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Legitimising violence in the British attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir

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At 5.53pm on 3 July 1940, British air and naval forces opened fire on French ships stationed at the French naval base of Mers-el-Kébir, near Oran in Algeria. The operation, codenamed Catapult, resulted in the sinking of one French battleship, damage to five other ships and the loss of 1297 French servicemen, with a further 351 wounded. Coming less than a fortnight after the French had defied London's wishes and signed armistices with the German and Italian governments, the attack sprang from British fears that the French fleet might fall into enemy hands. The British therefore issued an ultimatum to the French navy. The ultimatum gave four options: first, to sail French ships to British ports and continue to fight; second, to sail to British ports from where the crews would be repatriated; third, to sail to a French port in the West Indies where the ships would be demilitarised; or fourth, to sink the ships within six hours.¹ As commander of the Force de Rade at Mers-el-Kébir, Admiral Gensoul deemed all the options unacceptable.² The French government insisted that as a matter of national honour, it would never surrender its fleet. When the British made good on their threat, the French government was therefore outraged.

¹ Rachel Chin, *War of Words: Britain, France and Discourses of Empire during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 67.

² Philippe Lasterle, 'Could Admiral Gensoul Have Averted the Tragedy of Mers el-Kébir?', *Journal of Military History*, 67:3 (2003), p. 840.

The episode gave rise to a controversy that has remained alive to this day.³ For French sailors to have been killed by men with whom they had served as allies just a few days earlier in ships that were unable to retaliate seemed not merely an act of treachery, but an act of callous brutality. Indeed, if he maintained that no undertaking had ever been ‘more necessary for the life of Britain’, Winston Churchill nevertheless conceded that it was a ‘hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned’.⁴ While the British had neutralised a significant potential threat, the operation resulted in an immediate diplomatic rupture with France and pushed the new government in Vichy towards active collaboration with the Nazis and Italian Fascists.⁵ It played directly into Axis propaganda as well. The German government claimed that ‘all crimes in history pale before this new act of piracy’, while the Italian press alleged that the British had ‘danced’ around the French sailors’ corpses.⁶ In France, the episode inaugurated a propaganda narrative of ruthless global ambition in which Mers-el-Kébir had unmasked the British as the true enemies of the French people.⁷

This chapter explores the motivations and justifications behind the British use of force at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 July 1940. As an attack conducted against the forces of a friendly nation that had ceased to fight, the operation contravened the accepted use of military violence in war. It displayed an apparent ruthlessness that seemed at odds not only with Britain’s status as a liberal democratic pillar of the international community but with the supposed British

³ See, for instance, Adam Sage, ‘UK “Must Pay for Shrine to French Dead” at Mers-el-Kébir’, *The Times*, 4 July 2020; Pierre Wadoux, ‘Marins français tués par les Anglais à Mers-el-Kébir en juillet 1940: crime ou fait de guerre?’, *Ouest France*, 13 July 2020.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Vol II Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassel & Co, 1949), p. 206.

⁵ Archives Diplomatiques (Paris) 10 GMII 473. Note, 5 July 1940; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *L’Abîme 1939-1944* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1986), pp. 296-98.

⁶ ‘Italy abuses British Parliament’, *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 3.

⁷ Brett C. Bowles, “‘La Tragédie de Mers-el-Kébir’ and the Politics of Filmed News in France, 1940–1944”, *Journal of Modern History*, 76:2 (2004), pp. 372-75; Dominique Rossignol, *Histoire de la propagande en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), pp. 306-16.

values of decency and fairness as well. Nevertheless, the action gained wide domestic and international support as being both necessary and legitimate. Churchill justified the use of violence with a wider argument that the exceptional moral exigencies of defeating the Nazis warranted breaching the very codes, laws and values his government was fighting to uphold.

In some respects, however, the British action was neither exceptional nor without precedent. The 1807 bombardment of Copenhagen saw the Royal Navy mount a similar pre-emptive strike to prevent neutral Danish ships from falling into Napoleon's hands. As in 1940, the British justified the attack, and the civilian and military deaths that resulted from it, by claiming it was conducted in the interests of European peace. For some international observers, however, it revealed the harsh realities of British imperial and capitalist power, exposing an 'utter ruthlessness behind a humanitarian mask'.⁸ The ready recourse to violence and the reasoning that lay behind it indicate that the British attack at Mers-el-Kébir was more than merely a pre-emptive military strike for self-defence. Bolstered by the precedent of 1807, the British government was not simply engaged in an exercise of power without reference to morality. Rather, it conceived its own national interests as being so inextricably bound with those of the wider international community as to justify violence in the cause of peace and civilisation.

The chapter begins by exploring how British action in Norway earlier in 1940 helped establish a rationale for Mers-el-Kébir that centred on notions of supreme emergency. The second section outlines how Franco-British tensions over strategy and political and military obligations shaped London's decision to mount the attack. The third section deals with how

⁸ Jonathan Steinberg, 'The Copenhagen Complex', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1:3 (1966), p. 23.

the strategic use of violence was central to the planning and execution of Operation Catapult. The fourth section analyses how the British government justified its actions politically on the domestic and international stages. The chapter finishes with an examination of how military codes of honour militated against the use of violence in the circumstances presented at Mers-el-Kébir, highlighting the political impulses behind the operation.

Supreme Emergency

British intervention in Norway played a significant role in shaping the government's approach towards the Mers-el-Kébir operation. It establish a moral reasoning for violating international law and exposed tensions between military and political thinking about the conduct of the war. Following the Soviet invasion of Finland on 30 November 1939, as First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill proposed mining Norwegian territorial waters to prevent iron ore exports from reaching Germany and to hinder a German invasion of Norway.⁹ Even after the Winter War had ended in March 1940, Churchill continued to press his plans, against resistance from British army and naval officers who opposed the violation of Norwegian neutrality and the likely bloodshed that would ensue.¹⁰ In so doing, he revealed a determination not to be hindered by Britain's values and international commitments but rather to turn them into a justification for action. In a memorandum dated 16 December 1939, Churchill argued that Britain had entered the war to uphold the values of the League of

⁹ Chris Mann, *British Policy and Strategy Towards Norway, 1941-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ Graham Rhys-Jones, 'Churchill and the Norwegian Campaign', *The RUSI Journal*, 155:4 (2010), p. 77.

