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Churchill

1940-1945: Under Friendly Fire

Written by Walter Reid

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Churchill 1940–1945:

Under Friendly Fire

WALTER REID



BIRLINN

For Callum and Elspeth

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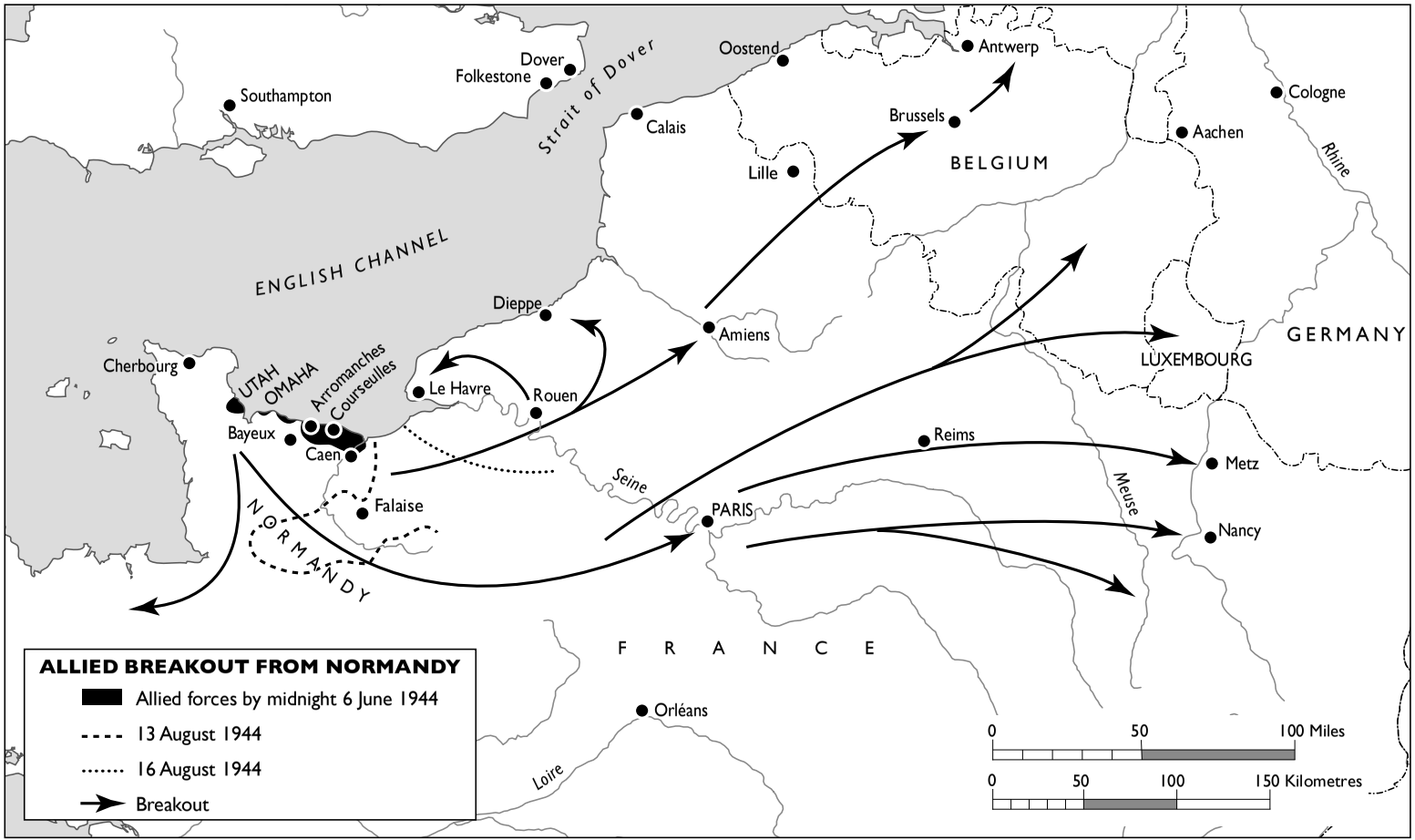
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Glenfintaig, June 2008


MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE
Rommel's Advance: May - June 1942
Montgomery's Advance: November - December 1942
Ljubljana
Pisa
Ancona
ANVIL/DRAGOON LANDING
CORSICA
Rome
Anzio
Salerno
SARDINIA
SPAIN
TORCH LANDINGS
Tangier
SPANISH MOROCCO
Oran
Algiers
Rabat
Casablanca
MOROCCO
Marrakesh
Mers-el-Kébir
ALGERIA
Bone
Bizerta
Tunis
SICILY
MALTA
Tripoli
Ghudamis
TRIPOLITANIA
LIBYA
GREECE
Athens
Black Sea
Istanbul
Ankara
DARDANELLES
TURKEY
DODECANESE ISLANDS
RHODES
CRETE
CYPRUS
SYRIA
LEBANON
PALESTINE
Tel Aviv
Jerusalem
Mediterranean Sea
Darnah
Gazala
Tobruk
Benghazi
Sidi Barrani
Mersa Matruh
El Alamein
Alexandria
Alam Halfa Ridge
Cairo
Suez
El Agheila
CYRENAICA
EGYPT
Nile
0 500 Miles
0 500 1000 Kilometres


Southampton
Dover
Folkestone
Strait of Dover
Oostend
Antwerp
Cologne
Calais
Brussels
Aachen
Rhine
Lille
BELGIUM
ENGLISH CHANNEL
Dieppe
Amiens
GERMANY
LUXEMBOURG
Cherbourg
UTAH
OMAHA
Arromanches
Courseulles
Le Havre
Rouen
Bayeux
Caen
Reims
Metz
Seine
Meuse
Falaise
PARIS
Nancy
NORMANDY
F R A N C E
Orléans
Loire
ALLIED BREAKOUT FROM NORMANDY
Allied forces by midnight 6 June 1944
13 August 1944
16 August 1944
Breakout
0
50
100 Miles
0
50
100
150 Kilometres

Part I

'The good, clean tradition of English politics has been . . . sold to the greatest adventurer of modern political history. This sudden coup by Winston and his rabble is a serious disaster.'

(R.A. Butler, 10 May 1940.)

I

The War of Words

There was never any doubt that Churchill would write a history of the Second World War if he lived to see its end. Even if he had not repeatedly said he would, he had never been involved in a military enterprise without recording his experiences, either as a book or in journalism.

He was proud of the fact that throughout his life he had supported his family and an elevated lifestyle by his pen. Between 1898 and 1958 he wrote fifty-four volumes. By adding in his final speeches, a 1962 compilation of his early articles and eight books published posthumously, he produced seventy-four volumes and, including articles, published letters, speeches and books, a total output of about 15 million words.[1]

His first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, an account of his experiences on the Afghan frontier, was published when he was only twenty-three. He had already written many newspaper articles, describing his experiences as an observer of the Cuban Civil War in 1895. In India, as well as composing his story of the Field Force he was sending reports both to the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Allahabad Pioneer*. He was also writing short stories and working on his one novel, *Savrola*.

So it went on. In Egypt in 1898 he was writing for the *Morning Post* and *The Times*. The articles for the *Morning Post*, he told his mother, would 'act as foundations and as scaffolding for my book'. That book, *The River War*, was published at the end of 1899. By then he was in South Africa, which similarly provided material for publication.

All of this can be seen as preparation for his remarkable survey of the First World War, *The World Crisis*. At the Admiralty, Munitions and the War Office, Churchill had been at the centre of the direction of the war, and the history he published between 1923 and 1931 is detailed, remarkably accurate and still very well worth reading. His vivid

descriptions and dramatic prose are undergirded by the authority of a mass of statistical data.

But in another respect, too, *The World Crisis* foreshadows the still more monumental history of the Second World War. He is the hero as well as the narrator, prompting Arthur Balfour's celebrated quip: 'I hear that Winston has written a book about himself and called it *The World Crisis*'. Churchill appears to be at the centre of events, dominating, directing and controlling them. His vision and his initiatives are those that count.

In the course of the Second World War he did not disguise the fact that his account of the conflict would be equally subjective. When a companion wondered what history would make of events, he famously replied, 'I know, because I intend to write the history'. On another occasion he gave the same response, though more elliptically, to the observation that it would be interesting to see what the verdict of history would be: 'That will depend on who writes the history'.

