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Churchillian Geopolitics and World War Two[*]

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Abstract

Winston Churchill emerges as a statesman who interpreted Britain's conflicts as a defence of Western civilisation. Deeply shaped by navalism and imperial thought, he saw sea power, empire, and the Anglo-American alliance as pillars of global stability. Though marked by controversial strategies and operational failures, his leadership during the critical years of 1940-41 sustained British resistance when defeat seemed imminent. Churchill's vision extended beyond war, anticipating the ideological struggle with Soviet expansion and contributing to the conceptual foundations of the postwar Western order. His enduring legacy resides not only in victory, but in preserving the political and moral continuity of the West.

We must begin by recognising how different is the part played by our Navy from that of the navies of every other Country. Alone among the great modern States, we can neither defend the soil upon which we live nor subsist upon its produce [...]. The food of our people, the raw material of our industries, the commerce which constitutes our wealth, have to be protected as they traverse thousands of miles of sea and ocean from every quarter of the globe [...]. The burden of responsibility laid upon the British Navy is heavy, and its weight increases year by year.

Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, introducing the Naval Estimates, House of Commons, 17 March 1914

[*] I have benefited from the opportunity to present an earlier draft at «Winston Churchill, Liberal Democracy, and the Euro-Atlantic Alliance», a conference held in Madeira on 20 February 2026

This is not a question of fighting for Danzig [Gdansk] or fighting for Poland. We are fighting to save the whole world from the pestilence of Nazi tyranny and in defence of all that is most sacred to man. This is no war for domination or imperial aggrandisement or material gain, no war to shut any country out of its sunlight and means of progress. It is a war, viewed in its inherent quality, to establish on impregnable rocks, the rights of the individual, and it is a war to establish and revive the stature of man.

Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 3 September 1939

«The very reason [we have] the right to protest is because this great man stood up against tyranny and Nazism [...] to disgrace his legacy is a prime example of utter stupidity and a lack of understanding as to what this great nation is all about». Al Carns, the Armed Forces Minister, was clear on 27 February 2026 in response to the vandalisation, probably by a Dutch-based group, of Churchill's statue in Parliament Square Westminster with graffiti describing him as a 'Zionist war criminal' and pressing support for the Palestinian cause. In 2020, during the George Floyd protests, the relevant graffiti described Churchill as a racist. The ignorance of such remarks is a sad comment on the present, one that demands an examination of the past.

It is particularly appropriate to speak of Churchill and the West in Madeira. First, and, most obviously, for Churchill the person, because he really liked Madeira. It offered the charm of the French Riviera but set in a silver ocean and with an anglophile culture and society. Secondly, because he was a navalist. Of course, Churchill served and fought on land, and notably on the North West Frontier of British India, in Sudan and on the Western Front. He was greatly proud of the generalship of his ancestor John, 1st Duke of Marlborough (and had another campaigning ancestor in the 3rd Duke). He was Secretary of State for War after World War One.

But, Churchill was fascinated by naval power, which he saw as distinctly British, and directed this power in two key periods of British and, indeed, world history. When, as Prime Minister, in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, Churchill pledged to fight on, he added that, even if Britain was conquered: «Our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet would carry on the struggle» until America joined in. Thus, Britain, its Empire, the British navy and America were all joined in Churchill's view as a civilisational force, one that would counter the dominance of Eurasia by the alliance of Germany and the Soviet Union.

Churchill was echoing the assurance offered by Edward Gibbon, a sometime MP, in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

(1776-88) that, in the unlikely event of civilisation collapsing in Europe before new barbarian inroads, it would be sustained «in the American world».

«Civilisation» was very much part of Churchill's view of history. In his *The River War. An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (1899) provided a clear, but also useful, account of the British defeat of the Mahdists: «They lived by the sword. Why should they not perish by the magazine rifle? A state of society which, even if it were tolerable to those whom it comprised, was an annoyance to civilised nations has been swept aside [...]. The Government was a cruel despotism»[1].