Nations Covenant and to 're-establish the reign of law'.¹¹ The country had a powerful moral duty not merely to fight but to be victorious, because 'defeat would mean an age of barbaric violence' for Britain and the rest of Europe.¹² In such circumstances, Churchill maintained, 'we have a right, and indeed are bound in duty, to abrogate for a space some of the conventions of the very laws we seek to consolidate and reaffirm'.¹³ Indeed, in the face of a 'supreme emergency', Churchill argued, 'the letter of the law' must not prevent Britain from taking action, because 'humanity, rather than legality', must be its guide.¹⁴

The episode was significant for two main reasons. It showed that Churchill was prepared not merely to inflict harm on a neutral state but to embed the moral justification for action within an abrogation of international law. The problem was, however, that the circumstances of war did not mean that decisions and their consequences occurred in a 'moral vacuum'.¹⁵ Even if international law could be temporarily abrogated, that did not justify a free-for-all. As Michael Walzer observes, Churchill adopted a 'sliding scale' rationale, in which the graver the injustice that would ensue from defeat, the more the rules could be broken to avoid that defeat. According to such reasoning, the rights of those whose cause is just become greater, while those of their enemy are diminished.¹⁶ With much of Europe under Nazi control and fears of an imminent German invasion of Britain, the case for declaring a 'supreme emergency' was much stronger at the time of the Mers-el-Kébir operation than during the Norwegian intervention. However, the moral imperatives for defeating Nazism did not

¹¹ Note by the First Lord of the Admiralty, 16 December 1939, cited in Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Vol I, The Gathering Storm* (London: Cassell & Co., 1948), p. 431.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

¹⁵ Michael Bess, *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 12.

¹⁶ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 229-31, 245.

correspondingly give the British the right to kill sailors from another state, especially one which was no longer an active belligerent.

The British government was in no doubt that if the French fleet were to fall into enemy hands, it would create significant threat to British security and prospects in the war more broadly. London therefore legitimately cited supreme national emergency as its main justification for action, arguing that Britain faced an existential danger. But while dealing with such a threat might have been a military necessity, the use of violence was less clear-cut. Operation Catapult fulfilled international law requirements that pre-emptive strikes must be in response to an imminent threat and that force must be proportionate to that threat.¹⁷ However, the manner with which force was deployed and the loss of life that resulted from it was a political as much as military choice.

Franco-British Tensions

The fact that the victims of British violence at Mers-el-Kébir were not German but French was a significant complicating factor in justifying the violence of Operation Catapult. For the British government to have taken such action against a hitherto friendly state with which it had a history of close political and military cooperation implied a ruthless determination to prioritise national interests that stood in marked contrast with principled assertions of Britain's moral duties to the international community. It also went against the direction of

¹⁷ G. H. Quester, 'Two Hundred Years of Preemption', *Naval War College Review*, 60:4 (2007), p. 17.

British policy up to that point. If London had tended to be suspicious of European entanglements and to limit military commitments on the continent in the 1930s, it had come to realise its reliance upon the strength and willingness of the French army to fight.¹⁸

Moreover, by 1938 there had been a marked strategic convergence with Paris as London increasingly accepted that it could not remain detached from developments on the continent.¹⁹ The Foreign Office even went so far as to propose an Act of Union with France that would have seen the two states combine their armed forces, foreign and economic policies as well as their political institutions.²⁰

However, the military disasters of May and June 1940 revived old Franco-British tensions, culminating in a breakdown of trust between the two governments. For all their shared interests and values, the alliance between London and Paris had always been built on uneven foundations. While the two countries had fought alongside one another during the First World War, the alliance was in many respects a ‘marriage of convenience’.²¹ The ease with which it dissolved into fractiousness after 1918 was a measure of how differently the two parties viewed it.²² A pragmatic British mindset conflicted with the deeper significance that French policy-makers attached to the alliance. Under the strain of the German invasion, past French suspicions mixed with new fears that London was putting its own interests first in failing to commit the necessary resources to the battle for France. Such concerns were intensified by the Dunkirk evacuation, when the proportionately lower numbers of French soldiers

¹⁸ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 134.

¹⁹ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 76-95.

²⁰ The National Archives, UK (hereafter TNA) FO 371/24301, Memorandum emphasising need for France to continue as a belligerent and for the United States to enter as a belligerent, 15 June 1940.

²¹ Gary Sheffield, ‘Introduction’, in Emile Chabal and Robert Tombs (eds.), *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013), p. 19.

²² John Keiger, ‘Crossed Wires, 1904-14’, in *Ibid*, p. 29.

evacuated led to accusations that the British had abandoned the French to their sorry fate.²³

For the British, meanwhile, the rapid collapse of the French army was not merely the result of poor planning but was a consequence of defeatism.²⁴

The weeks leading up to the French surrender fuelled a mutual misunderstanding that drove the decision to mount Operation Catapult. Repeated British attempts to gain the French government's assurance that it would not seek armistice terms without prior consultation were met with refusal and incomprehension. Repeated British demands for action to prevent the French fleet from falling into enemy hands were taken as an affront by French ministers and admirals.²⁵ On 16 June, Churchill informed his counterpart Paul Reynaud that London would only consent to a French request for armistice terms on condition the French fleet sailed to British ports first.²⁶ Reynaud rejected the demand. His resignation and replacement by Marshal Philippe Pétain only exacerbated the tensions. A last-ditch British offer of union as an inducement to continue fighting was dismissed by French ministers as a ploy to exploit France's fall and seize its empire.²⁷ By 17 June, the British and French governments had adopted fundamentally opposing approaches to the war. Whereas Pétain's experiences in the First World War led him to believe that his government's duty was to protect the French people from further suffering by seeking armistice terms, Churchill insisted that the British people would fight to the bitter end and would 'never surrender'.²⁸ The fallout over the

²³ R. T. Thomas, *The Dilemma of Anglo-French Relations 1940-42* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 11-13.