These, then, were to be the hallmarks of *The Second World War*: massive quotation of official documents, supporting a particular and skewed account of the historic events of the years 1940 to 1945. The treatment was to be noble, like the magnificent Gibbonian prose in which the story was told: the pettinesses, confusion, bungling and ignoble squabbling which are so much the essence of history are swept from his sanitised pages to give way to myth, drama and inspiration.

The Second World War, like *The World Crisis*, runs to six volumes; but the second series of volumes is bigger than the first: it extends to nearly 2 million words. Something like 12 per cent of these words is contained in appendices, in which official minutes and papers are quoted in part or whole. Churchill's approach to these papers was very simple: 'They are mine. I can publish them'. The constitutional position was much more opaque, and all that can be said with certainty is that Churchill was quite wrong. All the same, for a variety of reasons, many of them depending on rules which he himself had drawn up before surrendering office in 1945, he was able to take with him a substantial volume of his 'own' minutes and telegrams. He also had the right to consult an even bigger volume of papers, which was left in the government's hands. Furthermore, although government consent was required to quote from official documents and despite the fact that the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Edward Bridges, was anxious to avoid a repetition of the rash of memoirs based on official papers that occurred after the First World War, Churchill was accorded a very special dispensation.

The government came to think of his memoirs as having a quasi-official status and representing a statement for the historical record in the interests of the nation.

There were distortions in his narrative. The war in the Pacific is dealt with very sketchily, and there is no acknowledgement at all that it was Russia which really won the war in Europe. These faults reflect the egotistical nature of Churchill's project. His account was the sort of story that Julius Caesar told, history created by Great Men, events moulded by titans. When Eisenhower's naval assistant, Harry Butcher, published his diaries in 1946, Churchill wrote to his old colleague: 'The Articles are, in my opinion, altogether below the level upon which such matters should be treated. Great events and personalities are all made small when passed through the medium of the small mind.'[2]

The archival approach and the self-justifying process came together: because the documentary evidence more readily available consisted of Churchill's minutes and directives, not the responses to them, the picture that he painted was of events which he galvanised, and in which others' roles were minimised or completely excluded. This was resented by some, and the reaction of Sir Alan Brooke, later Viscount Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff for most of the war, will particularly be noted later in this narrative. Lord Reith, who had been a disappointing Minister of Information and was no friend of Churchill, complained, 'Winston prints in his war book innumerable directives and never once lets us see a single answer'.

In a fascinating piece of scholarly detective work, Professor David Reynolds has revealed the remarkable history of the writing of Churchill's history.[3] Sir Norman Brook, Bridges' successor as Cabinet Secretary, became less a censor than a co-author, and actively helped, drafting chunks of the narrative. Other public servants also made contributions. The price of government approval was a certain amount of vetting, but political control of the narrative stemmed less from the Labour government, in power when the first volumes appeared, than from Churchill himself. Even in opposition, but particularly when he was in power again after 1951, he distorted the historical record for political reasons.

In his second ministry he was greatly preoccupied by the tragic sense that the victory of 1945 would be succeeded by another war, even more terrible than the last. Nothing was to be done which might prejudice the chances of avoiding that disaster. Differences with Stalin were minimised, and in particular the tensions in the relationship with

America and the increasing divergence of the views of the two allies were almost written out. By the time that the last volumes were appearing, Eisenhower, the wartime Supreme Commander, was President of the United States, and the true nature of Anglo-American relations by the end of the war is accordingly scarcely hinted at.

There was some criticism of the history as the successive volumes were published. Emmanuel Shinwell adapted Balfour and said that Churchill had written a novel with himself as the chief character. Michael Foot, though generally well disposed, spoke of Churchill 'clothing his personal vindication in the garb of history'.[4] Other criticisms were made, both in regard to detail and to the nature of the books, but they were overshadowed by the vast preponderance of favourable reviews. In so far as criticism was noticed at all, it was largely discredited because it came from those who had never been Churchill's supporters.

