

2019

Winston Churchill: Guardian of Civilization

T.J. McCarrick

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCarrick, T.J. (2019) "Winston Churchill: Guardian of Civilization," *The Histories*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol10/iss1/6

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

IV
Winston Churchill:
Guardian of Civilization

By T.J. McCarrick '12



It is often said among historians that “we stand upon the shoulders of giants,” learning from and building on the wisdom won by the tiresome work of great men and women before us. But with that prominence comes a price, the price of being put on trial again and again before the ever changing tribunal of history. As John Lukacs writes, “Historical thinking and writing and study are, by their nature, revisionist. The historian, unlike a judge, is permitted to try a case over and over again, often after finding and employing new evidence” (Lukacs, 21). That Winston Churchill is such a historical giant well-tested in the hallowed halls of history is beyond dispute; what is not is what kind of giant Churchill was and whether his contributions to the course of world events were on par positive and negative. In analyzing two definitive works with differing perspectives on Churchill, *Churchill: Visionary. Statesman. Historian.* by John Lukacs and *Churchill: The End of Glory* by John Charmley, the following question can be answered: Should Winston Churchill be hailed as the savior of Western civilization or should he be vilified as an alcoholic imperialist drunk? The answer, as it often does, lies somewhere in the middle.

The above notwithstanding, questions of Churchill’s character often lend themselves to answers of a polarizing quality. John Charmley’s analysis in *The End of Glory* champions the type of negative character portrayals of Churchill that have become vogue as of late. Paying some small praise to Churchill’s positive characteristics, Charmley proceeds lambasting what he considers to be an overly romanticized myth about Churchill. He writes, “Showman that he was, stalking through the bomb-sites with taurine glares of defiance, massive cigar stuck firmly in his mouth, he became the mythical ‘Good ole Winnie’” (152). What this myth obscures, however, was a profoundly impulsive, ill-tempered, intellectually lazy man. And yet, despite these shortcomings, Churchill’s indefatigable ambition propelled him to his position of prominence. Charmley, quoting Churchill explains, “You know I have unbounded faith in myself” (Charmley, 9).

Underpinning this faith, though, was an insufferable vanity which, coupled with his mental acumen proved lethal. Charmley explains that the “ebullient” and “self-centered” Churchill, left unchecked, became intolerable in public office. He writes, “Churchill had little time or space for other people and their opinions ... One of the reasons why the Churchill marriage was a success... was that for most of it Clementine had the strength of character to stand up to her husband and prevent him becoming in the domestic sphere what he too easily became in the public sphere, a petty tyrant” (86). Much of this self-assuredness and sense of entitlement

is often ascribed to his aristocratic upbringing. Lukacs, quoting *The Daily News* in 1908 explains, "To the insatiable curiosity and the enthusiasm of a child he joins the frankness of the child. He has no reserves and no shams. He has that scorn of concealment that belongs to a caste which never doubts itself" (Lukacs, 143). And because of this air of superiority, Churchill was never effective in applying his intelligence to others arguments. Charmley explains, "Churchill's self-education...provided no training in learning how to think, how to weigh arguments, and how to judge your own ideas against those of others...he was marked by egotism and naïveté" (152). This boyish arrogance and temperament coupled with Churchill's high office placed him, on more than one occasion, in the position to affect change, not always for the better.

It is crucial, therefore, to isolate some of Churchill's official failures as distinct from but connected to his personal flaws. The first grouping concerns his hearty endorsement of a number of failed military strategies. The most well known is his fierce advocacy, during World War I, of a naval operation through the Dardanelles as a part of a grandiose scheme to near instantly knock Turkey out of the war. In short, it was a disaster, as predicted by a number of military men. Lukacs explains, "Battleships and other warships were sunk; the rest of the fleets had to turn around; their naval artillery could not (and should not have been expected to) destroy the guns of the fortifications on land; the subsequent decision to land troops and conquer the Gallipoli peninsula over land turned into another sad disaster" (143). In this vein, Churchill was hopelessly wrong in terms of his tactical vision. This is to say nothing of his strategic vision which left much to be desired as well – given the state of mobility and technological capacity of German forces, it is difficult to suggest the Balkans as the linchpin of penetrating German territory. This provides just one in a series of tactical military blunders advocated by Churchill including his support of the White Russians during the Bolshevik Revolution as well as the failed Norwegian campaign in WWII.

Additionally, Charmley argues that Germanophobia ultimately caused Churchill to consummate an illegitimate marriage with Stalin's Russia – a marriage which would bear bitter fruit. Regarding Churchill's fear of the Germans, Charmley asserts that Churchill was really nothing more than a warmonger preparing for Armageddon. As a result, any chance of making peace with Germany was not entertained. Charmley writes:

The 'finest hour' myth has such a hold on the British national consciousness that even to suggest, fifty years later, that a compromise peace might have been had is enough to prompt letters to the press denouncing such an idea as 'shameful' and the product of 'dubious hindsight'...The best accounts of the Second World War written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of 1939 declared grandly that after the fall of France, German peace feelers were brushed aside with scant evidence of interest in them...there was a continued interest in 'peace.' (Charmley, 422-423)

This interest, according to Charmley was not only among many British officials (though he contends evidence of that is conveniently in absentia), but also among the British populace. Churchill, however, at every juncture, from Munich to Operation Barbarossa, ignored the possibility of peace with Germany creating, "the spectre of a menace which was even greater than the one he destroyed" (Lukacs, quoting Charmley, 151).