At this state, Churchill's view of the West was very much linked to imperial commitment. This was seen in particular in the Boer War (1899-1902) in which Churchill participated. There was a commitment to a Greater Britain that drew in part on ideas of partnership based on settler Dominions and a British race and identity. A West understood in terms of a Greater Britain theme was always to be part of Churchill's mindset, with his Anglo-Saxonism encompassing America as a matter of personal background, affection, sense of civilisational development, and aspect of realism, the last an element always well worth consideration when assessing Churchill[2].

This Anglo-Saxonism also encompassed colonies that were very different in character but that Churchill felt it crucial to hold. Thus, the creation of the South-East Asia Command in October 1943 was designed to give effect to Churchill's wish to recapture Britain's lost colonies, and, specifically, to use amphibious operations to strike at the Japanese perimeter. In March 1944, he instructed the Chiefs of Staff to delay sending naval help to the Americans in the Pacific:

> It is in the interest of Britain to pursue what may be termed the "Bay of Bengal Strategy" at any rate for the next twelve months [...]. All preparations will be made for amphibious action across the Bay of Bengal against the Malay Peninsula and the various island outposts by which it is defended, the ultimate objective being the reconquest of Singapore. A powerful British fleet will be built up based on Ceylon, Adu Atoll and East India ports[3].

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[1] R.Toye, *Churchill's Empire. The World that Made him and the World He Made*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

[2] For a vigorous presentation of this piece, P. Porter, *Winston Churchill, Arch-Pragmatist*, «Engelsberg Ideas», 29 November 2022, https://engelsbedrgideas.com/essays/churchill-arch-pargmatist/.

[3] Churchill to Brooke, 20 March 1944, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London [hereafter LH], Alanbrooke Papers, 6/3/8.

Churchill, however, was not alone. In September 1944, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, Commander-in-Chief Ceylon, wrote of

> the vital importance of our recapturing those parts of the Empire as far as possible ourselves. I would specially mention the recapture of Burma and its culmination in the recovery of Singapore by force of arms and not by waiting for it to be surrendered as part of any peace treaty [...] the immense effect this will have on our prestige in the Far East in post-war years. This and only this in my opinion will restore us to our former level in the eyes of the native population in these parts.

Admiral Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander of South-East Asia Command, strongly agreed[4]. British anxieties about empire in part reflected a growing awareness of a relative decline of British influence compared to an increasingly assertive America and the Soviet Union. Brooke commented in August 1944:

> The Americans now feel that they possess the major forces at sea, on land and in the air, in addition to all the vast financial and industrial advantages which they have had from the start. In addition, they now look upon themselves no longer as the apprentices at war, but on the contrary as full blown professionals. As a result of all this, they are determined to have an ever increasing share in the running of the war in all its aspects[5].

In the event, the fall of Rangoon on 3 May 1945 to British amphibious forces was followed by just such an emphasis, rather than that of continuing to campaign overland, into southern Burma and/or Thailand, against the large Japanese forces in the region; or, alternatively, of focusing on the invasion of Japan. Operation Zipper, an amphibious attack on western Malaya, designed to lead to the recapture of Singapore, was planned for 9 September 1945, but was rendered unnecessary by the Japanese surrender.

The British Chiefs of Staff were, from 1944, actively considering post-war threats to the British world. This consideration included concern about the Soviet Union and with reference to Chinese *Guomindang* pressure on British India. The Chiefs of Staff Post-Hostilities Staff for example produced a map in 1944 about projected Soviet lines of advance against India, a map that looked back to nineteenth-century British anxieties about a Russian advance on India. This map was consistent with the view in British India, which was still a centre of strategic perception and planning,

[4] Layton to First Sea Lord, 13 September 1944, Mountbatten to Layton, 15 September 1944, British Library, London, Add. Ms. 74796.

[5] Brooke to Wilson, 2 Aug. 1944, LH, Alanbrooke Papers, 6/3/6.

that Baluchistan (and the Herat-Kandahar-Khojak-Bolan route) formed India's "front porch", as opposed to the side entrance via Kabul and Khyber Pass. To the British in 1944, western Afghanistan also formed a kind of pivot on which a Soviet force might turn toward southern Iran and, more particularly, the bottleneck of the narrow Straits of Hormuz to the entrance of the Gulf; an area that remains of geopolitical significance.