The publication of the six volumes was the literary phenomenon of the time. Each volume was published in America before Britain, and a series of different editions was published in each country, as well as elsewhere: concurrent Canadian, Australian, Taiwanese and book club editions appeared with translations in almost every language in Europe, including Russian. Editions in the remaining languages of the world followed. Among the various printings which subsequently appeared were paperbacks, and in addition to publication in book form, the history was serialised in Britain, America, Australia and other countries. The first volume appeared in forty-two editions of the *Daily Telegraph*.[5] In Britain alone the hardback six volumes were printed in quantities of about 250,000 each, and in the case of the early volumes they sold out within hours.

Churchill never claimed that his book represented the whole story: 'I do not describe this as history, for that belongs to another generation. But I claim with confidence that it is a contribution to history which will be of service to the future.' Those closest to the centre of affairs knew well that Churchill had not been alone in controlling events and that he was justifying himself before history and enhancing his personal role. But no one wished to destroy a myth that flattered not just Churchill, but Britain collectively – and indeed the American allies. The story he told was one of resolve, endurance and heroism. There was a collective collusion in perpetuating the legend that he was creating. To do otherwise would have minimised the nation's achievement as well as Churchill's and, particularly in the austere days of post-war Britain

when there was little else to celebrate, it would have been close to treachery to question the way in which victory had been won.

In the years that followed, many studies of component parts have altered views of aspects of the Second World War, but they have done little to dislodge from the popular mind the account of the war as Churchill gave it. It is doubtful now if the Second World War will ever be separated from the aura of heroic unity against evil that separates it from the study of other conflicts in history.

In Churchill's lifetime, publications like Brooke's diaries and those of General Sir John Kennedy made little impact on his reputation or that of his history. One or two publications in America had equally little effect, and his standing there is probably higher now than ever, and certainly higher than it is in his own country. In 1966, Lord Moran published his diaries. As his doctor, he had seen Churchill in his more vulnerable moments and the picture he drew was suggestive of weakness and doubt. In reality, although Churchill had treated Moran with great kindness and drew him into his own household, the doctor was never privy to the real secrets of the war and was not present at the meetings that mattered. Churchill talked incessantly, threw out ideas and thought aloud. Moran recorded what he claimed to have heard, sometimes in suspicious detail. He set out his story at length – although some elements were omitted: he makes no mention of the substantial financial provisions that Churchill made for his family. His account is fascinating and often informative, but is written from a limited perspective.

In the event it did more to enhance the Churchillian legend than to reduce it: Churchill's intimates, under the editorship of Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, and with the active encouragement of Clementine Churchill, published *Action this Day: Working with Churchill* in 1968, and very effectively displaced the Moran account with a picture of a vital, decisive and stimulating war leader, whose judgement and intuitive vision was the indispensable source of victory. Churchill himself could not have hoped for more.

One of the contributors to *Action this Day* was Churchill's former Private Secretary and subsequently his most devoted defender, John Colville. In his *The Churchillians* of 1981 he developed his theme and in his diaries and *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939–1955*, he supplied a substantial volume of data with which to support it. His books are not the only ones on which the Churchillian legend now rests.

At a certain level serious efforts have been made to reappraise Churchill, and to assess him according to normal historical criteria.[6] There have also been more generalised attacks by David Irvine and Clive Ponting. A recent example, written with great gusto, is Gordon Corrigan's *Blood, Sweat and Arrogance, and the Myths of Churchill's War* (2006). The broadest revisionist attack was John Charmley's *Churchill, The End of Glory: A Political Biography* (1993), which received more publicity than it might have done because of a favourable review by Alan Clark. Charmley is concerned to cut Churchill down to size, determined – as Sir Michael Howard pointed out – never to give him the benefit of the doubt.[7]

While his thesis is not entirely clear, Charmley appears to favour appeasement and to think that Halifax and Chamberlain were right to wish to seek peace with Germany in 1940. He makes the point that by standing out against Hitler, Britain only won the war at the cost of financial bankruptcy and loss of world power. It was on this point that Alan Clark agreed with him, though Britain would not have retained much world power, and probably not much financial power either, if Hitler had dominated the world as he planned to do.

The fact that Britain was weak and diminished by 1945 is in itself neither particularly startling nor noteworthy. What is interesting is to consider why this was the corollary of victory and whether things could have been done better.