²⁴ Martin S. Alexander, 'Dunkirk in Military Operations, Myths and Memories', in Chabal and Tombs, *Britain and France*, pp. 99-100.

²⁵ Thomas, *Dilemma*, p. 25

²⁶ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 181.

²⁷ TNA FO 371/24301, Memorandum emphasising need for France to continue as a belligerent and for the United States to enter as a belligerent, 15 June 1940; Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 187.

²⁸ Francois Broche and Jean-Francois Muracciole, *Histoire de la collaboration 1940-1945* (Paris: Tallandier, 2017), p. 87; Churchill, speech to House of Commons, 4 June 1940, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/>, accessed 10 January 2023.

French armistice terms and the subsequent British decision to take action at Mers-el-Kébir was a consequence of these irreconcilable positions.

Whereas Pétain's government was satisfied with Axis assurances on the security of the French fleet, London maintained that the armistice terms provided no guarantee that it would not fall into German or Italian hands.²⁹ In the agreements signed on 22-24 June 1940, the German and Italian governments declared that they did not 'intend' to use French ships under their control for the purposes of war.³⁰ The French government accepted the terms as being consistent with national honour and providing significant scope for the exercise of sovereignty.³¹ The British, by contrast, maintained that neither Berlin nor Rome could be trusted to uphold their pledges and that the French would be unable to resist any attempts to seize their ships.³² The experiences of occupied France and the impotence of Pétain's Vichy government in the face of Axis interventions would go on to vindicate the British assessment.³³ However, as the British Ambassador to France Sir Ronald Campbell noted, the armistice terms were 'diabolically clever' for bolstering French delusions and driving a wedge between the two allies.³⁴ Any further demand for assurance on the fleet would imply a mistrust of the French that distracted from the severity of the threat with which the British

²⁹ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 205.

³⁰ Armistice Agreement Between the German High Command of the Armed Forces and French Plenipotentiaries, 22 June 1940, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/frgearm.asp#art8>, accessed 5 December 2022; 'Convention d'armistice entre l'Italie et la France, 24 juin 1940', in Romain Rainero, *La commission italienne d'armistice avec la France. Les rapports entre la France de Vichy et l'Italie de Mussolini (10 juin 1940 – 8 septembre 1943)* (Paris: Service Historique de l'Armée, 1995), p. 380.

³¹ Armistice Negotiations at Compiègne, 21-22 June 1940, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945* Series D (1937-1945), Vol IX, *The War Years, March 18-June 22, 1940* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office: London, 1956), pp. 644-47; Marc Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'Etat français: L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp. 77-79; Karine Varley, 'Defending Sovereignty without Collaboration: Vichy and the Italian Fascist Threats of 1940-42', *French History*, 33:3 (2019), pp. 425-27.

³² TNA CAB 65/13/50, War Cabinet, confidential annex, 24 June 1940, 10.30am.

³³ Jean-Pierre Azéma and Olivier Wieviorka, *Vichy 1940-1944* (Paris: Perrin, 2000), pp. 54-88; Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 69-92; 109-35.

³⁴ TNA FO 371/24348, Special distribution and War Cabinet from Campbell, 22 June 1940, 3.30pm.

were confronted. On the evening of 22 June, Campbell told French officials that the failure to safeguard the fleet could make the difference between victory and a defeat that risked jeopardising the entire future of France.³⁵

Operation Catapult

Having decided to take military action to deal with the threat posed by the French fleet, on 2 July the War Cabinet agreed the wording of a telegram to be sent to Admiral Gensoul before it issued an ultimatum. The telegram reiterated the British government's position on the armistice terms and expressed a determination to fight to the end and restore the 'greatness and territory of France'.³⁶ However, it also restated the demand for French ships to sail to French ports in the West Indies or Martinique where they could be demilitarised or entrusted to American safekeeping. If the French refused these 'fair' offers, the telegram warned, the British must 'with regret' demand that the French sink their own ships.³⁷ The tone and language of the message conveyed a reason and courtesy that deflected from its violent intentions. The carefully-worded expression of support for France sought to express the notion that military action would be taken in the French, rather than the British, interest. Reminding the French of the close relationship between their armed forces, it sought to forestall any accusations of treachery by insisting that the Germans were the real enemy.³⁸

³⁵ TNA FO 371/24348, telegram from Campbell, 22 June 1940, 11.31pm.

³⁶ TNA CAB 65/8/3, War Cabinet, 2 July 1940, 12 noon.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ TNA FO371/24321, message to FO Force H from Admiralty, 2 July 1940.

Up until the last moment on 3 July, Admiral Somerville, commanding the Royal Navy's Force H at Gibraltar, remained convinced that he could persuade Gensoul to accept the terms and that violence could be averted.³⁹ Somerville portrayed the ultimatum not as a sign of mistrust in the French but rather as a lack of faith in the Germans and Italians. Seeking to take the onus away from Gensoul and to allow the French to honour their armistice undertakings, he argued that if the French admiral accepted the British terms, he would be acting under *force majeure* and would therefore be absolved from blame.⁴⁰ In response, however, Gensoul maintained that he would only break the armistice terms if the Germans or Italians breached them first. If the British fired on French ships, he would treat such action as tantamount to a declaration of war.⁴¹ Gensoul even showed Somerville the secret orders to prevent French ships from falling into enemy hands that Admiral Darlan had issued as commander of the French navy on 24 June.⁴² By 5pm, Gensoul had failed to agree to any of the British terms, conceding only his willingness to demobilise reservists the following morning.⁴³ With the ultimatum deadline having expired, at 5.53pm, Somerville gave the order to open fire on the French fleet.

