

Teachers' guide 2: Dunkirk



Background: This teachers' guide is designed to provide information about and ideas around teaching the events of Dunkirk, with an additional focus on some of the memorials to the Dunkirk evacuation that have been erected in the years since. These notes and teaching suggestions are not intended to be completely comprehensive but can be used as a starting point and combined with other resources. As well as learning about what happened at Dunkirk, this topic can be used as an introduction to the many different types of war memorials that exist because of the range of sometimes unusual memorials to the events. The suggestions below are guidance only and you will need to adapt them to suit your class and curriculum and possibly spread the activities over more than one lesson.

Suitable for: Key Stage 3

Learning objective: Pupils will learn:

- What happened at Dunkirk
- That there are different types of war memorial

Key information

- Dunkirk refers to the evacuation of troops of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from Dunkirk, France, in 1940 after they had become trapped there by the advancing German forces. The code name for this was Operation Dynamo.
- The BEF was in France to defend it against the German army. During the early summer of 1940 the German army advanced rapidly. On 10th May it attacked Belgium and the Netherlands and Brussels fell on the 17th.
- By the 20th May the Germans had reached the coast at the Channel and British, Belgian and French troops had been forced to withdraw, becoming trapped between advancing forces and the sea. Realising the problem, the decision had been taken by Lord Gort, the commander of the BEF, to evacuate and withdrawal to Dunkirk was ordered.
- To the BEF's advantage, German forces advancing towards the coast came to a halt partly due to concerns over going on with tanks. Continued attacks on the Allies were left to the German Luftwaffe. Their advance did continue but the delay had given the Allies time to prepare for the evacuation.
- The official order to begin the evacuation came on the 26th (some had already taken place) and on the 27th a call was put out for support from any other ships and boats. By the 31st, more than 400 small boats had been volunteered by their owners or seized as part of the operation. These became known as the 'Little Ships' of Dunkirk. Their key advantage was their size, which allowed them to get nearer than larger ships to the beaches where soldiers were waiting to be evacuated, and could therefore ferry them out to the larger ships. In many

War Memorials Trust 14 Buckingham Palace Road London SW1W 0QP

Telephone: 020 7233 7356/ 0300 123 0764

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cases the owners of the Little Ships sailed them over the Channel demonstrating great bravery.

- During the evacuation the Luftwaffe kept up bombing attacks on Dunkirk, killing many civilians left in the town and attempting to prevent the evacuation. The RAF fought back but because this was unknown to the troops waiting on the beaches there were accusations that the RAF did nothing.
- The evacuation ended on 4th June 1940, by which time Calais had fallen and the Belgian army had surrendered. Altogether 338,226 troops had been rescued, including 225,000 British. The BEF, which had been in serious danger, had made it back to Britain meaning that Britain still had an army.
- In the aftermath of Operation Dynamo Churchill addressed the House of Commons. During his now famous 'we shall fight on the beaches' speech, he reminded the Commons that "we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations." While there was a sense of triumph, with the evacuation being described as a 'miracle,' Churchill was careful in his speech not to portray it as a military success.
- There were 68,000 BEF casualties in total, including dead, wounded, missing and taken prisoner. In addition, much heavy equipment and transport had been abandoned in France.
- On 14th June German troops entered Paris, and France surrendered on the 22nd.

Suggested teaching and activities

1. Examine the events that led up to the evacuation of BEF troops from Dunkirk in 1940 and ensure pupils understand the key elements of what happened. Alongside the information provided here there is much material available about Dunkirk from some of the websites listed at www.warmemorials.org/links, including images, maps, videos and written accounts.
2. The impact of Dunkirk on the war can also be examined, along with other key events of the war, as a way of identifying significant turning points and what might have happened if events had gone differently. You could do this especially if you are doing a deeper chronological study of the war as suggested in War Memorials Trust's 'Teachers' guide 1' on the start of the war and its legacy.
3. A study of Dunkirk and its aftermath provides an opportunity to examine whether Dunkirk was a success or failure. Reports at the time tended to portray it positively, aiming to boost morale among the population that would read the papers. They focused on the fact that troops were evacuated and the BEF largely saved, calling it the 'Miracle of Dunkirk' and highlighting the bravery of the troops and their rescuers. The 'Little Ships' is now, too, one of the key things that make up the popular image of Dunkirk today (this is evident in a number of more recent memorials to Dunkirk) and this, the improvisation and bravery involved, can imply success.

However, as Churchill's speech demonstrates, the events at Dunkirk at the time represented a disaster in terms of military tactics. Pupils could examine different accounts of what happened at Dunkirk from the time and consider their own view. They can also use this as an opportunity to learn about different historical sources, how/why they show different interpretations and why they may or may not be reliable. Finally, they could consider how the

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popular image of Dunkirk has changed over time in the last 70 years and how reports, accounts and films and the media have portrayed it at different times.

4. Alongside the above suggestion of examining how Dunkirk has been portrayed and interpreted, pupils can also look at how it has been remembered, because regardless of opinions on its success or failure it has been commemorated. There are a number of war memorials to Dunkirk, some of which are described in detail on the accompanying 'Dunkirk memorials information sheet.' Others are shown on the accompanying 'Dunkirk memorials' PowerPoint which could aid class discussion.
 - a. These memorials can be used as part of an introduction to the purpose and nature of war memorials generally. War memorials can be any object that were intended to commemorate a war or those affected by it. They take many forms – you may find it helpful to use WMT's Gallery of war memorials and 'Introduction to war memorials' materials to familiarise pupils with key background information on war memorials. Some Dunkirk memorials, such as the 'Sundowner,' are quite unusual and can act as an example of different types of war memorials. Pupils could consider which memorial types they think are effective.
 - b. The idea of success or failure, explored in the activity suggested above, can also be extended to war memorials. Many memorials, particularly those erected relatively recently, to Dunkirk focus on the evacuation of troops and the success of this. What does this make us think about the events of Dunkirk? What can we learn from war memorials more generally about the events they commemorate? As a source of information how useful are they?

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