Yet, there was more to Churchill's West than the Empire, and that is why it is so appropriate that we are in Madeira. This different West was that not only of prudential and expedient alliances but also of the sense of a civilisation that looked back to Classical Athens, the Roman Republic, the Christian World, and forward to a sense of the value and values of Europe. This took a number of forms, from Churchill's wish to woo Mussolini, to the major and dramatic effort in 1940 to keep France in the war, not least by offering a union of the two states.

This was a theme that was stronger in some periods than others. Churchill, in particular, had a "Westphalian" view of Europe, one opposed to hegemonic notions as portrayed, for him, by Louis XIV, Napoleon, Wilhelm II and Hitler. This was a view that linked John, 1st Duke of Marlborough, the Britain of the Grand Alliance, the opposition to Nepoleon, the *Entente*, and, at the end of Churchill's imagination, with its particular brilliance in joining past and present, the creation of NATO and a world in which much of the British army was deployed on the Inner-German Frontier[6].

This, of course, was a tradition in which Britain and Portugal were closely aligned. Theirs was an alliance with a medieval origin and purpose, but it was repurposed in the 1580s and 1640-68 when England sought to free Portugal from Habsburg control, and then, again, in protecting its independence from Bourbon Spain and, subsequently, from Napoleonic sway. This was a protection that extended to the Portuguese Empire, from Brazil to the Orient.

Churchill's life encapsulated this relationship. The "Route to South Africa" for the Boer War took ships past Portuguese coaling stations, notably Madeira, while the geopolitics of British imperialism in the 1890s and 1900s in part rested on alliance with powers that could be seen as "informal" members of the British system, notably Portugal and the Netherlands. In World War One, Portugal joined in as an ally, providing

[6] T.G. Otte, *Churchill and Germany: a "Special" Relationship*, «History», early view, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229x.70081 (accessed 10.1.2025).

both troops for the Western Front, where Churchill served, and also colonial bases that could be used in the struggle against German colonies, notably German East Africa (Tanzania). Alliance with Portugal also offered naval bases and safe harbours for the struggle against German submarines and for the protection of British trade. In World War Two, Portugal was concerned about German-backed Spanish aggression, and with reason. Furthermore, the Japanese occupation of Macao and East Timor was a clear warning.

Nevertheless, Portugal played a fundamental part in the Allies winning the Battle of the Atlantic, for the changing nature of maritime power and capability meant a greater part in the acquisition of air bases. In 1943, the Portuguese provision of basing rights in the Azores provided a crucial capability in closing the mid-Atlantic "air gap" in Allied air cover against submarines, notably what the Germans termed the "Black Pit" west of the Azores. This provided the basis for Portugal being a founding member of NATO, which was founded in order to oppose Soviet expansion. As a secondary goal, NATO would serve to restrain a future Germany. In December 1942, Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, told the Commons:

> It will be the first and imperative duty of the United Nations to establish such a settlement as will make it impossible for Germany to dominate her neighbours by force of arms. It would be sheer folly to allow some non-Nazi government to be set up and then trust to luck.

NATO primarily, however, took forward an opposition to the Soviet Union that Churchill had repeatedly showed from the Russian Civil War on. Thus, during World War Two, there were contrasting views over Poland. Looking back to rivalry from the outset of the Soviet Union, Stalin informed Churchill that the Poles were "incorrigible"[7]. He added, in March 1944, that there could not be "normal relations" between the Soviet Union and the London-based Polish government in exile, and that the Polish view of the frontier was unacceptable. Churchill was willing to be helpful about the frontier, but offered a view on power that was very different to that of Stalin:

> Force can achieve much but force supported by the good will of the world can achieve more. I earnestly hope that you will not close the door finally to a working agreement

[7] Stalin to Churchill, 7 January 1944, in *The Kremlin Letters. Stalin's Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt*, ed. by David Reynolds, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2018, p. 358.

with the Poles which will help the common cause during the war and give you all you require at the peace. If nothing can be arranged and you are unable to have any relations with the Polish Government, which we shall continue to recognise as the government of the ally for whom we declared war upon Hitler, I should be very sorry indeed. The War Cabinet ask me to say that they would share this regret,

the last a point underlining that the stance was not solely that of Churchill[8].