Despite the repeated British demands in relation to the French ships, and despite the ultimatum of 3 July, French ministers and admirals refused to believe that London would carry out its threat to attack. On receiving the news, French Foreign Minister Paul Baudouin therefore responded with 'stupor'.⁴⁴ Darlan took it as a particularly personal affront.

³⁹ TNA ADM/205/6, 'Narrative of 3 July'.

⁴⁰ TNA ADM/205/6, Interview with Admiral Gensoul.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Baudouin to Cambon, 3 July 1940, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Commission de Publication des Documents Diplomatiques Français, *Documents diplomatiques français 1940, Tome I (1 janvier - 10 juillet 1940)* (Peter Lang: Brussels, 2004), p. 904.

According to one observer, his whole mentality changed overnight, going from clarity and reason to ‘internal frenzy’ and rage.⁴⁵ The French Ministry for Naval Affairs issued a statement accusing the British of callously exploiting France’s misfortunes to advance their own global ambitions.⁴⁶ Refuting British claims that the fleet had been in danger of falling into German or Italian hands, the statement insisted that French sailors had not wanted to be placed under Churchill’s command. By positioning magnetic mines in the harbour before the ultimatum deadline had expired, the Ministry claimed, the British had engaged in a ‘deliberately hostile’ act.⁴⁷ Using highly emotive language, it claimed that the dead sailors had been stabbed in the back by the British, despite having selflessly given their all to help the Royal Navy.⁴⁸

The use of violence in the operation was, however, neither unconsidered nor unconstrained. On 2 July, the Cabinet agreed that if the French rejected the ultimatum, air and naval forces should use all means at their disposal to destroy the French ships, especially the battleships *Dunquerque* and *Strasbourg*. In considering the options for carrying out the operation, the Admiralty and Cabinet had to balance achieving their strategic objectives with the likely military and political repercussions. Such were the risks that on 24 June, First Sea Lord Sir Dudley Pound had warned that the military gains would not be worth the potential British losses and advised against the whole operation. The naval staff took the view that capturing French ships or sinking them would drive French crews into active hostility and would prompt the Germans to seize the rest of the fleet.⁴⁹ The decision not to allow the evacuation of French sailors was to prove particularly contentious, not merely for the many deaths that

⁴⁵ Bernard Costagliola, *Darlan* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2015), p. 69.

⁴⁶ ‘Un rapport de l’amirauté française sur l’agression britannique’, *Le Matin*, 6 July 1940, p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ ‘What France was Told’, *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 3.

⁴⁹ TNA CAB 65/13/50, War Cabinet confidential annex, 24 June 1940, 10.30am.

resulted but for its apparent callousness. Nevertheless, in considering the options, the British government took steps to minimise military and civilian casualties. It ordered that bloodshed should be avoided in the capture of the battleship *Richelieu*, which had set sail from Dakar on 25 June.⁵⁰ Minimal force was deployed in the seizure of French ships at British ports as well.⁵¹ Moreover, while the Cabinet opposed offering the French fleet the option to demobilise itself, to avoid unnecessary bloodshed it conceded that it would accept such a proposal if it came from the French themselves.⁵² The Cabinet also agreed that a similar operation at nearby Oran would only go ahead if it did not involve ‘considerable loss of civilian life’.⁵³ It rejected a separate operation in Algiers on the grounds that it would cause significant damage to the town and its civilian population.⁵⁴

Despite the limitations on the use of violence, British admirals maintained their opposition to Operation Catapult on grounds of its judiciousness and morality. Indeed, Churchill later conceded that only the most direct orders had compelled naval officers to open fire on their former comrades-in-arms.⁵⁵ Whereas ministers and civilian officials in London took a detached view of French sailors, British admirals and their crews had developed a camaraderie with their French counterparts. On 30 June, as commander of the North Atlantic fleet at Gibraltar, Admiral North convened a meeting of captains and flag officers to express opposition to any use of force at Mers-el-Kébir.⁵⁶ The following day, Somerville sent the Admiralty a telegram stating that he and the other naval commanders in the Mediterranean

⁵⁰ TNA PREM 3/197/4, message to CAA from Admiralty, 26 June 1940.

⁵¹ TNA FO 371/24321, French ambassador to Foreign Secretary, 3 July 1940; FO 371/24321, note, 3 July 1940.

⁵² TNA CAB 64/14/1, War Cabinet confidential annex, 1 July 1940, 6pm.

⁵³ TNA CAB 65/8/3, War Cabinet, 2 July 1940, 12 noon.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 208.

⁵⁶ Martin Thomas, ‘After Mers-el-Kébir: The Armed Neutrality of the French Vichy Navy, 1940-43’, *English Historical Review*, 112:447 (1997), p. 650; Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 165.

also opposed the use of force.⁵⁷ Even after having fulfilled his orders, Somerville expressed his disapproval in his report to the Admiralty.⁵⁸ Cunningham did not hold back either, describing the operation in his memoirs as ‘utterly repugnant’ and nothing less than an ‘act of sheer treachery’.⁵⁹

In marked contrast with the violence at Mers-el-Kébir, an analogous operation at Alexandria was averted by Cunningham negotiating an agreement with his French counterpart, Admiral Godfroy. On being presented with a similar ultimatum, Godfroy opted to place the French ships in a non-seagoing condition. Unable to communicate with his government, however, he told Cunningham that he would have to sink the ships and requested forty-eight hours to make the necessary arrangements.⁶⁰ The Admiralty was unwilling to agree any extension to the ultimatum deadline. Cunningham therefore took the initiative, sending a private letter to Godfroy to seek a way out of the impasse. By 5.30pm on 3 July, the two men had agreed a compromise. Godfroy was to remove oil from the French ships and remove the torpedo warheads, but would only reduce the crews if his government approved.⁶¹ Once again, however, the Admiralty rejected the proposal. In a tersely-worded signal sent at 8.15pm, it ordered the immediate reduction of French crews, insisting ‘do not, repeat, not fail’.⁶² Filled with ‘indignation’, Cunningham ignored the signal and continued the negotiations.⁶³ Having learned of the developments at Mers-el-Kébir overnight, however, the following morning Godfroy repudiated his previous undertakings, declaring that he would sail his ships out of the harbour and would fight the British to do so. As a final resort, Cunningham appealed

⁵⁷ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 208.

