

Sir Winston Churchill: The greatest Briton?

1945 Victory and defeat: video transcript

The end of the war in Europe brought scenes of tumultuous rejoicing in Britain. 'Weary and worn and impoverished but undaunted and now triumphant', wrote Churchill, 'we had a moment that was sublime.' But for the exultant people Churchill stood for all that had brought them through the dark years to victory. It was his moment of utter and temporary triumph.

Europe was free and it paused in its rejoicing to acclaim Churchill; his voice, his confident eccentricity, his arrogant and civilised contempt for the enemy had given them hope when hope seemed irrational. In Paris he was given the highest honour of France.

One after another the cities of liberated Europe paid their willing tribute to the man. No shadow from the future marred that deserved triumph. In a Berlin without Hitler he took the salute of the troops he had visited so often on the long and bloody road to this place. With him were some of the commanders who had survived his impatience and some of his colleagues in the coalition government that had shared his burden.

But the coalition government had ended. A general election had been promised the country as one of the immediate fruits of peace. Three weeks of uncertainty while the overseas military votes were counted. Not knowing the basis of his authority Churchill went to Potsdam. Here for the first time he met President Truman – his old friend Roosevelt had died a month before victory. This was Stalin's last meeting with the men he used as allies. Churchill was already worried by the Soviet drift back to hostility to the west. He wanted the west to keep the strength to negotiate from strength with a man who only understood power. He was to leave deeply dissatisfied.

Of the three who sat together at Potsdam two would remain in power for the next crucial years drawing apart in their leadership of east and west. But Churchill at 71 was to be thrown from office by one more of the violent acts of fate that dominated his career.

The day before the result was announced Churchill returned to London. He had been deposed. His personal prestige was not enough to save the Tory party from one of its major defeats.

Extract from BBC obituary of Churchill narrated by Richard Dimbleby