The Roosevelt administration was opposed to colonial rule (although not by America in the Pacific) and, instead, in favour of a system of "trusteeship" as a prelude to independence. Prior to the war, the Americans had already promised to give the Philippines its independence, and were to do so in 1946.

Roosevelt pressed Churchill on the status of both Hong Kong (which he wanted returned to China) and India, and British officials were made aware of a fundamental contradiction in attitudes. In 1943, at the Tehran conference, Roosevelt told Churchill that Britain had to adjust to a "new period" in global history and turn its back on «400 years of acquisitive blood in your veins».[9]

Just as, under the pressures of force and events, he yielded to Stalin, particularly at Yalta, so Churchill made significant concessions to America. Article seven of the Lend-Lease agreement of 1942 affected imperial preference, the commercial adhesive of the empire, although imperial preference continued until 1973 and Roosevelt assured Churchill that the article did not mean its abolition. In 1944, Britain and the USA signed treaties with China ending the extra-territorial rights acquired the previous century.

Churchill's hopes of imperial gains, for example Italian Somaliland and Libya, capture the war as opportunity, a theme differently pushed by Stalin and (less crudely) Roosevelt, but again suggest a degree of hubris in the face of Britain's relative decline and difficulties. Indeed, there was, and is, good cause for criticising Churchill. In particular, he bore some of the responsibility for the humiliating failure of the strategy for confronting Japan, and the diary of Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff from December 1941 to January 1946, made it clear

[8] Stalin to Churchill, 3 March, reply, 7 March 1944, *The Kremlin Letters* cit., pp. 387, 393.
[9] N. Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003, p. 360.

that he could be very difficult as far as military planning was concerned. For 6 July 1944, Alan Brooke recorded,

> At 10pm we had a frightful meeting with Winston which lasted till 2am! It was quite the worst we have had with him. He was very tired as a result of his speech in the House concerning the flying bombs, he had tried to recuperate with drink. As a result he was in a maudlin, bad-tempered, drunken mood, ready to take offence at anything, suspicious of everybody, and in a highly vindictive mood against the Americans. In fact so vindictive that his whole outlook on strategy was warped.

However, although his confidence in Churchill having the necessary grip lessened, Brooke's overall judgement was that Churchill was crucial to the winning of the war, while command failures in Malaya and Singapore were fundamentally responsible for disaster there. More generally, Churchill's main objective was to get the Americans to fight the Germans and then defeat the Japanese later; and, despite his fears, that was how the situation worked out from the outset.

Europe was to become more important for Britain because, essentially despite and after Churchill, the Imperial dimension to British strength within the Anglo-American duality collapsed. A replacement of America by Britain was not just a matter of relative power because there were fundamental divisions between Britain and America over the future of the Empire. In October 1942, *Life* declared «Of one thing we are sure. Americans are not fighting to protect the British Empire». Churchill, in contrast, was at pains to emphasise his opposition to losses, writing to Roosevelt in March 1944:

> Thank you very much for your assurance about no sheep's eyes at our oil fields in Iran and Iraq. Let me reciprocate by giving you the fullest assurances that we have no thought of trying to horn in upon your interests or property in Saudi Arabia [...]. Great Britain seeks no advantage, territorial or otherwise, as the result of the war. On the other hand she will not be deprived of anything which rightly belongs to her[10].

In practice, the "destroyers for bases" deal of 1940, under which British bases in the New World had been transferred for 99 years to America in return for warships, represented just such a diminution, and was seen in that light.

Indeed, American opposition to imperial preference, the commercial adhesive of the British Empire, was a major challenge. Article seven of the Lend-Lease agreement of 1942 stipulated the eventual end of such pref-

[10] *Roosevelt and Churchill. Their Secret Wartime Correspondence*, ed. by F.L. Loewenheim, H.D. Langley, and M. Jonas, Dutton, New York 1975, p. 459.

erence, and this strategy of opening up the British empire was followed up as a result of the financial loan from America that Britain was obliged to seek after the close of the war.