⁵⁸ TNA ADM/205/6, ‘Narrative of 3 July’.

⁵⁹ Cunningham, *Sailor’s Odyssey*, p. 244.

⁶⁰ TNA PREM 3/197/4, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean to Admiralty, 3 July 1940, 2.31pm.

⁶¹ TNA PREM 3/197/4, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean to Admiralty, 3 July 1940, 3.09pm.

⁶² Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor’s Odyssey* (Hutchingson: London, 1951), p. 250.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

directly to the French sailors. Under pressure from his crews, Godfroy agreed to discharge the oil from his ships and to place his ships in a non-combat condition. Cunningham's compromise therefore averted the use of force, earning fulsome praise from the Admiralty and even from Churchill.⁶⁴

Political Justifications

Ultimately for Churchill, however, it was the desire to show that the British government would stop at nothing in the pursuit of victory that lay behind Operation Catapult. In his statement to the House of Commons on 4 July, the Prime Minister declared that the operation would end the 'lies and rumours' circulating in the United States and in German propaganda that the British were on the verge of surrender.⁶⁵ Churchill later argued that 'ruthlessly' taking 'violent action' against his country's 'dearest friends of yesterday' at a time when many observers had written Britain off proved that London was fearless.⁶⁶ Operation Catapult was therefore designed to be decisive and to appear so. Indeed, Martin Thomas and Richard Toye have gone so far as to suggest that it was 'intended as a symbolic or even rhetorical act'.⁶⁷

If British action sailed close to the wind in its morality and legitimacy, it did so deliberately. Churchill wanted to show British resolve to friendly governments, while showing British

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 255.

⁶⁵ 'Period of Splendid Hope', *The Times*, 5 July 1940, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 211.

⁶⁷ Thomas and Toye, *Arguing about Empire*, p. 163.

ruthlessness to unfriendly governments. Above all, he sought to demonstrate that his country's defiance was more than a match for Nazi aggression and that being a liberal democracy was no hindrance to the pursuit of victory. His strategy had the desired effect. The *New York Herald Tribune* observed that 'Britain has at last the one thing which the democratic Powers have lacked through all these fantastic years – the will to fight regardless of consequences, the will to victory.'⁶⁸ The *Chicago Daily News*, meanwhile, noted that the decisiveness of the operation signalled that the British government would not be hampered by its liberal democratic values: 'There was a widespread fear that the rot of indecision – that disease of Democracy – had eaten as deeply into the British, as it was proven to have spread into the French.'⁶⁹ In France, there was widespread shock at how the action seemed the very opposite of the values the British claimed to represent. Far from behaving like 'gentlemen' according to notions of 'fair play', Darlan claimed, British sailors had been 'accomplices to premeditated murder'.⁷⁰ In the press, the 'civilised' conduct of the French was contrasted with the 'gangster' behaviour of the British.⁷¹ German propaganda, meanwhile, berated the British for betraying their supposed values of 'honesty, decency and chivalry', expressing outrage at the 'triumph of pirate morals'.⁷²

In making such a show of defiance, the British government consciously drew upon the precedent of Copenhagen in the Napoleonic Wars. Despite the public uproar at the time, in British memory Copenhagen had become a shorthand for decisive pre-emptive action that helped secure ultimate victory against Napoleon. Indeed, Cabinet minutes dated 27 June 1940

⁶⁸ 'A Tragic Necessity', *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁶⁹ 'Britain Up in US Opinion', *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁷⁰ 'Lorsque la France a donné sa parole, elle la tient, quoi qu'il puisse arriver', *Le Figaro*, 6 July 1940.

⁷¹ 'L'odieuse agression de l'Angleterre contre la flotte française a l'ancre soulève l'indignation mondiale', *Le Matin*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁷² 'Scuttler-in-Chief Gives Order', *The Times*, 5 July 1940, p. 4; 'French Fleet No Longer in Being', *Daily News* (London), 5 July 1940, p. 1; 'London News and Comment', *The Scotsman*, 5 July 1940, p. 4

claimed that public opinion was ‘strongly insistent’ that the government take similar action to that against the Danish fleet in 1807.⁷³ A *Times* editorial on 6 July explicitly drew parallels between the two episodes, arguing that if the 1807 attack had been justified to prevent Danish ships from potentially falling into enemy hands, the 1940 attack was even more justified because French ships were already under enemy control.⁷⁴ Several regional papers followed suit, drawing positive comparisons between the two operations.⁷⁵ In Germany, by contrast, Copenhagen had become a byword not merely for pre-emptive action but for British violence and disregard for international law as well. Four months earlier, officials had claimed that British sailors boarding the German supply ship the *Altmark* while in Norwegian territorial waters was part of a pattern of British violations of international law that stretched back to 1807.⁷⁶ The German minister in Oslo compared the killing of four members of the *Altmark*’s crew with the violence witnessed in 1807.⁷⁷ It was perhaps because Nazi propaganda had been so quick to draw parallels between the two episodes that Churchill avoided any direct comparisons at the time and in the period thereafter.⁷⁸ In his memoirs, he likened the Mers-el-Kébir operation to the less contentious British action against the Danish fleet at Copenhagen in 1801. Striking a more remorseful tone than in July 1940, he claimed that Mers-el-Kébir had been even more painful than the Copenhagen attack of 1801 because the French ‘had been only yesterday our dear Allies’.⁷⁹

⁷³ TNA CAB 65/13/53, War Cabinet confidential annex, 27 June 1940, 12 noon.

