



“A Bigger Danger Than The Germans”

By Stephen Berry
A Review of John Charmley's
Churchill: The End of Glory

In a recent review of *A World at Arms* by Gerhard L. Weinberg in *The Times*, the historian Norman Stone gave the official British line on the Second World War. The British, he thinks, are the heroes of this book. Stone finds it remarkable that the British, along with the French and Dutch, did not make a pact with the German government to maintain their maritime empires. Germany had imperial ambitions in the Ukraine. Why not a pact, with Western Europe looking to the oceans and Central Europe looking to the steppes? Instead, the war turned out to be the War of the British Succession - a quarter of the globe to partition - with America emerging as the very clear winner. And Stone is glad all this happened. "That war, disastrous as it was for the British had to be fought, and nowadays we have the Germany that we need and want."

Although A.J.P Taylor wrote a book hinting that Hitler was not a madman intent on world domination, he did (in his Oxford History of England) consider that World War Two was a people's war, a war where the British people came of age, a war to be proud of. In the midst of his effusions Taylor is remiss enough to give the cost of the war to the people of Britain. Approx. 400,000 people were

killed, and to this must be added the number of maimed and injured. The UK had incurred debts to the rest of the world to the tune of £4 billion (figures relate to the 1946 value of Sterling). Slightly over £1 billion had been raised by the sale of foreign assets. £3 billion of foreign debt was uncovered and therefore a debt to future generations. Invisible income had fallen by half to £120 million per year and exports were 40% of their pre-war figure.

This does not begin to come close to a full calculation of the real cost of the war. Now and then I come across little tidbits which provide evidence of the deterioration of living standards during those years. Recently, statistics were published showing that road deaths are falling (I think that last year's road deaths were around 4,000). The two years when fatalities on the roads were at their highest were 1940 and 1941 (approx. 9,000 each year), presumably a result of the air-raid blackouts. During the recent controversy on the falling reading age of schoolchildren, someone mentioned that the last time the reading age of children had fallen occurred between 1937 and 1946. I am certain that examples like this can be multiplied, and that the quality of life fell dramatically between 1939 and 1945 for most people.

Little by little, the official view of World War Two is beginning to change. Churchill quipped, "History will not look kindly on Neville Chamberlain - I know, I shall write it." He then proceeded to write a multi-volume history of the war which shaped the general perception of it. John Charmley has recently written a biography of Churchill which in turn questions the official, Churchillian view

and offers some insights into the fate of liberalism at the beginning of the 20th century in Britain.

Churchill's early life is that of an ambitious young aristocrat who is anxious to make his mark. He wrote some books in the last years of the 19th century which described his experiences as a soldier in the army of the empire on which the sun never set. In these books he was critical of the "forward policy" of the Salisbury government - the policy of further imperial expansion. It is agreeably surprising to find that the cigar-smoking imperialist of later years was at one time satisfied that only one quarter of the world map should be coloured red.

Because Churchill's father had been a Tory Party grandee, the young Winston felt obliged to join the Conservatives. In fact, his political views were closer to those of the Liberal Party of the time, and it came as no surprise when he jumped party ship (not for the last time) and joined the Liberals in 1905. His refusal to play for the team, an intense egocentricity which he took no pains to hide and a predilection for personal attacks caused the King to remark, 'Churchill is a born cad', and as Charmley says, the King was by no means alone in this view.

Charmley identifies three main strands in the British Liberal Party at the beginning of the 20th century.

1. What Charmley calls the Gladstonian tradition was in reality founded and developed by Cobden and Bright. It was a moral crusade to do with peace, economy and freedom with John Morley and Campbell Bannerman as the main representatives of this strand at the beginning of the century. Churchill subscribed to the Free Trade aspects of this policy, but to little else. The idea that the British government should have little to do with the affairs of British citizens

and nothing to do with the affairs of foreign citizens was on the wane at the turn of the century, and this decline was an important reason why Britain was involved in and ruined by two world wars.

2. Churchill was more at home on the Liberal Imperialist wing of the party. Asquith and Rosebery led this group, imperialist, but not as imperialist as the Tory Party. It should be remembered that strand one and strand two of the Liberal Party had split at the time of the Boer war.

3. The New Liberalism was essentially the ideas of Joseph Chamberlain and Dilke, taken up by the Webbs, Fabians and other socialists, incorporated into the Liberal Party. Churchill was strongly influenced by these views along with Lloyd George.