The two powers competed over Middle Eastern oil, American successfully developing links with Saudi Arabia, and over economic interests elsewhere. There was also strong American support for a Jewish state in British-ruled Palestine, a policy opposed by Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, because of concern about Arab views, both there and elsewhere. Roosevelt's opposition to key aspects of British policy was shared by significant advisers, such as Sumner Welles, Under-Secretary of State from 1937 until 1943, and was also echoed in public, notably, but not only, by isolationist or quasi-isolationist opinion.

Indeed, American dominance of the Anglo-American alliance had important implications for the British Empire, as there was a marked increase in the American military presence in the Dominions, notably Australia the colonies, and the areas of imperial influence. This presence was a matter not only of units and bases, but also of defence planning. There was tension, not least over the American role in the southwest Pacific, but the war ended with closer strategic relations between America and both Australia and Canada. At the same time, Britain only won security and success as part of an alliance system. In particular, the American "Germany First" policy was of great value to Britain.

Roosevelt was certainly not keen on the British extending their empire, for example, as Churchill considered, at the expense of Thailand in the Kra isthmus, which would have strengthened Malaya's northern defences, removing a problem encountered with repelling the Japanese attack in December 1941. Roosevelt's opposition to French and Dutch imperialism in Asia was also very strong. He mistrusted the French empire even more than the British one, which was ironic as, by 1954, President Eisenhower was unsuccessfully pressing the French to stay in IndoChina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) in order to prevent a Communist takeover.

Ultimately, World War Two defines Churchill's significance. Essentially two views of Churchill as war leader are offered. The first presents him as the key figure who rallied domestic opinion and kept Britain determined in the dark days of defeat and isolation in 1940-1. This is a Churchill of resolve and fortitude, the Churchill of great and defiant speeches, a man who was both national symbol and the force of national resolve. In-

deed, Churchill's conviction that the struggle was a great moral cause had been there from the outset.

Most of the discussion of Churchill as strategist focuses, understandably on his years as Prime Minister, 1940-5. However, it is also worth devoting attention to his period as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939-40. This role was important in itself, first, because at sea Britain played a more significant role in the Anglo-French coalition than on land, secondly, because Churchill had established strategic views, having been First Lord before and in the early stages of World War One, and, thirdly, because he retained a navalist interest and commitment throughout World War Two.

However, both as First Lord and as Prime Minister, Churchill revealed serious flaws as a strategist that repay consideration. In many senses, these were flaws in execution, because the policy pursued was consistent. Churchill was determined to preserve national greatness, a greatness that for him included the empire as a central force, and also to destroy Germany. In 1939, with the fate of war in the opening balance, he presented the struggle as a moral one. In 1940, with defeat apparent to many foreign commentators, he pressed to fight on. In early 1941, with defeat still apparent, he pressed to fight on. In 1945, with victory imminent, he underlined the need for total victory. On 18 January 1945, Churchill told the Commons:

> I am clear that nothing should induce us to abandon the principle of unconditional surrender, or to enter into any form of negotiation with Germany or Japan, under whatever guise such suggestions may present themselves, until the act of unconditional surrender had been formally executed.

Indeed, Josef Goebbels recorded that, on his visit to Hitler on 11 March 1945, the latter had argued that, due to what he saw as Churchill's determination to exterminate Germany and refusal to ally against the Soviets, and President Roosevelt's wish that the Europeans destroy themselves through war, it was necessary for Germany to fight sufficiently well to lead Stalin to seek a separate peace.

As First Lord, in 1939-40, however, Churchill repeated his strategic failure in 1914-15. The largest and most powerful navy in the world, at a stage when it was only opposed by Germany, could not be used with strategic effect, to influence, let alone direct, the course and politics of the war. Germany was not intimidated into responding to British wishes. This represented a major failure for navalism, a failure that was difficult for Churchill

to accept precisely because he understood the importance of the Royal Navy to British greatness.

