

# CHURCHILL AND HIS CRITICS

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'History' declared Winston Churchill in November 1940 panegyric to Neville Chamberlain, 'with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trails of the past, trying to reconstruct its themes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.' Churchill would probably have been very pleased by the historical cottage industry that has grown up around him and his reputation. Never far from controversy during his own lifetime, he would doubtless have taken enormous pleasure in defending himself from those who are today loosely called the 'revisionists.'

In one sense, of course, all history-writing is but a revision of the original version, and for some years after his death in 1965, writers about Churchill were merely seeking to restore the balance after the mass of hagiographies which had lauded him in the 1950s and early 1960s. Since then, however, and especially in the past decade, a new, highly critical tone has appeared – knocking, aggressively carping, sometimes frankly contemptuous of Churchill and his achievements.

It has all had surprisingly little effect on the public perception of the great man. The English-speaking peoples seem to have a settled view of Churchill's glory which no amount of historical debate will now alter. 'Churchill has a few detractors' wrote *The Sunday Telegraph* on the fiftieth anniversary of V E Day, 'but none has made much impression on the public view of him.' His popularity shows no sign of abating. The numbers visiting his home, Chartwell, have been increasing every year; a United States warship was named after him last year, the first English-man to be so honoured since the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and 140ft statue has been proposed for the white cliffs of Dover; a pair of his bedroom slippers recently fetched \$10,000 at auction. He regularly and easily wins Man of the Century contests, and was only just pipped at the post for Man of the Millennium by William Shakespeare, a defeat he would have taken much better than he did the result of the 1945 general election.

The virulence of the 1995 row over the purchase of his archives with money from the British National Lottery was a tribute to his continued pre-eminence in the national pantheon, as is the way in which both sides of the European-integration debate have attempted to appropriate his political legacy. When the would-be new fuehrer of Austria, Herr Jorg Haider, was reported to have criticized Churchill as a war criminal on a par with Hitler, it told the British public all it needed to know and received far more attention than his other more immediate pronouncements about the widening of the European Union.

In the popular, non-academic sense at least, Churchill-revisionism is redundant. Like Lincoln, Washington and Napoleon - or like his own antagonist Gandhi and de Gaulle - Churchill is so well-bunked that no amount of debunking books will have any appreciable effect on his standing. They will continue to be written, of course, but they will continue to have the same impact on public perception as does a tin-tack stuck into the hide of a great pachyderm. What in *Great Contemporaries* he called 'the grievous inquest of history' has sat in judgment on Churchill and has found that he has no case to answer. In certain historical and

academic circles, however, as well as in the mind of Vienna's putative chancellor, that verdict is considered unsafe.

The first set of Churchill-knockers are the ideologists. From the British author Clive Ponting on the Left to David Irving on the far Right, these people attempt to use various aspects of Churchill's career in order to make certain political points of their own. Depicting him as having a vicious or even evil personality, often by dragging quotations wildly out of context and ascribing motives so Machiavellian that they might even have shocked Churchill himself, the ideologists rapidly lose the sympathy and patience of most objective readers. If Churchill is so violently disliked by both extremes of the political spectrum, we rightly assume, he could not have been all that bad.

A second strand of Churchill revisionism comprise a critique which seems to be growing in American libertarian and isolationist circles. In Patrick Buchanan's recently published book, *A Republic, Not an Empire*, Churchill is denied a place on the side of the angels, and in a single half-hour speech at a history conference, the New York State University historian, Robert Raico, managed to level no fewer than thirty-two accusations against Churchill. According to him, Churchill was a crypto-socialist, and ethnic-cleanser, a war criminal, and a stooge of Stalin's. 'A man of blood and politico without principle,' Raico wrote in an article to support his thesis, 'whose apotheosis serves to corrupt every standard of honesty and morality in politics and history.' Rarely, I find, do the American revisionists take refuge in understatement.

There is a good deal of cross-fertilisation going on here. Many of the quotations Mr. Raico uses to illustrate his accusations are footnoted to have come from the work of Irving and Ponting; in turn Raico is quoted admiringly by Buchanan. Churchill also seems to be a powerful magnet for believers in conspiracy theories. Hardly a year goes by without a new book being published accusing him of luring Rudolf Hess to Scotland or having had prior knowledge of the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Mr. Raico himself even suspects that Churchill was probably responsible for torpedoing the *Lusitania* in order to bring America into the First World War, and argues that Churchill was wrong to, in his words, 'harp on' about the bombing potential of the Luftwaffe in his wilderness years of the 1930's. I have found that survivors of the London Blitz have their own comments to make on Mr. Raico's other statement that Hitler never had any intention of bombing their city, but these are certainly not repeatable in a place of worship. Indeed, this very place of worship stands testament to Hitler's malevolence and evil-doing, as well as to mankind's capacity to rise above him and his works.