⁷⁴ ‘A Tragic Necessity’, *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁷⁵ ‘Current Events – A Great Peril Escaped’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 5 July 1940, p. 2; ‘Lesson for Italy at Oran’, *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 6 July 1940, p. 4; ‘Sea-Power’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5 July 1940, p. 2.

⁷⁶ ‘Norway Lodges a Protest’, *The Times*, 19 February 1940, p. 8.

⁷⁷ ‘Raid on *Altmark* Described’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 February 1940; ‘German Note to Norway’, *The Scotsman*, 19 February 1940, p. 5.

⁷⁸ J. C. Johnstone, ‘The Nazi Dreams that were Shattered at Oran’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 July 1940.

⁷⁹ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 206.

In the days immediately following the operation, however, Churchill mounted a more bullish defence of British actions. Addressing Parliament, he focused on justifying the action in military and political terms. Beginning by expressing his regret at the losses, he quickly moved on to rebuff French claims of treachery with accusations of his own. Charging the French government with ‘abandoning the conflict and leaving its whole weight to fall upon Great Britain and the British Empire’, he went on to condemn its ‘callous and perhaps even malevolent treatment’ of the British.⁸⁰ He ended with what Rachel Chin describes as a ‘classic rhetorical device’ that encouraged the audience to draw its own conclusions on the legitimacy of the operation.⁸¹ Throwing down the gauntlet, Churchill challenged the United States, the world and ‘history’ to make their judgement.⁸² In a similar vein, Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax told the House of Lords of his ‘distress and sorrow’, but insisted that the operation had been justified, accusing the French government of prioritising its promises to the enemy over the ‘fulfilment of a solemn pledge to its ally’.⁸³

Managing media reporting on the operation was critical to the British government’s efforts to legitimise it politically. The Ministry of Information advised that the story’s release must be carefully timed so that the government could control the narrative. On 2 July, in conjunction with the Admiralty, it proposed a statement for release to the press once the operation had been completed. The statement began by outlining how the German and Italian armistices included terms that affected the ‘vital interests’ of the British empire and claimed that the

⁸⁰ Hansard, vol. 362, House of Commons, French Fleet, debated 4 July 1940, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1940-07-04/debates/5b3e0cdc-25db-4ee3-bd4c-bc0a26f94395/FrenchFleet>, accessed 15 July 2022.

⁸¹ Chin, *War of Words*, p. 89.

⁸² Hansard, vol. 362, House of Commons, French Fleet, debated 4 July 1940, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1940-07-04/debates/5b3e0cdc-25db-4ee3-bd4c-bc0a26f94395/FrenchFleet>, accessed 15 July 2022.

⁸³ ‘Period of Splendid Hope’, *The Times*, 5 July 1940, p. 2.

French government had placed itself in a position where it would be unable to prevent the enemy from seizing its ships.⁸⁴ Under such circumstances, the statement explained, the British government ‘felt constrained’ to take action.⁸⁵ In anticipation of the potential losses resulting from the action, it concluded on a conciliatory note that emphasised the British government’s hopes that French sailors would join their ‘British comrades’ in continuing the fight for the ‘freedom of France’.⁸⁶

The British press faithfully followed the government line in conveying the necessity of the operation while highlighting the painful nature of the decision.⁸⁷ Many reports focused on Churchill’s emotion as he delivered the news to Parliament, seeking to quash any suggestions of triumphalism or that the British government revelled in the misfortunes of its former ally.⁸⁸ Several newspaper editors and columnists welcomed the change in the tone of the British engagement, praising not merely the decisive nature of the intervention but its ruthlessness as well. *The Scotsman* noted the Prime Minister’s promise to handle the situation with ‘patience and resolution’, commenting that hitherto, patience had ‘been shown perhaps to excess’, but resolution had ‘now been brought into play with heartening and decisive success’.⁸⁹ A columnist for *The People*, meanwhile, was ‘thrilled’ to see ‘John Bull drive into battle again,

⁸⁴ TNA FO371/24321, Note, 2 July 1940; PREM 3/197/4, letter from Alexander to Churchill, 2 July 1940.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ ‘Horrible - But Necessary’, *Daily News* (London), 5 July 1940, p. 4; Hector Bywater, ‘Facts About the French Navy’, *Daily News* (London), 5 July 1940, p. 4; ‘London News and Comment’, *The Scotsman*, 5 July 1940, p. 4; ‘Current Events – A Great Peril Escaped’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 5 July 1940, p. 2; ‘A Tragic Necessity’, *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁸⁸ ‘Churchill in Tears at the End’, *Daily News* (London), 5 July 1940, p. 1; ‘Let’s Talk It Over’, *The People*, 7 July 1940; ‘As Hanner Swaffer Sees It’, *The People*, 7 July 1940; ‘Remarkable Demonstration of Support for Mr Churchill’, *The Scotsman*, 5 July 1940, p. 4. For French accusations of British ‘rejoicing’ at French losses, see ‘Pour une diplomatie française’, *Le Temps*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.

