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The People's War
and
Winston Churchill

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The People's War by Angus Calder is a history of the Second World War which offers interesting and at times controversial insights into the attitudes of the British people to the war, their feelings towards the Germans, and how the war was waged.

Calder shows that after Britain had declared war, support for this decision was far from unanimous. There was opposition to the war primarily from the Labor Party. According to Calder, in November 1939, twenty-two Labor Members of Parliament "signed a manifesto calling for a world conference of powers and an armistice as soon as a date could be fixed... Over seventy constituency Labor parties supported this call for a truce" (page 58).

There was also widespread hope that the war would soon be over. Calder writes that on November 5, 1939 Neville Chamberlain wrote: "I have a 'hunch' that the war will be over before the spring" (page 61). Calder further writes that "the public seemed to share this optimism... Only about one person in five expected the war to last three years or more, and an equal number gave it no more than six months to go.... Approval for Chamberlain's premiership in the opinion polls ... had increased ... to an average of seventy percent" (page 61).

This seems understandable
The people firmly supported Neville Chamberlain and clearly did not anticipate how the war would evolve and probably did not fully appreciate the ruthlessness of their enemy. This was a serious drawback, for to underestimate your enemy is to invite disaster.

Regarding the Nazi air offensive against Britain in 1940,

too strong?

Calder makes a statement that is shocking. Calder writes that "the Germans continued their heavy bombing of civilian centers partly to persist with the policy of 'reprisals'; partly, no doubt, because Hitler and Goering were sadists...." (page 162). This statement is highly objectionable because if Hitler and Goering bombed Britain because they were sadists, then the same could be said about Winston Churchill, Frederick Lindemann (Churchill's science advisor), Arthur Harris (Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command) and Archibald Sinclair (Secretary of State for Air). Calder omits the fact that it was the British who had started the air war with Germany.* Moreover, Calder himself points out that Churchill advocated the bombing of civilian targets in Germany as a legitimate strategy to win the war. ✓ Calder writes that "Churchill was easily persuaded by Lindemann that attacks on working-class houses were the way to stop Germany. When [Arthur] Harris took over, 'The general idea,' he records, '... on what civil servants always call 'a high level,' was that the main and almost the only purpose of bombing was to attack the morale of the industrial workers" (page 286). This is not to suggest that the British were not fully justified in bombing Germany; their national survival was at stake. But if the British felt the need to bomb Germany, they had to expect retaliation in kind, especially from the Nazis. Even if Hitler

*See F.J.P. Veale, Advance to Barbarism, 1968; Sir Arthur Harris, Bomber Offensive, 1947; "Berlin gives 'reprisal warning'", The New York Times, May 12, 1940.

I am not familiar with these articles and they seem interesting

and Goering were in fact sadists, that would have had no bearing on their decision to launch the Blitz against Britain. That was strictly a military decision, no different than the decision of the British and the Americans to wage a strategic air offensive against Germany. When the Germans felt that they could not invade Britain, they decided to try to knock the British out of the war in another way. It was total war, and Calder's statement is totally indefensible unless he is willing to call Churchill a sadist too.

*But didn't
This all
come
later?*

he might be willing if it seems like a small point

In view of the bombing of Britain, this raises another question: How did the British people feel about the Germans? Did they hate the Germans? Did they crave ~~for~~ revenge? Did they want to obliterate the German people from the face of the earth? Calder writes that "the Germans were, first and always, the real enemy" (page 487). The Japanese War, on the other hand, according to Calder, "impinged remarkably little on the consciousness of the British people" (page 488). This statement is unbelievable. The sinking of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse, and the fall of Singapore were disasters that had to remind the British that a war was going on the the Far East too. The British, moreover, were in no position to respond to these disasters. The Germans, on the other hand, were much closer to home and had taken the war to the British homeland. Calder suggests that despite the characterization of Germans as "brutal butchers" (page 490) by Lord Vansittart, the Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government, and as "Huns" (page 491) by Winston Churchill, the majority of the British

*They were
reminders
of not a
direct
threat*

people did not harbor hatred toward the Germans. According to Calder, "when Londoners were asked at the beginning of 1944 whether they approved of British raids on Germany, about six out of ten gave 'unqualified verbal approval', two had qualms, and only one felt that they were too terrible to be fully condoned. However, a positively gloating attitude was rare even amongst those giving unqualified assent. People thought the raids would shorten the war, so they accepted them, though very few actually liked the idea. And only one person in ten was aware that the British were not aiming solely at military targets. 'Few people, Mass Observation concluded, 'think that the crimes of war should be visited on the ordinary citizens of Germany ...'" (page 491). If these findings accurately reflected popular sentiment, then the British people were remarkably tolerant and forgiving, despite their cities having been bombed.