A third and highly influential source of Churchill revisionism is provided by the press. Newspaper editors will affirm that Churchill stories make great copy; especially since the dead cannot sue for libel. We therefore see news stories in reputable newspapers which, had they been written in his lifetime, would have garnered Churchill millions. According to a compilation of recent news articles, Churchill was a drug-addict who helped his daughter-in-law to cuckold his own son. He ordered Mussolini's assassination, and then tried to recover compromising documents relating to a secret peace deal he had allegedly tried to arrange.

Churchill rarely smoked cigars, we've been told, but liked having lit ones around to accentuate his masculinity. According to various revisionists, he was a plagiarist, an

opportunist, a warmonger, a hypocrite, a fantasist, the creator of Nazism – ingenious one, that – a terrible military strategist, an unChristian deist and a pathological liar. Someone has even written a book which is listed as non-fiction, stating categorically that Churchill helped Martin Bormann escape from Berlin in 1945 and then found him a house near London in which to live out his days in comfort. The advance paid to the author of this drivel was reputed to be in the region of three quarters of a million dollars.

All one can do when faced with these patent absurdities is stay calm, go back to the authorities – usually Sir Martin Gilbert's magisterial eight-volume biography – examine the historical context and available evidence and work out the truth as forensically as possible. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Churchill comes off scot-free. I am not suggesting that Churchill is above all criticism. Quite obviously with a career so long and varied, involving twice crossing the floor of the House of Commons, and with the decisions he was called upon to make so momentous, of course his judgment on certain issues can legitimately be questioned; indeed he often questioned it himself in retrospect.

Over issues such as the Abdication Crisis, the Sidney Street siege, the Gallipoli landings, the handling of the General Strike, the partition of Ireland, rejoining the Gold Standard, the insistence on Germany's unconditional surrender, Bomber Command's targeting policy, the refusal to help the July Plotters, British official recognition of Soviet guilt over the Katyn massacres, the 1943 'soft underbelly of Europe' strategy, Indian nationalism, and the proposed bombing of Auschwitz, Churchill has been criticized by distinguished academics and responsible politicians and journalists, both during his lifetime and after it. (I personally believe he made the right choice in almost every single one of those cases, displaying a far better track record of good judgment than any of his contemporaries). Such criticism was and is fair enough. What is now being seen, however, is a far more acerbic and hostile series of criticisms leveled at Churchill's very patriotism and honour.

By far the most cogent criticisms of Churchill's career, and the ones most capable of scratching the edifice of what I nevertheless still consider to be his by now untarnishable reputation, are leveled by Dr. John Charmley and the Tory nationalist critique. In January 1993, Dr. Charmley, a former visiting Fellow here at Fulton, published *Churchill: the End of Glory*, which he followed up in 1995 with *Churchill's Grand Alliance*. Both were closely-argued and well written analyses of Churchill's personal responsibility for the collapse of British power in the twentieth century. Churchill is also blamed for preventing Charmley's hero, Neville Chamberlain, from successfully pursuing appeasement to its intended conclusion, a German-Soviet war.

Churchill is then accused of effectively betraying the British Empire to the United States through naivety and an over-exaggerated view of British postwar weakness, and also of letting socialism into Britain by the back door. This view is, I believe, fundamentally flawed, in that it mixes up cause and effect and hardly allows for Churchill's limited alternatives. Charmley's work, along with that of the politician-diarist historian, the late Alan Clark in *The Tories* (1999), and Professor Maurice Cowling in related historical fields, nonetheless constitutes the most significant attempt to dislodge the great man from his Parliament Square pedestal.

It is worthwhile, therefore, to look closely at the contention that the British Empire ought to have made peace with Nazi Germany in 1940 or 1941. For I believe it would have been disastrous both for Britain and for the prospects of a civilized, peaceful, democratic Western Europe such as has existed since 1945. Any advantages that so craven a treaty might have produced would have been marginal, prohibitively expensive and probably only very short-lived.

