It is eighty years since Winston Churchill used his victory address on the BBC World Service on May 13 1945 to lambast Taoiseach Éamon de Valera and his neutrality policy during the Second World War.

“Owing to the action of Mr de Valera, so much at variance with the temper and instinct of thousands of Southern Irishmen who hastened to the battlefront to prove their ancient valour, the approaches which the Southern Irish ports and airfields could so easily have guarded were closed by the hostile aircraft and U-boats.”

Listening to the speech, which was broadcast to a huge global audience, it is clear that Churchill deliberately emphasised the different syllables of de Valera’s name to subliminally conflate the devil, evil, and Éire, mispronouncing Dev’s name as “D’evil Éire”, as [Ryle Dwyer](https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-20330428.html) notes.

The British Prime Minister continued “This was indeed a deadly moment in our life, and if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland, we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr de Valera or perish forever from the earth.”

This was perhaps the most disingenuous passage of the speech. Churchill had regularly secretly disregarded Northern Ireland as a separate entity by offering a united Ireland in return for the abandonment of neutrality. This is documented in his letter to US President Franklin D Roosevelt of 7 December 1940 and, following Pearl Harbor, his now-famous letter to de Valera, memorably quoting Thomas Davis in promising “a nation once again”.

The threat of military intervention, however, was a consistent feature of Churchill’s thinking on Ireland and he’d pursued brutish trade intervention, in the form of a debilitating supply squeeze.

He went on to name three Irishmen who had won the Victoria Cross. “I do not forget Lieutenant-Commander Esmonde, VC, DSO, Lance-Corporal Kenneally, VC, Captain Fegen, VC, and other Irish heroes that I could easily recite, and all bitterness by Britain for the Irish race dies in my heart.” These men were a small component of the [considerable number who fought for Britain in the conflict](https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/4451?lang=en).

Although Churchill’s speech was delivered in the aftermath of de Valera’s maladroit decision to visit the German legation to express formal condolences on the death of Hitler, as Conor Mulvagh puts it Churchill was nonetheless guilty of [‘overstepping his vitriol’](https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/20785434/). As the research of [Michael Kennedy](https://www.fourcourtspress.ie/books/archives/guarding-neutral-ireland) and others has established, Ireland’s tacit assistance to the Allies was considerable and the ports issue overstated.

And in claiming, in particularly gratuitous language, to have left de Valera’s government to “frolic with the German and later with the Japanese representatives to their heart’s content”, Churchill knowingly omitted the considerable Anglo-Irish intelligence sharing that had gone on during the war.

De Valera’s measured reply - considered by many his finest speech - was broadcast live on Radio Éireann late on Sunday evening, May 16, 1945.

He began by thanking God for sparing Ireland from the ravages of war, before turning to Churchill’s words.

“Mr Churchill makes it clear that, in certain circumstances, he would have violated our neutrality and that he would justify his action by Britain’s necessity.”

“It seems strange to me that Mr Churchill does not see that this, if accepted, would mean that Britain’s necessity would become a moral code and that, when this necessity was sufficiently great, other people’s rights were not to count.

“It is quite true that other great powers believe in this same code — in their own regard — and have behaved in accordance with it. That is precisely why we have the disastrous successions of wars — World War Number One and World War Number Two — and shall there be World War Number Three?”

De Valera’s next reflection was perhaps his most effective line. “It is, indeed, hard for the strong to be just to the weak. But acting justly always has its rewards,” he said. This was a successful countering of the Anglo-American tendency to roll out a long list of allies as part of the ‘winning team’, thereby implying that for states to maintain neutral was (and is) always morally unjustifiable.

In a neat example of damning with faint praise, de Valera went on “By resisting his temptation in this instance, Mr Churchill, instead of adding another horrid chapter to the already bloodstained record of relations between England and this country, has advanced the cause of international morality an important step.”

De Valera’s speech, like neutrality policy as a whole, was resoundingly popular in Ireland. In a society marked by a pervasive mood and official culture of [‘moral neutrality’](https://cora.ucc.ie/items/e62c16b4-ffc9-4a62-8fd9-e34bef718912), the restrained and pious tone of the speech went down very well.

For his part, Britain’s top diplomat in Ireland, John Maffey, deemed that it was not Churchill’s speech, but de Valera’s retort which “bore the stamp of the elder statesman” and recorded how popular the Taoiseach’s response had been with the Irish public.

Assuming the moral high ground played out very well domestically for de Valera and his central point was, in large part, justified: unlike other ‘long haul’ neutral states of World War II, Ireland did [not gain materially or financially from its noncombatant status in the conflict.](https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526111302/)

Nonetheless, there was no doubting which statesman’s speech gained most international traction. Churchill’s address was broadcast around the world, while de Valera’s response was only broadcast on Radio Éireann.

What is perhaps most extraordinary about Churchill’s speech is the extent to which he went out of his way to mention Ireland, by any yardstick a bit player in the global conflagration which would define the twentieth century.

Its poisonous effect would be felt for years afterwards, illustrated most vividly in the relative freezing out of Ireland from the immediate post-war order and in the mistaken charge – still popularly encountered to this day – that Ireland ‘collaborated’ with Nazi Germany.