That menace which was borne of Churchill's antipathy towards Germany was Stalin's red menace in the East. In order to counteract growing German power in continental Europe, Churchill envisioned an Anglo-Russian alliance as a buffer to German dominance of Europe. Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union allowed this vision to become a reality. "Churchill had long

trumpeted the necessity for a Russian alliance, but lulled by the siren voice of Ivan Maisky and the grandeur of his own vision, he had never stopped to ask what might be the price which Stalin would demand” (Charmley, 361). This quotation demonstrates a point central to, what Charmley believes, is one of Churchill’s most egregious shortcomings – the auctioning of Eastern Europe to Russia. Lukacs explains the position of those historians who join Charmley’s company in this view. He writes, “They accuse Churchill of double standards. He, who fought bitterly and single-mindedly against the appeasement of Germany and of Hitler, went a very long way to appease Stalin and Russia...His hatred of Germany blinded him throughout the war. It also made him an accomplice in allowing Russia and Communism to advance far into the heart of Europe” (Lukacs 21-22). In this way, some suggest that Churchill foolishly dismissed any chance of peace with the devil he knew (Hitler) and in so doing condemned Eastern Europe to the devil he didn’t (Stalin).

The inability of Churchill to halt the Soviet advance into the heart of Europe lies very closely near the final shortcoming to be analyzed – his subservience to the United States. Perhaps begrudgingly, Churchill realized that the 20th century was not to be hailed as a British one. Any chance of such a vision would likely have been shattered with the houses of London during Germany’s blitzkrieg. By this point the eventual liquidation of the British Empire Churchill sought to maintain was inevitable, and playing second-fiddle to the Americans was the only way Britain could achieve some sort of peace and independence with honor. But what really was won? Lukacs quoting Charmley explains, “One simple fact: the Prime Minister’s policy in 1940 had, in effect, failed. Far from securing Britain’s independence, it had mortgaged it to America” (150). And so Churchill’s Germanophobia, far from securing Britain and Europe from the Nazi war machine, traded their respective futures to the Americans and the Soviets.

But is Charmley’s portrait of Churchill a true one, a fair one? Simply put, no, it is not. Leaving aside the factual inaccuracies, fatally flawed historical lessons, and widespread popularity among Nazi supporters (which will be discussed later), there are two other issues looming large for Charmley. The first is his obvious bias. John Lukacs describes the important influence of Piers Mackesy, the son of Major General Macksey, on Charmley. Such a relation would be unremarkable excepting the fact that there were personal disagreements between the Major General and Churchill. Mentioned only in passing by Churchill in his War Memoirs, Charmley devotes “five pages and ten references to Churchill’s quarrel with that incompetent general, while there is but one single sentence about the Hitler-Stalin Pact...a very peculiar ratio for a historian” (153).

An additional problem is the manner in which he employs sources. Not even attempting any measure of impartiality, Charmley openly attacks, often in his notes, those historians with whose views he disagrees and simultaneously lavishes praise on those with whom he is in accord. One disturbing example is Lukacs’ illustration of Charmley’s reliance on David Irving, whose work has some notable anti-Semitic leanings. To wit, some of the following are examples of Charmley’s reliance on Irving: “Winston was certainly bankrolled by wealthy Jews” and “So was Churchill the hired help for a Jewish lobby which, regarding Jewish interests as superior to those of the British Empire, was determined to embroil that empire in a war on its behalf.” (153). (I would really hate to give in to the urge to draw parallels between Irving’s words and the words of a genocidal dictator in the Rhineland in 1940, but if the boot fits...) Charmley’s reliance on such works bespeaks a sad truth, the truth that he sought to find evidence for a previously held position and in so doing undertook not a “proper revisionism of a historian” but a “denigration by a pamphleteer” (152).

Did Churchill have his faults and personal shortcomings? Certainly; all people do. But Lukacs contends, and I tend to agree, that Churchill's virtues far outweighed his vices. A woman who Churchill fancied when he was younger put it best: "The first time you meet Winston you see all his faults, and the rest of your life you spend in discovering his virtues" (144). And those virtues were magnified one thousand fold as his political career blossomed. His wit, intelligence, foresight, and courage were put on full display, as were his faults. Lukacs explains, "Churchill's foresights were historical rather than political. Impetuosity, impatience, willfulness, fancifulness were Churchill's faults, often. Shortsightedness? No. An unwillingness to think? Seldom: perhaps never" (4). Such qualities contributed to Churchill's open-mindedness, an invaluable quality. Churchill himself once wrote, "An unchanging mind is an admirable possession – a possession which I devoutly hope I shall never possess" (138-139). But his ability to take seemingly contradictory policies should not be mistaken for indecision. Rather, his advocacies and policy positions were based in principle, allowing for flexible application. As such he simultaneously could warn of the dangers of Tory democracy and defend it, vigorously oppose Hitler while tolerating Stalin, and do about-faces on a number of positions concerning Ireland and India. It is through this lens that one must view his successes and failures.

