunkirk. Amazingly, Hitler halts his blitzkrieg for three days against the advice of all his generals. Why? Some now believe he did not want to defeat the British Empire. How much did Hitler want a peace deal? Is that the real reason for his otherwise incomprehensible decision to halt his victorious army within easy reach of Dunkirk?





The War Cabinet has now to decide whether to continue to fight or to seek peace terms. Churchill must consider peace negotiations with 'that man'. No other country apart from the beleaguered British Empire was prepared to fight. France was to fall. Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff expect only 50,000 British soldiers to be rescued. This is the vital context of Lord Halifax's suggestion for peace talks. The film asks how real was the peace offer? How far did actual negotiations get? What was public opinion in the country for? If Churchill lost the debate in Cabinet, he could be deposed and voted out of office.

In the end, it is Chamberlain who tips the scales. Churchill is forever grateful to his great political enemy. Halifax is defeated. Important too are the votes of the Labour War Cabinet members, Arthur Greenwood and Clement Attlee. Was Neville Chamberlain, the architect of Munich, the man who saved the world – together with Winston Churchill?

Britain in the Second World War, as in the First World War, was as a nation to be bankrupted - this time by the decision that Churchill, his cabinet, and his nation, took. Churchill expected to only evacuate 50,000 men from France. He called for an army of little boats to get the men back. A miracle happened, though he called defeat at Dunkirk "the greatest British military defeat for 300 years".

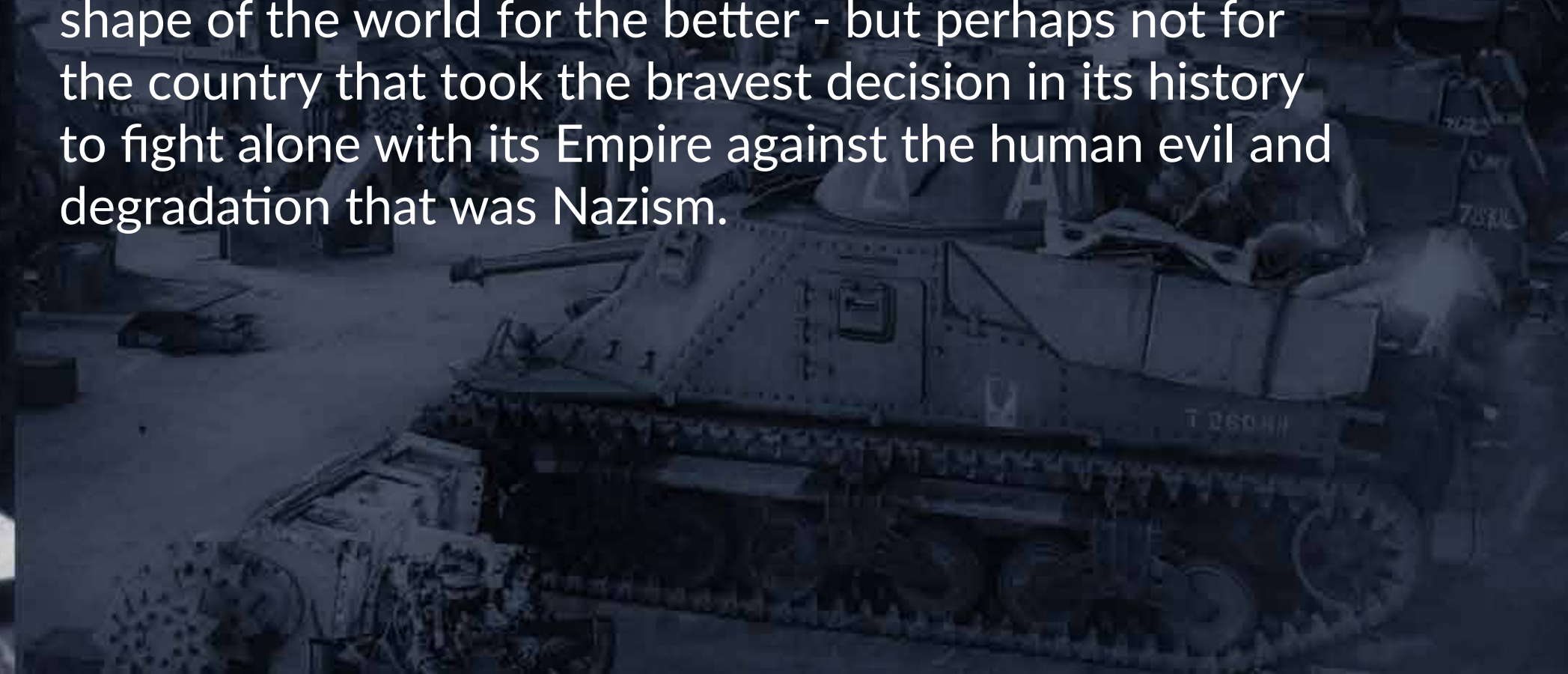




Drawing from Cabinet minutes, this new film draws upon the perspectives of contemporary documents, powerful archive, and great historians to describe the five days when the fate of the world was held in the balance. A British peace with Hitler would have surrendered much of the world to Nazi dominance. The Americans would not help, and Russia was in alliance with Germany.

In the end Britain would lose its power, its Empire, and its wealth. Despite winning the Battle of Britain in 1940, the country could not pay for the US arms it had ordered. It could lose the war by going bankrupt. Only through Roosevelt agreeing Lend Lease was Britain not defeated. By the end of the war, the country was economically exhausted. But for the US 1946 War Loan, the country would have been thrown into penury, and economic and social disaster.

