

2010

Paul Johnson's Brief Life of Churchill

Henry M. Rector

Paul Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Rector, Henry M. and Johnson, Paul (2010) "Paul Johnson's Brief Life of Churchill," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 63 : No. 4 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss4/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

PAUL JOHNSON'S BRIEF LIFE OF CHURCHILL

Henry M. Rector

Johnson, Paul. *Churchill*. New York: Viking, 2009. 181pp.
\$24.95

Paul Johnson's most recent biography of Winston Churchill provides a thumbnail sketch of the British statesman's life and achievements. At only 166 pages of text, it cannot do justice to the epic scope of Churchill's roles both as a peacetime statesman and as a war leader, but it does offer judgments, some of them in implicit counterpoint to recent revisionist treatments of Churchill's career.

Johnson writes that although Churchill, as Britain's prime minister during World War II, was nothing less than the savior of Britain, he was also the beneficiary of certain conditions that were not of his own making. By the outbreak of war, for example, public opinion had turned against the military "brass hats," whose management of World War I had taken a catastrophic toll on British lives. This meant that despite the resentment of some military leaders, Churchill had a relatively free hand in strategic and military matters. He also benefited from national unity. After the pacifism of the 1930s was discredited, the British people grasped that they were in a struggle for national survival and rallied around the prime minister and a national government, including all parties.

Churchill was personally suited to wartime leadership in ways that none of his contemporaries could equal, and his strategic communication skills and work ethic were unrivaled. Also, Johnson credits Churchill with personal initiative in wartime policies that were crucial to the Allied victory. First, his innovation and expertise in airpower enabled him to organize a crash program for British air superiority. Second, Johnson argues that Churchill was correct

to prioritize early offensive campaigns in North Africa and the Mediterranean. In addition to securing Allied access to oil in the Middle East and eventually removing Italy from the Axis, these campaigns diverted German assets and attention from the primary theater, Europe. Third, Churchill was adept in his management of alliances. After Germany launched Operation BARBAROSSA, Churchill did not let his implacable hostility to Bolshevism prevent him from forming an alliance with the Soviet Union.

Henry Rector, a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State, is a June 2010 graduate of the College of Naval Warfare. He is currently serving as Deputy Director of the State Department's Office of Caribbean Affairs. His previous overseas U.S. embassy postings include Timor-Leste (as Deputy Chief of Mission), Jakarta, Berlin, Haiti, and Copenhagen. He holds a BA in German and French from Rhodes College and an MA in West European studies from Indiana University, and studied at the universities of Tübingen and Kiel in Germany.

Naval War College Review, Autumn 2010, Vol. 63, No. 4

And, famously, Churchill artfully cultivated President Franklin D. Roosevelt and American amity well before the attack on Pearl Harbor. No one except Churchill, Johnson writes, could have made these indispensable contributions to the Allied victory, which Churchill believed to be assured upon America's entry into the war.

Johnson argues that Britain's allies share blame in two matters for which Churchill has often been criticized. The first is the air campaign against Germany. He writes that Churchill pursued the bombing, including civilian targets, enthusiastically and was supported in this wholeheartedly by the British public. Although the bombing campaign did not significantly impair German industrial output until the outcome of the war was already clear, Johnson argues, it was nonetheless justified. This was because after the July 1943 attack on Hamburg the air defenses for western Germany that became necessary were provided at the cost of air superiority on the eastern front. Johnson goes on to describe the February 1945 bombing of Dresden as "an atrocity" but argues that Churchill carried this out mainly in fulfillment of a commitment made to Stalin at Yalta.

Johnson also maintains that the United States shares blame for the consequences of delays in launching the Normandy invasion. This delay, Churchill's critics argue, allowed the Red Army to advance far into Central Europe, ultimately bringing those territories behind the Iron Curtain. Churchill, recalling the failed Dardanelles expedition in World War I, was reluctant to proceed with the invasion until he had an overwhelming force at his disposal. After D-day, the Allies could not make up the time that assembling this force had cost, and Churchill could not overcome Eisenhower's insistence on a ponderous "broad front" advance into Central Europe. This meant that the Red Army got to Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and Budapest first.

Johnson has little to say about a subject that has been a focus of Churchill's revisionist critics, namely, his role as architect of Britain's special relationship with the United States. He does note that Roosevelt was "oversuspicious of Churchill and undersuspicious of Stalin" and offers the contrarian view that "the death of FDR . . . came as a relief, especially as Harry S. Truman, brisk, decisive, much better informed on strategy, proved infinitely easier to deal with."

Of course, Churchill had already secured a place in the history of British strategy and warfare before his service as prime minister in World War II. Johnson assesses Churchill's role in two of the most controversial episodes of his pre-World War II career.

The first of these was the disastrous Dardanelles expedition of 1915, which Churchill masterminded as First Lord of the Admiralty. Johnson blames the fiasco on the operation's irresolute implementation by military commanders. However, in Johnson's account, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was the real

villain of the piece. Asquith, already contemplating jettisoning Churchill as the price of a new coalition government, refused to allow Churchill to assume command, as he had done during the siege of Antwerp in October 1914. Asquith was only too eager to fire Churchill once the Dardanelles expedition turned into a shambles.

Johnson's take on this episode is incomplete, however. It is certainly true that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John "Jackie" Fisher, was at his most erratic during the planning for the operation and that the war minister—Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener, Earl Kitchener—who had authority to commit ground troops, vacillated in his support. Likewise, the in-theater commanders were inept. However, Churchill should have foreseen that his plan was too daring to be attempted without more robust backing and implementation, and this arguably justified his dismissal.

Johnson also faults Churchill for dismissing a potential Japanese threat during the interwar period. As chancellor of the exchequer, Churchill put the Royal Navy on a tight budget. In an uncharacteristic lapse of imagination and insight, Churchill made no objection when the government of David Lloyd George allowed the Washington Naval Disarmament Treaty to supersede the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which the Japanese saw as disadvantageous. Johnson describes Churchill's categorical rejection of any Japanese threat during these years as a "complete mystery" and attributes British vulnerability in Asia between 1940 and 1942 directly to it. This lack of foresight ultimately led to the sinking of two capital ships and the fall of Singapore.

Johnson reserves his greatest scorn for blunders that Churchill committed in British domestic politics, particularly in the 1930s. Chief among these was his impassioned, quixotic defense of Edward VIII during the abdication crisis of 1936, which culminated in Churchill's disastrous intervention in the House of Commons. This impaired his credibility at a time when he was about to deliver his unwelcome, if prescient, warnings about Hitler's ambitions.

Since Johnson's take on Churchill's career is not particularly original, his offering differs from other biographies mainly in its brevity, and therein lies its deficiency. Nevertheless, *Churchill* is a readable study for those who are daunted by the overwhelming scale of other works on this twentieth-century giant.