⁸⁹ London News and Comment, *The Scotsman*, 5 July 1940, p. 4.

resolute, full of fight', noting that the British government had abandoned its earlier 'hesitations and over-nice scruples'.⁹⁰

Careful management of how domestic public opinion responded to the news was also vital in helping to legitimise the operation. Ministry of Information monitoring suggested that such efforts were largely successful. The British people generally welcomed the decisive nature of the action as a turning-point for the nation's war effort. Having been on the back foot in May and June 1940, many believed that they were finally showing Hitler what they were capable of.⁹¹ The public were said to have hailed the 'strong action' as evidence of government 'vigour and decisiveness'.⁹² For many, the violent character of the attack was central to its appeal, with one report noting the public's 'cheerful aggressiveness'.⁹³ Antipathy towards the French was exacerbated rather than generated by the episode, with some claiming that Britain had never been 'real friends with the French'.⁹⁴ Overall, the Ministry of Information deemed Operation Catapult to have had a positive effect on British morale, with members of the public showing little concern about the French casualties.⁹⁵

The decisiveness of the operation gave it a powerful simplicity that was designed to resonate in the wider international community.⁹⁶ In the weeks that followed, Britain's network of ambassadors reported favourable responses from across the globe.⁹⁷ Above all, however,

⁹⁰ 'Let's Talk It Over', *The People*, 7 July 1940.

⁹¹ TNA INF 1 264, Daily report on morale, 8 July 1940.

⁹² TNA INF 1 264, Points from regions, 4 July 1940.

⁹³ TNA INF 1 264, Daily report on morale, 8 July 1940.

⁹⁴ TNA INF 1 264, Daily report on morale, 7 July 1940.

⁹⁵ TNA INF 1 264, Daily report on morale, 5 July 1940.

⁹⁶ TNA FO 371/24311, Note by Campbell, 8 July 1940.

⁹⁷ TNA FO 371/24321, telegram from Mallett, 6 July 1940; telegram from Knatchbull-Hugessen, 6 July 1940; telegram from Palairret, 9 July; telegram from Campbell, 9 July; telegram from Bentinck, 10 July 1940.

Churchill was determined that the operation should send a signal to the United States.

Desperate for greater support from Washington, he wanted to demonstrate his government's resolve.⁹⁸ The response was overwhelmingly favourable. Reuters reported that Washington saw the operation as evidence that 'the iron will has not yet rusted out of the British character'.⁹⁹ There was widespread relief at the development on Capitol Hill as well.¹⁰⁰

Churchill's radio broadcast a few days later did much to consolidate this view, especially within American public opinion.¹⁰¹ Coverage in the American press was also positive, with newspapers praising the 'boldness' and 'efficiency' of the operation.¹⁰² The *New York Post* said that any lesser action would have been 'criminal madness'.¹⁰³ The *New York Times* agreed that without the operation, the French fleet would 'inevitably' have fallen into enemy hands.¹⁰⁴

The British handling of the French government was, perhaps inevitably, rather less successful. The gulf between British confidence in the legitimacy of the operation and French outrage at the apparent treachery was most starkly exposed in the diplomatic fallout between the two countries. After protesting in the 'strongest terms' against the 'unacceptable' nature of the British ultimatum, on 4 July the French government formally broke off relations with London.¹⁰⁵ In a note delivered to Halifax a few days later, the French government emotively

⁹⁸ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, pp. 211-12.

⁹⁹ 'Iron Still in British Character', 14 July 1940, Foreign Office United States Correspondence, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=GDSC&u=ustrath&id=GALE|SC5114141702&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-GDSC&sPage=381&asid=081d1994>, accessed 1 December 2022.

¹⁰⁰ John Walters, 'America Feels Happier Now', *Daily Mirror*, 5 July 1940, p. 1; 'US is Relieved by News', *Daily News* (London), 5 July 1940, p. 1; 'The Seizure of the French Fleet', *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ 'Americans Welcome Churchill's Speech', 14 July 1940, Foreign Office United States Correspondence, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SC5114141702/GDSC?u=ustrath&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=081d1994&pg=377>, accessed 1 December 2022.

¹⁰² 'The Navy Does its Job', *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ TNA FO 371/24321, French ambassador to Foreign Secretary, 3 July 1940; French ambassador to Foreign Secretary, 4 July 1940.

invoked memories of their countries' alliance to highlight the apparent callousness of the attack, arguing that such a close relationship should have deterred the British from their 'repeated acts of aggression'.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the Foreign Office remained sanguine about the prospects of reconciliation, believing that simply by repeating its defence of the operation along with a perfunctory 'expression of regret', the French would come to accept the just nature of the action.¹⁰⁷ In reality, however, the French government had already decided to pivot its foreign policy to an alignment with the Axis, having seriously considered declaring war on Britain.¹⁰⁸

Honour

If British policy-makers were confident in the legitimacy of Operation Catapult, they nonetheless had to square it with notions of honour. Despite modern warfare having become more total and more deadly, professional officers and servicemen continued to uphold a set of restraints rooted in respect for enemy combatants.¹⁰⁹ Many of these restraints had their origins in ancient aristocratic chivalric codes and served to distinguish professional combatants from mere killing machines. They have therefore often led to clashes with civilian political leaders' pursuit of victory.¹¹⁰ Such was the case in July 1940.

¹⁰⁶ TNA FO 371/24301, Halifax to Campbell, 15 July 1940.

¹⁰⁷ TNA FO 371/24301, 'Anglo-French Relations', 7 July 1940.

¹⁰⁸ Duroselle, *L'Abime*, pp. 296-98.

¹⁰⁹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 46.