This failure was also more specific in that particular plans and operations were misconceived or misguided. The war began with Britain and France unable to have any impact on the war in Poland which rapidly fell to German attack. Churchill's desire to act was understandable, but also unwise. He advocated the dispatch of a fleet to the Baltic specially prepared to resist air attack, but this rash idea, which would have exposed the fleet to air attack in confined waters, was thwarted by his naval advisers. Nevertheless, the Royal Navy fought a real, not a "phoney", war. It was energetic against German surface raiders, notably the *Graf Spee*, and U-boats.

When the Royal Navy did act in strength, it did so with less success than anticipated. On 9 April 1940, Denmark and Norway fell victims to a surprise German attack. The failure of the poorly-directed Royal Navy to prevent the initial German landings in Norway or, subsequently that day, to disrupt them, was a serious problem, and was part of a more general failure of British naval management. On 9 April the British were initially convinced that the Germans were planning to sail into the Atlantic, and made dispositions accordingly. Moreover, a *Luftwaffe* attack ended moves by the Royal Navy on invasion day, although British submarines had an impact on the German surface fleet. The possibility of naval action was displayed on 10 and 13 April when British warships sailed into Ofotfjord to wreck the German squadron that had attacked and occupied Narvik. This success simply highlighted the failure on 9 April and more generally. The Royal Navy had been shown to be unable to cope effectively with German air power, and a doctrine of reliance on anti-aircraft fire had been revealed as inadequate. The navy also took hard knocks from the German surface warships, especially when covering the forces returning from Narvik. Sunk with heavy casualties on 7 June, the *Glorious* was the only carrier ever lost to battleships.

Norway, however, was not to be a second Gallipoli. Instead, Churchill's reputation as a resolute opponent of Hitler, his ability to convey determination, his war experience, and the impression that he could do the job, helped ensure that he succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister on 10 May; rather as David Lloyd George had replaced Asquith in 1916. Lloyd George saw himself as a possible Prime Minister in 1940, «when Winston is bust», but in the autumn of 1939 he had pressed for a compromise

peace and in 1940 he supported war as a means to a compromise settlement with Germany. In May 1940, Churchill also became Minister of Defence, and thus gained complete political control over running the war. Churchill's appointment was not entirely unprecedented. In 1936, Sir Thomas Inskip was appointed Minister for Coordination of Defence, and he was followed by Lord Chatfield in January 1939. However, they were minor figures who were appointed to mute the growing demand for Churchill to be given a central defence role. The power and authority he obtained as Minister of Defence were much greater.

Having tried and failed to keep France in the war, Churchill was forced to focus on the defence of Britain. Churchill was fully aware of the risk, including «heavy barge concentrations at the invasion ports». Again, reality scarcely matched his rhetoric, or indeed the drive the latter represented. On 4 June 1940, Churchill told the Commons, «we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender»; but, if the first two had failed, it is difficult to see how resistance at his subsequent stages could have succeeded.

Nevertheless, alongside optimism, a key characteristic of Churchill's strategy was a determination to attack. Driving the Vichy French from their possessions, was regarded as a crucial way to win the global struggle for power. In September 1940, Churchill wrote to Sir Samuel Hoare, the Ambassador to Spain, explaining his support for the French attempt to gain Dakar, the capital of the French colony of Senegal the leading French colony in West Africa, presenting a classic account of the strategy of the indirect approach to attacking an opponent. He observed that if Charles de Gaulle was to establish himself in Dakar and become «master of Western and Central Africa, Morocco is next on the list».

In the event, due to firm resistance, the expedition failed. Churchill was very upset, and for his wife Clementine, looking back on the war, it was «the progressive and sickening disappointment» she remembered most, «a classic example of Hope deferred making the Heart sick». Fortunately, the port of Duala, and with it the French colony of Cameroon, fell to the Free French in October 1940, news Churchill greeted by promising de Gaulle «we shall stand resolutely together».