A provocative summary

Winston Churchill was able to clearly perceive the threat that Nazi Germany posed to Britain while the British government followed a policy of appeasement. Why was Churchill's warnings ignored? This is a question that is answered by Henry Pelling in his book Winston Churchill.

Pelling shows that Churchill was considered a political liability by his own party and was unpopular in the House. *Common*
For instance, when Churchill threatened to defect from the Conservative Party in 1931 over the issue of the tariff, which Churchill opposed, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, "was obliged to regard Churchill's possible defection as no more than a relatively minor misfortune" (pages 347, 348). In fact, according to Pelling, Baldwin was advised to "risk the loss of Winston, because in exchange you will get the support of many" (page 348). And regarding the question of granting dominion status to India, Churchill was intrusive and devisive. Pelling writes that "policy toward India was not Churchill's personal responsibility" (page 350). Yet Churchill had made "public utterances", which prompted the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, to ask Lord Salisbury, the Conservative Leader of the House of Lords, "to do what he could to 'curb Winston,' whom he regarded as 'doing not a little harm.'" (page 350). Churchill's opposition to granting dominion status to India, to which the Conservative Party was committed to support, "found virtually no support" during the debate on the matter. In March 1933, during the debate on the government's White Paper outlining "plans for the establishment of an elected Federal Government"

in India, Churchill conceded that he could not substantiate "a charge he had made that British officials were promoted on the basis of their sympathy with government policy rather than on the basis of merit" (page 357). Churchill's speech was described as "a most surprising crash" (page 357). In 1934 Churchill "aroused some hostility" (page 360), by charging that Lord Derby and the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, "had brought improper pressure to bear upon witnesses" appearing before the Joint Select Committee of the Lords and Commons who were examining the proposals of the White Paper. Churchill was also cited for impolite and aelf-centered behavior in the House. Churchill, according to Pelling, "was roundly denounced by George Lansbury, the Leader of the Opposition, for his discourtesy: 'He usurps a position in this House as if he had a right to walk in, make his speech, walk out, and leave the whole place as if God Almighty had spoken.... He never listens to any other man's speech but his own'" (page 357). Lansbury's complaint "was well received, not only on the Labor benches but also on those of the government" (page 357). Robert Bernays, a new Conservative member, also complained that while he was delivering his maiden speech, "Mr. Churchill had strolled into the House in an absent-minded way and sat in front muttering disagreement - not realizing it was a maiden speech ... - and after five minutes of it, he could bear no more and strolled out again" (page 363). Sir John Wardlaw Milne reportedly said that "if there is a bully in the House it is Mr. Churchill" (page 363). Pelling writes that "Baldwin had

*This
Simply
means that
he is
a parliamentary
street
fighter*

made up his mind not to risk such an awkward person as his colleague again" (page 363). Thus Pelling presents a picture of Winston Churchill during the early 1930s as being an abrasive, argumentative figure who was too strong? considered a buffoon by his colleagues in the House and who was politically erratic. "At the age of sixty, it looked as if Churchill's ministerial career was over and done with" (page 365). Yet in 1940 the same man was to become Prime Minister. How did this happen?

According to Pelling, Churchill was one of the first to recognize "the evil character of the new regime [Nazi Germany]" (page 367) and to denounce it. Churchill's warnings were met with skepticism by other members of the House. This reflected the mood of the people at the time, which was too strong? clearly pacifist. Pelling writes that "blunt truths about a danger of a new war with Germany found no welcome in Britain at this time. In 1933 hopes of peace through all-around disarmament were still strong" (page 367). But Churchill was not a warmonger. Pelling shows that if Britain's interests were not directly threatened, Churchill favored acquiescing to acts of aggression. This was the case regarding the Japanese invasion of northern China and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia; Churchill also advocated neutrality in the Spanish civil war. Pelling also points out that Britain's Foreign Minister, Sir Samuel Hoare, was willing to agree to the partition of Ethiopia between Italy and Haile Selassie, a plan which was endorsed by the Cabinet. Thus, although Baldwin decided that Hoare had to resign because the Conservatives had promised to stand by the League of Nations

What is the connection with Churchill?

and impose sanctions, there already existed in Britain a desire to avoid confronting fascist aggression.

In March 1936 Churchill's warnings to re-arm and to contain Nazi expansionism gained credibility after Nazi Germany reoccupied the Rhineland. Pelling writes that Churchill was listened to "with patience and growing appreciation" (page 376). Pelling also writes that "Churchill would have supported a vigorous French response ... but no such response took place. The French Army commanders appeared to be unwilling to move" (page 375). In fact Pelling is highly critical of the performance of the French up to their defeat in June 1940 and portrays the French in a very negative light, assigning to them major responsibility for the failure of the Allies to thwart the aggressive designs of Nazi Germany. For instance, Pelling writes that "Eduard Daladier's Cabinet threatened that if Czechoslovakia did not agree [to German demands] France would abandon her guarantee under the Franco-Czech Treaty. Under this harsh and dishonorable constraint the Czech government agreed to the dismemberment of their country" (page 388). After Germany invaded Poland, "the French government was unwilling to declare war immediately" (page 419) and "did not to take any initiative likely to open up the war on the Western Front" (page 427). Four days after France was invaded, the French Premier, Paul Reynaud, telephoned Churchill to state "we have been defeated ... we have lost the battle" (page 444). And on May 19, 1940, General Gort, the British Commander in France, "was beginning to think that he would have to retreat to the coast and undertake