Since before the time of the Spanish Armada of 1588 it has been British policy to oppose any hegemonistic continental power which sought to control those continental Channel ports in Holland and what is now Belgium from which an invasion of Southern England might be launched. Phillip II of Spain, Louis XIV, Napoleon and the Kaiser all suffered significant reverses in successive wars over this issue. To have left Hitler in undisputed control of these ports in 1940 would have entailed decades of danger, with astronomically high defense expenditure and the need for perpetual vigilance well into the 1950s and probably beyond.

With Britain out of the war, Hitler would not have needed to swoop south into Yugoslavia and Greece in the spring of 1941. He would thus have been able to launch his invasion of Russia six weeks earlier than he did, with divisions taken from France and the Low Countries as well as those he had originally earmarked in Germany and Poland. Even as it was, the Wehrmacht reached Moscow's underground stations, captured Stalingrad and subjected Leningrad to a grueling thousand-day siege. Had the Germans pushed the Soviets back beyond the Urals, Hitler would have been master of Europe from Brest to Sverdolovsk. Instead, our alliance with Russia allowed the Allies – once Hitler's lunatic declaration of war had brought the United States into the conflict against Germany – to supply the Red Army with 5,000 tanks, 7,000 aircraft, 51,000 jeeps and 51 million pairs of boots, assistance which contributed materially to its ultimate victory.

Just as disastrous for Britain's hopes of long-term independence would be if Stalin had defeated Hitler and the Red Army had poured westward to Berlin and beyond, with no Anglo-American army in France and Germany to stop him pushing on further. Stalin's control of the Channel ports would be no less dangerous to Britain than Hitler's.

Add to this the fact that Hitler was undertaking his own nuclear research, while Stalin was learning about the Allied nuclear breakthroughs from his Western spies, and the necessity for British participation in a drastically-foreshortened war becomes obvious. For either dictator to have been left, perhaps for years, in control of Europe would have necessarily been disastrous for Britain's hopes of genuine independence.

Furthermore, the great cause of trying to encourage the United States to adopt a 'Germany First' policy in the great struggle to save global civilization would have been utterly wrecked if Britain had come to terms with Hitler after the evacuation from Dunkirk. It took Britain's dogged resistance during the Blitz and the Battle of Britain to convince America of Britain's worthiness as an ally. Although Britain did indeed wind up in hock to her after the war, she would have been in a no better financial state as a result of remaining in decades-long military readiness, waiting for the inevitable moment when Hitler suddenly revoked his peace treaty and attacked. He had, after all, ripped up every other single treaty he had ever signed.

The war had been going on at sea for nine months by the time of the Dunkirk evacuation; sailors had perished, ships carrying child evacuees to Canada had been torpedoed, Britain's blood was up. To have made a palpably ignoble peace would have dealt a crushing blow to her imperial pride and self-esteem, and would doubtless have caused severe internal ructions fatal to the crucial sense of national unity fostered since September 1939. The demoralization of the United Kingdom and her imperial allies was too high a price to pay to escape the perils of the Blitz.

As for the accusation that Churchill killed off the Empire he loved; in fact, after the 1935 India Act, the Empire was well on the way towards self-governance. The Second World War sped that process up, no doubt, but the great days of Empire were long over by the time Churchill came to power in May 1940, and they were not coming back. On a more emotional level, what glory would there have been in the possession of an Empire mortgaged to Britain by the grace of Adolph Hitler?

To have made peace with Hitler in 1940 and thus to have forsworn the hope, however remote it might have seemed at the time, one day to liberate Europe from Nazism, would have been to condemn the continent to what Churchill that year famously termed 'a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.' Hardly a European Jew could have survived the extermination process which had been begun on an *ad hoc* basis in Poland in September 1939 if Hitler had been allowed undisputed possession of Europe and no Allied invasion had taken place in 1944, 1945 or perhaps any time later. The Great Powers are presently enjoying their longest period of peace since the rise of the nation-state; would that really have been possible if Hitler had been allowed to keep his spoils of the war in 1940?

Churchill knew that to have made peace would be to forfeit his own and his country's honour. I opened with a quotation from his panegyric to Chamberlain, and would like to close with the sentences which succeeded it. After speaking of History's flickering lamp trying 'to kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days,' he asked:

'What is the worth of all this? The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we always march in the ranks of honour.' Despite all the unrelenting efforts of his revisionist detractors, Winston Churchill marches there still.