Although Churchill opposed increased naval estimates in 1909 whilst at the Board of Trade, he supported increased expenditure once he reached the Admiralty. He seems to have been a minister increasing his own importance by fighting to increase the budget allocation for his department, a by no means unique phenomenon. He fully supported the naval arms race with Germany prior to World War One. He seems to have loved war and all about it. In the midst of the Sarajevo crisis in 1914 he wrote to his wife, "I am interested, geared up and happy. Is it not horrible to be built like that?"

By 1914 Churchill's views had been formed and I do not think they changed very much. He was for active intervention abroad (as soon to be evidenced by his views on the Russian Civil War and Turkey) and intervention at home in social matters. In short, the typical views of a 20th century politician, a little unusual in that foreign rather than domestic affairs were the more important to him. But this type is not unknown,

Eden and Hurd from this country, and Bush from the US are further examples. Churchill thought that Britain should ally with the second strongest power in Europe, the central plank of Foreign Office doctrine. Alliances had been formed against the Spain of Philip II, the France of Louis XIV and the Germany of Kaiser William II in order to prevent these countries dominating Europe. I hold the view that alliances against the strongest power in Europe make sense for the UK government, but only if that country's intentions are hostile to the UK. Baldwin, and probably Chamberlain, took the view that Hitler wanted to move East. If there was any fighting to be done in Europe, Baldwin wanted to see the Bolshies and the Nazis doing it. Baldwin was right here and Churchill was wrong. A cursory flip through *Mein Kampf* would have enlightened British politicians as to Hitler's views. Hitler wanted to turn the Ukraine into a German colony. This was deplorable, but none of the UK government's business - just as the present events in Yugoslavia should be none of the UK government's business. Such a policy is consistent with a non-interventionist foreign policy and is consistent with the first strand of Liberalism mentioned above.

In February 1938 the Cabinet agreed that defence spending should be £1,570 million over the next five years. This, it was felt, was the maximum amount for a nation of Britain's type. Charmley points out that Churchill's pre-World War Two views took little account of their long-term domestic implications for the UK. The state could exert more control over the economy and raise defence spending, but what would be the consequences for the economy? Perhaps Churchill thought that bringing trade unions into government, spending massive amounts of money and intervening in the economy on a grand scale could be rapidly undone. Most British citizens alive today have been living with the consequences of the war economy built

up between 1939 and 1950 and know that it can not be rapidly undone. The Labour Party could not have travelled at the speed it did between 1945 and 1950 without the political and economic structures inherited from the war. These are the domestic implications of an interventionist foreign policy.

After the fall of France, a variety of people were interested in peace. Beaverbrook said, "He could see no alternative at that time but to negotiate an honourable settlement, retire behind our Empire frontiers, arm ourselves to the teeth, leave the Continent to work out its own destiny and defend the Empire with all our strength". Lloyd George believed that once Hitler saw that Britain could not be defeated with ease, the time would come to discuss terms. Britain was isolated on the Continent in a way she had never been before. In order to defeat Germany, she would need to equip, raise and land a massive army on the Continent and wage war for years. By that time Britain would be bankrupt.

Churchill would have none of this. He had obtained the job of Prime Minister with the aid of Lady Luck. On May 10th 1940, the day of the German Blitzkrieg on Holland and Belgium, a civil servant failed to tell Halifax that R.A.B Butler was waiting in the outer office with the message that Labour would serve in a coalition under him. Halifax went out of the other door to go to the dentist. By that evening Churchill was Prime Minister and it was too late. He was not going to relinquish his life's ambition without a fight. At the end of 1940, various German codes had been broken and Churchill knew that the Germans were not planning to invade. The Luftwaffe had been repulsed over the skies of Britain and the Italians defeated in North Africa. The possibility of an honourable peace over the next few months must have been very real. R.A.B Butler contacted the Swedish minister in London and it has to be assumed that

Hess flew to Scotland because some people of significance were interested in peace (the details of this episode are still shrouded in mystery and successive British governments are loathed to enlighten us).

Churchill again stood firm. He would fight them on the beaches - for job and country. The outbreak of war had brought him to the Admiralty and its end might see his demise after the fashion of Lloyd George. He was still unpopular with a large section of the Conservative Party which had not forgotten his opposition to the India Act and his gaffes during the Abdication Crisis. Churchill put forward two methods by which the war might be won.

1. The RAF would bomb the Germans into oblivion. The subsequent conduct of the conflict threw into doubt the feasibility and the morality of this policy.