One should not confuse my endorsement of a net positive view of Churchill to mean he had no practical failings. The Dardanelles debacle, the Norwegian nightmare, his imperialist leanings (especially towards withholding dominion status from India), and his failure to support German resistance movements are tragic. But it is important to remember that there is more than myth in Churchill's "finest hour." Earlier than all others, Churchill envisioned a vengeful Germany dominated by the increasingly radical, though, at that time, little known Adolf Hitler. As Hitler rose to power, Churchill's predictions came true. Lukacs writes, "He saw that Hitler had forged a formidable unity of a people; that German National Socialism was a terrific wave of a possible future; and it was against this that his Britain had to stand fast" (9). And stand fast it did, much to the chagrin of Charmley and Co. To negotiate with Hitler was fundamentally impossible as it would condemn Europe, and perhaps, Britain to complete and total German dominance. Again, Lukacs writes, "What is not speculation is what Churchill... called 'the slippery slope.' If... a British government had signaled as much as a cautious inclination to explore a negotiation with Hitler, amounting to a willingness to ascertain his possible terms, that would have been the first step onto a Slippery Slope from which there could be no retreat" (2). Churchill's unyielding courage in dismissing appeasement with Adolf Hitler made clear that though Britain could not defeat Germany by themselves (which later they were not), so long as Churchill's Britain pressed on, Hitler could not achieve his ultimate goal.

Enter the Churchill- Stalin relationship, borne of necessity – the necessity to stop Hitler at all costs. Lukacs explains, "As early as 1940 he saw two alternatives: either Germany dominates all of Europe; or Russia will dominate the eastern portion of Europe (at worst for a while): and half of Europe is better than none" (10). To be clear, Churchill abhorred Communism; his willingness to support the White Russians in their opposition to the Bolsheviks is instructive. But what Churchill was able to do was what many of his contemporary American allies could not – distinguish Stalin and his nationalist ambitions from the international rhetoric of the communist movement. Lukacs writes, "Churchill's recognition that Stalin was a nationalist and not an internationalist Communist; and that the clue to the Russian 'enigma' lay in the interests of the Russian imperial state as seen by Stalin" (12). Though he initially misestimated Russian support for some of its allies *a la* Czechoslovakia under threat of German invasion, he had a

clear grasp of the bigger picture. That said, he did not underestimate the Soviet threat. After all, this is the very same Winston Churchill who warned of the iron curtain descending over Europe.

In this way, Churchill understood the Russian threat in the East – so much so that he lobbied the American forces to cut off the Russians westward advance as early as possible. If there is any great failing of Churchill's career it is this. But it is silly to misappropriate the blame for the fall of Eastern Europe to Churchill and not place it rightly on the shoulders of Eisenhower and America. There was little leverage that Churchill could bring to bear on this question, not to mention the central importance of the Anglo-American relationship for the future. That said, he pushed the Americans on this question, and after the war was over on questions of the Soviet Union – hardly the actions of an American pawn. Lastly, it was Churchill who predicted that Russia could not subjugate Eastern Europe forever; their peoples would not tolerate it. Approximately a half-century later, his prediction proved right.

The above provide but two examples of Churchill's visionary quality, a talent greatly emphasized by Lukacs. I believe that this talent was greatly aided by another, perhaps underemphasized facet of Churchill's life – his role as a historian. After all, Winston Churchill is one of a very few people who made history, but also wrote it. And this, I believe, was the secret to his success. His mastery of events before him gave him the foresight and visionary ability to see and thus shape those things lying before him. Lukacs explains, "history was not, for Churchill, like painting, something one turned to for relaxation or merely to turn an honest guinea to meet his mountainous expenses. History was the heart of his faith; it permeated everything which he touched, and it was the mainspring of his politics and the secret of his immense mastery" (124). And by making history the core of his person, the core of his politics, Churchill became the consummate statesman-historian, unsurpassed in his visionary ability. He saw himself standing at a key crossroads of history, perhaps one the defining moments of the modern era. And he chose to defend civilization. Take his poignant words towards the close of his career. He said, "Which way shall we turn to save our lives and the future of the world? It does not matter so much for old people; they are going soon away; but I find it poignant to look at youth in all its activity and ardour...and wonder what would lie before them *if God wearied of mankind?*" (18). I imagine that the landscape of the world would look something like Europe at Hitler's peak. We should consider ourselves lucky that Winston Churchill never wearied of defending mankind.

Bibliography

1. Charmley, John. *Churchill: The End of Glory*. London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993.
2. Lukacs, John. *Churchill: Visionary. Statesman. Historian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002