

EMPIRE FIRST
Churchill's War Against D-Day
Graeme Bowman
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Hats off to Winston? Not in this book. The continued deification of Churchill is one aspect of WW2 that is worth re-visiting, and over 450 pages Graeme Bowman proves, comprehensively – with a few specific caveats – that he was a menace to the UK's efficient conduct of the war.

His personal history, the milieu and context within which he thrived, and his political career are all set out. Central to this, and typical of his generation, was an uncritical belief in the British Empire. In practical terms this meant control of the Mediterranean and, via the Suez Canal, the trade route to India. In 1929 Churchill was 55, noted for a debating style based around much use of windy rhetoric, and apparently washed-up. He was widely regarded as having been a poor Chancellor of the Exchequer under Stanley Baldwin in the 1920s and his return to office in 1939, following the nadir of his support for Edward VIII in 1936, was one of the great comebacks of UK political history. His rallying of the cause in May 1940, and the determination to resist in the months that followed, secured his reputation, which has lasted to the present day.

But, as Bowman shows, the charge sheet against him is also significant. There was the planning for a Baltic expedition, without air cover, in the autumn of 1939; the attempt at turning the war into an anti-communist campaign in Finland a few months later; the disastrous failure in Norway that this produced (which, ironically, propelled Churchill to power); the diversion of forces from Libya to Greece in early 1941 when the success of the British offensive seemed secure – and the subsequent routing of those forces in, and their evacuation from, Greece a few months later. You could also toss into the pot the continued failure to reinforce Malaya (and the largely racial assumptions that went with that) which resulted in the UK's worst ever military defeat at Singapore in

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As a strategist – and he liked to think in grand terms – Churchill's abiding concern was the maintenance of the UK's primacy in the Mediterranean. All his faults, the obsession with sideshows, the interest in naval warfare which meant that the UK's allies were relied on to do the fighting on land, stemmed from this. At its root was a belief in the absolute primacy of trade, the function of the state being to preserve this, and thereby preserve prosperity (for those dictating the terms of trade) at all costs. In having these views Churchill was part of a tradition, known loosely as 'the British Way of War'.

Made popular from 1932 by Captain Basil Liddell Hart, this claimed that directly intervening on 'the Continent' with a great army was a mistake, and that historically the British had left major land battles to her allies, intervening only through naval power. There was some truth to this. Churchill was a direct descendant of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, whose successes at Ramillies and Blenheim early in the 18th century had thrilled generations of schoolboys and were regarded as exemplars of British military prowess. In fact, Marlborough usually commanded coalition forces in which the English contingent was a minority, and his strategic objective was to preserve Spanish Flanders and the Netherlands as a buffer state against France, thereby preventing the rise of France to European dominance.

In another example of English isolationism from 'the Continent', thirty years after Marlborough, Prime Minister Robert Walpole kept Britain neutral in the War of Polish Succession, memorably remarking 'There are fifty thousand men slain this year in Europe, and not one Englishman'. Later, the Duke of Wellington would be much acclaimed as the victor over Napoleon at Waterloo. As some point out – not that many remember – the UK contribution in troops to this encounter was slight: most of those fighting against the French were German and Dutch. And, even if Napoleon had prevailed, there were extensive Russian and Austrian forces that he would have had to reckon with not far behind Blucher's Prussian army.

To support his thesis that Churchill did everything possible to avoid instigating the D-Day landings, Bowman provides a well-written account of the campaign in North Africa, showing the many failures and the continued British inability to defeat small German and Italian forces. (In using the term 'British' we should recognize that most of the troops that defended Egypt were either Indian or Australian.) Eventually the Desert campaign did turn in the UK's

² Bowman's book includes an addendum that discusses the Bengal Famine, in which 3 million civilians perished 1942-1944. This was approximately six times the number of total UK casualties, civilian and military, for the entire 1939-1945 period. Churchill failed to prioritise or co-ordinate relief efforts to India address this.

favour; but after the US entry into the war, and the Soviet counter-attack before Moscow (both December 1941), Churchill and the UK generally had less influence. Neither the US nor the USSR would countenance pointless sideshows, though Churchill would continue to launch these as late as the autumn of 1943 in the Aegean. In preference to a cross-Channel assault in 1944, Churchill, instead, wanted to advance through Greece and Yugoslavia. The disastrous conduct of the conflict in the Aegean (known officially as the Dodecanese campaign)³ killed off his hope of avoiding D-Day.