Italy's entry into the war on Germany's side on 10 June 1940 provided a clear opportunity to link attack to imperial interests, notably protecting the key British colony of Egypt, and, more particularly, the Suez Canal,

the vital axis of British imperial power. The defeat of the Italian invading force in December 1940 owed much to Churchill's decision to send to Egypt tanks that were a key part of Britain's strategic reserve. In October 1940, Churchill wrote, «It should be possible to provide by the end of July [1941] a striking force for amphibious warfare of six divisions, of which two should be armoured». This reflected his determination to strike at the Axis where possible, but also his confidence that a German invasion of Britain would not come.

Churchill's move had been prefigured in 1758-9 when William Pitt the Elder, 1st Earl of Chatham, sent forces to conquer the French colony of Canada despite the risk of a French invasion of England that was, indeed, to be thwarted by the Royal Navy in 1759. In October 1940, Churchill wrote the foreword to an edition of *The War Speeches of William Pitt the Younger* [Prime Minister 1783-1801, 1804-6] pressing the case for «our determination to fight on, as Pitt and his successors fought on, till we in our turn achieve our Waterloo».

Chamberlain's cancer opened the way for Churchill to become leader of the Conservative Party in October 1940. In his speech of 9 October accepting the leadership, Churchill offered an account of his broadest concerns: «I have always faithfully served two public causes which I think stand supreme – the maintenance of the enduring greatness of Britain and her Empire and the historical continuity of our Island life». Churchill was strong enough politically to send his major Conservative political rival, the Earl of Halifax, as ambassador to Washington.

Churchill's interventionism was less successful when forces were sent to Greece in April 1941 in an unsuccessful attempt to help resist German invasion. The dispatch of forces there greatly weakened the British in North Africa. Churchill, who had backed the policy for political reasons, in order to show that Britain was supporting all opposition to the Axis, swiftly recognised it as an error. Criticism of him increased when the British defence of Crete that May against German invasion proved a major failure. Relations with the military leadership were put under strain, not least due to disputes over how best to balance between commitments in the Mediterranean and the Far East. Churchill pressed the case for advancing in North Africa, leading an angry Field Marshal Sir John Dill to write to Churchill on 15 May 1941:

> I am sure that you, better than anyone else, must realise how difficult it is for a soldier to advise against a bold offensive plan. One lays oneself open to charges of de-

> featism, of inertia, or event of "cold feet". Human nature being what it is, there is a natural tendency to acquiesce in an offensive plan of doubtful merit rather than to face such charges. It takes a lot of moral courage not to be afraid of being thought afraid. Be this as it may, the responsible military advisers, both in this country and in France, under-rated the Germans [...]. My only concern in this particular problem is that we should not repeat our previous mistake of under-rating the enemy.

Nevertheless, the German hope that the British people would realise their plight, overthrow Churchill and make peace, proved a serious misreading of British politics and public opinion. The German bombing offensive had led, British Intelligence reports suggested, to signs «of increasing hatred of Germany» as well as demands for «numerous» reprisals. Hitting back was a theme of Churchill's strategy, in the shape of a bombing offensive designed to show that Britain was not dependent on the less direct means of blockading Germany, supporting resistance in lands conquered by her, and attacking Italy and Vichy France.

Failure in 1942 brought fresh criticisms. The fall of Singapore in February was a great humiliation. The British loss with 33,000 prisoners, of Tobruk in Libya in June to the *Afrika Korps* under Rommel led to a censure motion in the House of Commons on 1 July. Churchill easily survived this mishandled attack, winning a division in the Commons by 475 to 25 votes, but the attack reflected widespread political concern about military failure and his leadership. At the same time, the controversy revealed that parliamentary critics of the government held differing views, lacked coordination, and found it difficult to voice criticism without causing offence and risking appearing unpatriotic.

Victory at El Alamein in Egypt on 23 October-4 November 1942 turned the tide for Britain, both militarily, in the then key area of British engagement, and politically. The key role of conflict in the political framing of strategy was seen in Churchill's ability, thanks to El Alamein, to ensure that the growing political crisis of the autumn did not become as serious as that in July. The autumn crisis had seen widespread criticism, and intrigues by Stafford Cripps, the left-wing Lord Privy Seal, who wanted to replace him. Cripps proposed the formation of a War Planning Directorate, which was intended as a body to circumvent Churchill. There was also a public call for Churchill's resignation from the Labour MP Aneurin Bevan, although he was more prominent as a speaker than a politican. After El Alamein, Churchill was able to demote Cripps, and his political position was far less vulnerable.