While it is true, as this book seeks to emphasise, that as the years went by, Churchill had less and less control over the war and increasingly became America's humiliated and ignored petitioner, that was a fate infinitely less abject than being a British Pétain. Churchill had to work within the circumstances that existed. It is clear now, as his own history never revealed, that at many levels his room for manoeuvre was limited. He had to fight to have his strategy adopted, to the extent it was. He frequently failed. He had to fight against the Americans; he had to fight against British generals and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The Free French alliance was often much more trouble than it was worth. The backing of his own party could not be relied upon in the House of Commons, and the War Cabinet overruled him from time to time. Sometimes he lacked even domestic support.

These various sources of obstruction have been dealt with individually: they are brought together in this volume not to emphasise Churchill's weaknesses and failures, but rather to suggest that what he did is all the more remarkable in the face of such opposition.

Churchillism may have been overdone; so has revisionism, if that consists of a bleak enumeration of the ways in which Britain's standing in the world was diminished as a result of the war. It is time for post-revisionism, by which I mean an analysis of some of the factors by which Churchill was constrained.

It is the argument of this book that in the West it was Churchill, more than anyone else, who devised the strategy that won the war, and that he succeeded in doing so despite the efforts and interventions of less far-seeing strategists who were motivated by sectional concerns or, in the case of the Americans, by a desire to mould the polity and economy of a post-war world. In the course of this narrative there will be numerous occasions where Churchill's will be seen to be the broader vision and the more inspired concept. But not always; and his shortcomings are also recorded.

The book attempts to bring together the characters, events and trends that tended to limit Churchill's freedom of action, to explore the extent to which he was able to resist the impeding factors and to see how far he or others were in the right when there were differences. Other, structural constraints over which he had little or no control, such as problems of mobilisation, foreign exchange and trade, also of course bore down upon him.

I have tried to strike a balance between a discussion of themes and a sequential narrative treatment of events in order to give a comprehensible history of the war. I have sought to concentrate on the western war, and the Pacific dimension appears only when unavoidable. Relations with Russia are only slightly more prominent, and in order to contain the book within reasonable compass are not discussed at length. Stalin was in any event the ally from whom Churchill might reasonably have expected trouble, though for much of the war he proved surprisingly reliable.

In 1940 Churchill was a political outsider, widely distrusted by his own party, vulnerable and not expected to last. The Crown and what was not then called the Establishment did not greatly like him. Senior naval commanders and many senior army officers regarded him with a degree of hostility. He had to weld together a new means of political control over the service chiefs, and by slow degrees he consolidated his political position.

It was not until the outcome of the Second Battle of El Alamein in November 1942 that he was safe from imminent deposition. From then for a time he was dominant in the Atlantic Alliance and was generally able to bend his military advisers to his will. It was a period he enjoyed,

but a short one. As early as the Casablanca Conference his own service chiefs were beginning to gain in confidence, and increasingly the Allied Joint Chiefs sidelined both Roosevelt and Churchill, whom they described as 'paltering' at some of the conferences. By the time of the Teheran Conference at the end of 1943 he was a relatively negligible figure in the Alliance, and even at home his own party felt able to rebel, for instance over Yalta and even over teachers' pay.

He had little time or interest for the crucial domestic political planning that was going on by this stage in the war. It involved Conservative politicians such as Sir John Anderson and Rab Butler as well as Labour Ministers, but the fact that this was not generally recognised may account for the final blow, which Churchill felt so acutely, the defeat at the 1945 general election.

It has been estimated that about 1,633 books have now been written about Churchill.[8] No apology is made for adding to that total. No one who is interested by this ever-fascinating sport of nature who emerged at a critical moment in the history of the world and affected that history for the better is disappointed to see another book about him.

One of the most moving pictures of Churchill is of him in old age, at table, despairingly saying that his whole life had been a failure. 'I have worked hard all my life, but what have I achieved? Nothing.' Of course this was the most monstrous misappreciation of his enormous achievements. His wonderful buoyancy had succumbed to age and an impaired circulation. But what lay behind this sense that all he had done for his country had been negated? That is what this book is about.