There was, of course, a positive side to him that requires acknowledgement. He 'read' Hitler correctly from very early on; his defiance between May and September 1940 saved the UK and western democracy; and his opposition to the Nazi regime was not just due to a fear that it would supercede the British Empire: it was based on moral considerations as well. To this I would add, after reading *Great Contemporaries* (1937), that he wrote well, and if you could get him out of 'House of Commons mode', was actually quite fair-minded.⁴

For anyone familiar with the military and strategic history of the period, as experienced from a British point of view, a couple of points might occur following a reading of the book. Firstly, it can be argued quite plausibly that Churchill's escapade in Greece unwittingly saved Russia and, by virtue of doing so, changed the course of the war. Hitler's original starting date for Operation Barbarossa had been 15 May. It was put back to 22 June after a British-inspired coup in Belgrade (27 March 1941) installed an anti-Hitler regime, necessitating a German preliminary assault in the Balkans. It seems reasonable to conclude that, if the Germans had arrived earlier, Moscow might have fallen. However, the Nazis' advance was delayed by a combination of severe weather, continued Russian resistance and the Greek diversion.

Though a late-night man, happy discussing tactics well into the early hours with colleagues over brandy and cigars, there is no evidence that Churchill consciously planned the British expedition to Greece so that it would delay the German attack on Russia. But in this case, completely by accident, his pursuit of 'the British Way of War' had a benign outcome.

Secondly, though it is outside the parameters of Bowman's book, how certain are we about Churchill's popularity in 1940-1941, particularly among those with political influence? Why did Rudolf Hess fly to the UK in May 1941?

³ Waged in September-November 1943 this resulted in 55,000 Italian and British losses (troops killed or captured) against 1,100 German.

⁴ *Great Contemporaries* is a collection of 25 essays Churchill wrote as a working journalist between 1928 and 1931, many of them taking the form of a lengthy and very literary book review.

Who was he supposed to meet, and what did he plan to discuss with them? Could it be, that after being headed off in May 1940, those who wanted Churchill shunted aside were much more careful, but prepared to dump him a year later?⁵ The collapse of the Greek expedition, and the German/Italian reconquest of Libya, both significant British defeats, happened in late April 1941. A careful scrutiny of the material published, both here and abroad, suggests it is entirely possible that many prominent figures – in the military, royalty, the security services and Parliament, where Churchill lacked a majority – wanted out of the war by this point, via a compromise peace. However, as we know, rather than meeting whoever he was supposed to meet, Hess fell (literally) into the custody of the Home Guard after losing his way, running out of fuel and having to bail out of his aircraft. If there is any truth in this reading of events, then Churchill's standing today as the defiant war leader who galvanised the free world to victory when all seemed lost, owes its existence to the most amazing stroke of luck: that Rudolf Hess got lost in the dark.

The book comes with a massive bibliography, including many primary sources. Bowman makes carefully researched points and arrives at conclusions that are well put and corroborated by his evidence. As a corrective to the increasingly Disneyfied version of WW2 that still prevails in the UK, this is an important work. It is also self-published, as an increasing number of books are now.⁶ Why is this? Given the tiny advances most writers get, if they get one at all, and the low production costs now possible . . . Bowman's book should really have been snapped up by a mainstream publisher. Instead, the preference for cookery books, lifestyle books, celebrity biographies and shallow political memoirs carries all before it, to the detriment of serious political and historical discussion. For all his faults, one wonders what Churchill would have thought of that.

*Simon Matthews' new book, Looking for a New England,
the sequel to his Psychedelic Celluloid,
was published on 28 January 2021.*

⁵ Churchill became PM on 10 May 1940, and successfully faced down a serious attempt, led by Lord Halifax between 24 May and 28 May, to seek a separate peace with Germany, using Italy as an intermediary. See John Lukacs *Five Days in London, May 1940* (London: Yale University Press, 1999). However: approaches to, and from, the German resistance about a compromise peace continued thereafter, as did diplomatic discussions via the Vatican, the International Red Cross, Sweden, Portugal and Finland. Some, but not all of these, were authorised by the UK government.

⁶ For another example of a fine book neglected by the wider publishing industry see Bryan Clough's *State Secrets: The Kent-Wolkoff Affair* (2005), reviewed in *Lobster* 50.