Whereas Churchill assessed the necessity for action in strategic and political terms, French and British naval commanders clung onto the inviolability of military codes of honour. In the days prior to Operation Catapult, Darlan's repeated rejection of British demands to hand over or sail French ships from the Mediterranean was accompanied by an incomprehension as to why such action was necessary. Having given his word that he would never surrender the fleet and that he had ordered its scuttling if the Germans or Italians tried to seize it, Darlan saw no need for further measures.¹¹¹ The Admiralty took a similar view. Many naval officers trusted that the French would not allow their ships to fall into enemy hands.¹¹² Dudley Pound retained his faith in Darlan's honour as a fellow admiral.¹¹³ Cunningham, meanwhile, insisted that Godfroy was a 'man of honour' and considered the prospect of Darlan willingly handing over the fleet 'unthinkable'.¹¹⁴ By contrast, Churchill, the Cabinet and the Foreign Office were unwilling to risk the nation's defences on the private word of men they believed had already betrayed Britain.¹¹⁵ As well as seeking a decisive resolution to the crisis, they took a more pragmatic view of France's military and political leaders than the Admiralty, with one Foreign Office official noting that Pound had 'too much confidence in old friends and sailors of other races'.¹¹⁶ Despite their differing approaches, however, the Admiralty and the Cabinet agreed on the importance of avoiding any unnecessary affront to French honour. The Admiralty therefore informed the French navy that it did not doubt the 'good faith' of Darlan's assurances on the French fleet but feared he would not be in a position to oppose German or Italian attempts to seize it.¹¹⁷ The Cabinet showed a similar sensitivity. Rather than telling Gensoul that it would be 'dishonourable' to allow the French fleet to fall into

¹¹¹ TNA FO 371/24311, Campbell final dispatch, 27 June 1940.

¹¹² TNA CAB 65/13/50, Confidential annex, 24 June 1940, 10.30am.

¹¹³ P. M. H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1978), p. 92.

¹¹⁴ Cunningham, *Sailor's Odyssey*, pp. 244-45.

¹¹⁵ TNA CAB 65/13/50, War Cabinet confidential annex, 24 June 1940, 10.30am.

¹¹⁶ TNA FO 371/24348, handwritten note, 24 June; note, 25 June 1940.

¹¹⁷ TNA PREM 3/197/4, message to CAA from Admiralty, 26 June 1940.

enemy hands, it suggested that communications should stress how the British proposals were consistent with French honour.¹¹⁸

The British government's contention that it had acted on behalf of a French nation whose political and military leaders had betrayed it was supported by General de Gaulle.¹¹⁹ The Free French leader maintained that Pétain's government did not represent the 'true' France and that the honour of the nation could only be served by continuing the war.¹²⁰ Despite not having been consulted by the British before the operation, de Gaulle publicly gave it his endorsement in a BBC radio broadcast on 8 July. Speaking directly to the French people, he asked them not to think about the 'deplorable and detestable' events at Mers-el-Kébir but about the wider goals of victory and liberation.¹²¹ Seeking to refute accusations that he was a puppet of the British government, he described his 'grief and anger' at the losses and condemned attempts to glorify the operation as a military victory. Nevertheless, de Gaulle accepted that the ships had to be destroyed to prevent them from being used by the enemy, insisting that the defeat of Britain would seal the 'enslavement' of France.¹²² For all the many resentments he was to hold against the British over his long political career, de Gaulle's endorsement of the Mers-el-Kébir operation was truly remarkable. It stood as a powerful testimony to the legitimacy of the action and the British government's justification of it.

¹¹⁸ TNA CAB 65/14/1, War Cabinet, confidential annex, 1 July 1940, 6pm.

¹¹⁹ CAB 65-8-3 – War Cabinet, 2 July 1940, 12 noon. Chin, p. 81.

¹²⁰ Charles de Gaulle, Appel prononcé à la radio de Londres, 22 June 1940, <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr/textes/degaulle22061940.htm>, accessed 10 November 2022; Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs, Vol. 1, The Call to Honour 1940-1942*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (London: Collins, 1955), p. 97; Julian Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), pp. 137-38.

¹²¹ "'Tragedy' of Oran", *The Times*, 9 July 1940, p. 3.

¹²² Ibid.

Conclusion

Much of the bitterness of the French response to Operation Catapult derived from a sense that the British government seemed to treat the loss of French sailors, ships and diplomatic relations as mere collateral damage. The apparent callousness of the attack was taken as evidence that it was merely a cover for Britain to pursue its global ambitions at France's expense.¹²³ Moreover, when the French fleet at Toulon scuttled itself in November 1942, Darlan claimed moral vindication for the position he had adopted in July 1940. The arrival of German and Italian forces to the unoccupied zone saw the French navy take action to prevent its ships falling into Axis hands, defying even the instructions of the Vichy government. Writing to Churchill in early December 1942, Darlan claimed that the French navy's action showed that he had been right all along.¹²⁴ In the circumstances of early July 1940, however, the British government faced a supreme emergency that meant it could not risk the nation's security on mere verbal promises. Pétain's government may have insisted that the armistice terms preserved French sovereignty, but it was a delusion that the British government saw through from the outset. Quite simply, there was no guarantee that France's navy would remain in French hands. The issue was therefore not so much the reason for Operation Catapult as the nature with which it was conducted.

A *Times* editorial of 6 July 1940 summed up the difficulties facing the British government. While the British maintained that they had higher moral values than other nations, the article claimed, they needed to avoid those moral values seeming a hindrance to their ability to

¹²³ Lucien Bourgues, 'L'inconcevable agression', *Le Petit Parisien*, 5 July 1940, p. 1.

¹²⁴ Churchill, *Finest Hour*, p. 203.

undertake difficult and contentious military action.¹²⁵ In pursuit of domestic and international support for its continuing war effort, the British government used violence to send a signal of its determination to pursue victory at any cost. At the same time, however, it had to ensure that such violence did not undermine its claims to be acting legitimately and in the moral interest. While Operation Catapult was not the first such use of military force, the British government centred its justification on claims of the wider exigencies of defeating the extraordinary threat posed by Nazism. The violence at Mers-el-Kébir was not a deviation from Britain's moral undertakings, nor was it a sign that the 'mask' had slipped. It was rather that the British government's belief in the moral superiority of its cause became at once a driving factor and a justification for its use of violence.

¹²⁵ 'A Tragic Necessity', *The Times*, 6 July 1940, p. 1.