an evacuation by sea. This was because he had obtained no clear orders from the French Command, which seemed incapable of decision" (page 445). Thus, Pelling shows that the French were unreliable allies who were unwilling to honor their commitments, which not only gave Nazi Germany free reign to act but also jeopardized the British Army in France and put the British at a distinct disadvantage, both militarily and politically, in their efforts to oppose Nazi aggression.

*again, The
Commentary
with
Churchill
's
unclear*

Neville Chamberlain succeeded Stanley Baldwin as Prime Minister on May 28, 1937. Churchill supported Chamberlain for Prime Minister and party leader; Anthony Eden became Foreign Minister. However, on February 20, 1938 Eden resigned as Foreign Minister which "opened a new period of conflict between Churchill and the government, largely occasioned by Chamberlain's policy of actively 'appeasing' the dictators, in the hope of averting future conflict or at least reduce the number of Britain's enemies" (page 385). Pelling explains that Eden had resigned because he wanted "to try to establish closer links with" Britain's obvious friends while Chamberlain wanted "to reduce the number of Britain's potential enemies" (page 387). Churchill was opposed to the government's policy and said "that Britain should join France and Russia in declaring support for Czechoslovakia" (page 387). But, according to Pelling, "co-operation of action with France and Russia was precisely what Chamberlain did not want" (page 387).

Chamberlain's policy of "appeasement" seems naive and simplistic in retrospect. But was it? After reading Pelling,

V it seems that Chamberlain's policy had merit. Firstly, Pelling

shows that the Britain had not gone to war over previous acts

of fascist aggression, so why should the British have risked

going to war with Germany over Czechoslovakia? As far as

Chamberlain was concerned, it was far more preferable to have

the Nazis and Communists fight each other. Pelling writes that

in 1936 Chamberlain said, in rejecting Churchill's idea of

all-out emergency action, that "if there is any fighting in

Europe to be done, I should like to see the Bolshies and Nazis

do it" (page 397). Secondly, "the value of the Russian army

was ... in doubt as a result of the Stalin's purges" (page 385).

Thirdly, in the United States, popular feeling was "in favor

of isolation and neutrality ... and so, as Chamberlain observed

'he would be a rash man who based his considerations on help

from that quarter'" (page 385). Fourthly, "Britain had to

recognize that France was her only possible major ally" (page

385), and France had already demonstrated its unwillingness

to fight. And fifthly, British popular feeling was opposed

to war against Germany. Pelling writes that after the Munich

Conference, "most people still thought Chamberlain had been

right to avoid the catastrophe of war in September 1938; and

... the earliest opinion polls conducted in the autumn and winter

suggests that Chamberlain still had majority support" (page

392). In short, there was no other country that Britain could

rely on to help fight Germany and Britain was in no position

to fight Germany alone. Britain's precarious position was

later borne out in the case of France which, despite its

but does this exculpate Chamberlain's policy of appeasement?

but does this mean we have merit?

Was this not policy as the escape from war?

huge army, collapsed in six weeks after the Nazis invaded.

✓ Chamberlain thus had valid reasons for ^{WANTING}~~trying~~ to avoid war.

But, as Pelling writes, "their was a great revulsion of feelin in the country" (page 393) after the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and "Churchill's remarks about the worthless character of the Munich settlement now appeared thoroughly justified" (page 392). Pelling writes that there were calls for "Churchill's return to high office" (page 394). After war broke out on September 1, 1939, Churchill was offered the post of First Lord of the Admiralty, and after the Allied failure in Norway, Chamberlain resigned, despite the fact that his government still had a majority in Parliament, and Churchill became Prime Minister. According to Pelling, Churchill was selected as Prime Minister "by default" after Halifax declined the position (see page 437). Thus, the man who only a few years before was considered politically dead became the Prime Minister - without a general election being called.

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✓ In conclusion, Churchill's rise to power was spectacular. Churchill was held in disrepute, but because of Adolf Hitler, his political career was resurrected. Pelling shows that the British did not want to have another war with Germany. But after the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia, popular opinion changed and Churchill's popularity rose. Churchill's warnings about Nazi Germany had been proven right. Suddenly Churchill was no longer pushy, but pugnacious; no longer cantankerous, but dynamic; and no longer useless, but needed. Not that Churchill's personality actually changed. Rather, circumstances