Those five days in May had momentous consequences - far greater than is commonly understood. This film draws out these brave and tragic decisions which changed the shape of the world for the better - but perhaps not for the country that took the bravest decision in its history to fight alone with its Empire against the human evil and degradation that was Nazism.





# CONTRIBUTORS



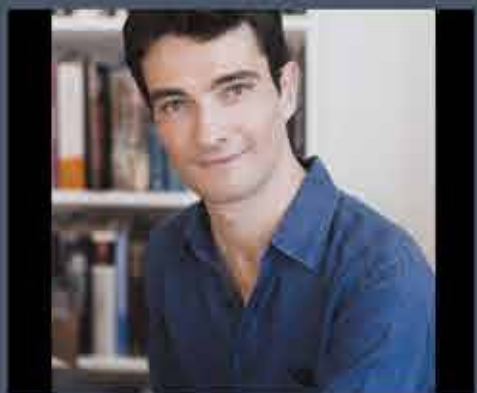
Andrew Roberts - biographer of Churchill and Lord Halifax - *The Holy Fox*.



Professor John Charmley - author of *The Lost Peace*, who thinks a peace settlement was available and a good idea.



Professor Frank McDonough is a British historian of the Third Reich and international history.



Tim Bouverie - covers many of these issues in his book *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War*.



Nicholas Shakespeare – writer of the best-selling book *Six Minutes in May. How Churchill Unexpectedly Became Prime Minister*.



Clare Mulley – an expert on the Third Reich. Books include *The Spy Who Loved*.



Helen Fry - expert on British intelligence in World War Two, offering insights on this aspect of the war, which the Allies won. Her books include *Mi9: Escape and Evasion*.



# PART TWO

*The film changes its perspective in Part Two to that of the rest of the world. This covers why World War Two turned into a global war. It focuses on the non-European participants and their reasons to fight. We see how accounts from China, India, United States, Germany, Russia, and the Middle East put the Second World War in a different perspective. For Germany and Russia, it remained predominantly a European war, notwithstanding Germany, Italy and Japan forming a Tripartite Pact in September 1940.*

From the perspective of Japan, China, the United States and the Middle East, the Second World War is not as Europeans have seen it. The Eurocentric view of the Second World War may be seen as a mistake. A less Eurocentric perspective sees that the irrevocable change was from 1941 onwards when, with the entry of Russia, United States and Japan, the Second World War becomes a world war. It is this change - from the imperial perspective of the British - that many Europeans have failed to recognise.





British perspectives on the Second World War are compared with American, German, Japanese, Russian, and Indian perspectives. The heresy of a peace that some historians regard as possible in 1940 is contrasted with the revolutionary geopolitical and economic outcomes of the transformation of the war to becoming a truly world war. British and European perspectives are often mistaken in understanding the full significance of the scale of historical, political, social, and economic change brought about by this terrible conflagration.

The Japanese, Russian and American entries into the war changed it from a conflict that Britain could neither win nor lose into a different level of war. To prevent the German conquest of Russia, the Russians lost 27 million men, half from the actions of Stalin himself. Many historians regard the Russians as having won the war. To this day, the Russians are not invited to any victory commemorations. The legacy of the Russian capture of Eastern Europe, with its Red Army mass rape, is the cycle of conflict, savagery and revenge that continues to this day.

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 led to the subsequent occupation of large parts of China. The prospect of peace was doomed when Japan withdrew from the League of Nations when it refused to recognise Manchukuo, the puppet state Japan created out of Manchuria. The Marco Polo Bridge incident of 7th July 1937 was the point of no return in the eastern part of the world. US oil sanctions against Japan additionally led to the fateful decision of Japan to attack Pearl Harbour on 7th December 1941. Hitler then declared war on the United States. Without these two events it is possible that the United States might not have entered the war.





This failure of perspective, however, is not restricted to Europe. China lost 17 million men during the Second World War. The Second World War in fact started in China when China was ruthlessly attacked by Japan. International perspectives, and particularly those of the US and Britain, do not understand the need for China to be recognised as one of the victorious and leading participants in the Second World War - and the scale of the contribution. This was particularly so in the defeat of Japan, where, but for the Chinese army engaging with two thirds of the Japanese army in China, the Americans might never have conquered Japan.

The position of Britain was further changed, and utterly, with the fall of Singapore in 1942, called by Churchill “a greater defeat than Dunkirk”. In India, not only was invasion threatened by Japan, but the terrible famine in Bengal led, through at best incompetence and at worst a cruel racist policy towards India, to the loss of three million lives. Churchill’s refusal to countenance dominion status for India led to a partial but significant falling out with Roosevelt.

The Second World War was to conclude with the end of the British Empire, near bankruptcy for Britain and the end of Britain’s status as a world power.





# CONTRIBUTORS



Richard Overy – makes the case that World War Two should be seen as an imperialist war in his book *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931-1945*.



Professor Frank McDonough is a British historian of the Third Reich and international history.



USA - Patrick O Cohrs – writer of acclaimed books on American diplomacy in World War Two including *The New Atlantic Order*.



Economic underpinnings of war - Adam Tooze, writer of *The Wages of Destruction*.



Matthew F. Delmont - the role of black Americans, author of *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*.



Japan - Yukiko Koshiro, author *Japan's World and World War II in Diplomatic History* Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 425-441 (17 pages). Published By: Oxford University Press



China – Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China, University of Oxford.



India- Madhusree Mukerjee, author of *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II*.



China - Dr. James C. Hsiung, Professor of Politics and International Law, New York University. His teaching and research interests go beyond international law and politics and extend to East Asian politics (China and Japan), Asian international relations, and Asian political cultures.



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