2. He also held out the prospect of help from the West, the land of his mother's birth. But there was a price.

Chamberlain's policy of building fighters rather than bombers ensured Britain's independence from Germany. Churchill's continuance of the war replaced this with dependence on the USA. By autumn 1940 dollar reserves were exhausted. The American Treasury secretary Morgenthau requested a complete list of British holdings in the Western Hemisphere, differentiated according to liquidity. When Roosevelt was shown the list, he remarked, "Well, they aren't bust, there's lots of money there." By the spring of 1941 Roosevelt was in a more sympathetic mood, "We have been milking the British financial cow, which had plenty of milk at one time, but which has now about become dry". On March 10th Halifax was given an ultimatum (Churchill had got rid of his main opponent by making him Ambassador to America). The British must sell one of their important companies in the next

week as a mark of good faith; a major subsidiary of Courtaulds was sold at a knock-down price.

As the war deepened, so did its cost. Charmley has great fun comparing the similarities Churchill's policy towards Poland after 1944 with that of Chamberlain's towards Czechoslovakia in 1938. He contrasts Chamberlain's attitude to Germany in 1938 and 1939 with Churchill's appeasement of Russia at the end of the war. Yet I have sympathy with Churchill here. What could Britain do to help Poland in 1944 and 1945? Whose troops were in Poland at the this time? British public opinion was so pro-Soviet then that Orwell had the utmost difficulty finding a publisher for his anti-Bolshevik satire, *Animal Farm*.

As the old soldiers of World War Two gradually fade away, a more balanced judgement can and will be made. In the light of the events of the last 50 years, Chamberlain's reasons for avoiding war seem ever more cogent:

1. Another major war would weaken the basis of British power even further. Britain could not afford to fight a long war, and it was impossible to win a short war militarily.

2. War would push the UK into a reliance on America whose ideas would play an even greater part in the post-war settlement than they had in 1919. Wilsonian internationalism would become the new world order.

3. Germany's expansion would be in Eastern Europe, an area which was traditionally of little importance to the UK.

4. Intervention in Eastern Europe would require the assistance of the USSR and the price for this would be high.

"But how would this madman have been stopped" is regarded as the decisive

argument by the pro-war brigade at this point. I am not convinced. Imagine that Britain and France had not declared war on Germany in September 1939 and Hitler had eventually continued his master plan by attacking the Soviet Union. A major war between the USSR and Germany could have had a number of possible results. A stalemate, with two totalitarian powers glaring uneasily at each other from behind miles of barbed wire. Germany "wins". Robert Harris portrays this result rather effectively in his novel *Fatherland*. Hitler said in 1942, "People sometimes say to me: 'Be careful! You will have twenty years of guerrilla warfare on your hands'. I am delighted at the prospect ... Germany will remain in a state of perpetual alertness." The consequences of a German Empire in European Russia would have been a guerrilla war (no doubt financed by the West) on a scale which would have made Afghanistan look like the proverbial vicar's tea party. In both cases there is the prospect of disgruntled populations enduring the joys of totalitarian economies - made worse by the perpetual reality of war. If we compare the performance of this type of state with that of a welfare-state mixed economy, the superiority of the latter is obvious - especially to the people enduring the former. The collapse of Communism demonstrates that people do tire of dictatorships and a miserable standard of living. Countries with developed free markets should act as examples of what is possible. I do not doubt that liberalisation in China has been prompted by the example of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. A liberal economy will dramatically outperform the controlled variety, and this will be obvious to most people.

Churchill's avowed aims were to preserve the British Empire and safeguard the continuity of British institutions. His life's work had the opposite effect. The war bankrupted the UK and paved the way for the Empire's

dissolution by increasing the importance of the US and USSR. Churchill was fond of noting that Cromwell was a great man who made one terrible error. Obsessed with the power of Spain in his youth, Cromwell failed to note the rise of France. The same could be said of Churchill with regard to Germany and the USSR. The complete defeat of Germany commensurately increased the importance of Soviet Russia in the post-war period. If that were not enough, the war helped socialist and interventionist ideas to secure a hold on power which would do much to weaken the economic and social system in post-war Britain. Foreign Exchange controls, for example, imposed in 1939 were only abolished in 1979. "A bigger danger than the Germans by a long way", remarked First Sea Lord Fisher to Bonar Law in 1915. This description of Churchill seems uncannily prescient today.