Churchill announced on 10 November 1942 that recent successes signified not «the beginning of the end», but «the end of the beginning». Indeed, at the Casablanca conference, held from 14 to 24 January 1943, Churchill was bounched by Roosevelt into supporting the demand for unconditional surrender. Churchill, instead, had sought a way to ease Italy out of the war. From late 1942, the Allies could move over to the offensive, not as a series of counterattacks, but as part of a planned attempt to regain Axis conquests, and then to take the war to the Axis states themselves. Thanks to success at El Alamein, Britain was able to complement the American-dominated Torch invasion of French North Africa on 8 November.

The shift to the offensive highlighted questions of prioritisation and therefore strategic choice. In particular, Churchill sought to thwart the Soviet Union and to preserve the British empire. He was anxious to invade Italy and to use the Mediterranean as a staging point for amphibious operations into the Balkans. To the Americans who had been persuaded to persevere in a "Germany First" rather than a "Japan First" policy, this was a distraction from defeating the Germans in France, and also a logistical nightmare. To Churchill, however, the Balkans presented an opportunity not only to harry the Germans, but also to pre-empt Soviet advances.

This policy reflected his suspicion of the Soviet Union, but also his strong sense that the war was a stage in the history of the twentieth century, a formative stage but one that would be succeeded by challenges and rivalries that had only been partly suspended during the conflict. To Churchill, who had played a key role supporting intervention in the Russian Civil War in 1919-20, the cause of freedom meant keeping the Soviets at bay. On 30 September 1940, broadcasting to the people of Czechoslovakia then under German tyranny, he had promised, «The hour of your deliverance will come. The soul of freedom is deathless; it cannot, and will not, perish». By 1943, however, particularly in Poland, there was the danger that one tyranny would replace another. Churchill, however, failed to prevail with the Americans who, by 1944, were clearly taking the leading role in the Western Alliance.

There were issues of practicality in Churchill's strategic options. The boldness of his strategic planning paid insufficient attention to logistical and other military realities. This was a particular problem in Churchill's case, as in his plans in 1942 to invade Norway and in August 1943 to gain

«partial control» of the Dardanelles. Indeed, it could be argued that Churchill was poor at military strategy but better at the geopolitical strategies of coalition warfare. Churchill's emphasis on operations in the Mediterranean had serious logistical implications as it was more distant from British bases than France. Instead, the American preference for concentrating on a cross-Channel invasion of France was more appropriate in terms of resource availability and the resulting logistical capability.

Discussion of Churchill's role in Anglo-American wartime strategy continues to be contentious, not least because it is linked to counterfactuals relating to post-war geopolitics, notably the claim that more commitment to a Mediterranean strategy might have restricted subsequent Soviet control of the Balkans, affecting the Cold War, an issue that melds politics and morality. Moreover, it is argued that greater success in Italy could have been obtained had American pressure to allocate resources to an invasion of southern France in 1944 been unsuccessful. Churchill hoped that a presence in Italy would encourage resistance in Yugoslavia, hold down German forces in the Balkans and serve as the basis for advancing into Austria and southern Germany. His expectations that a forward policy in the Mediterranean would affect the post-war situation possibly did not take sufficient note of the realities on the ground in Yugoslavia, both during and after the war. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government thought of joining the Allies in 1943-4 if their forces invaded the Balkans, while Romania and Bulgaria also switched sides in 1944 when the Soviets advanced.

Yet, Churchill failed sufficiently to appreciate the difficulties of campaigning in Italy, both those posed by the terrain and those due to the German defenders who responded promptly and fought well.

Moreover, the amphibious force sent to secure the formerly Italian-held Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean in late 1943 proved a disaster, with the Germans successfully regaining the islands in October-November. The Americans had opposed the commitment. It appealed, however, to Churchill's interest in bold steps, his commitment to action, and his longstanding belief in the importance of Turkey; indeed, in some respects was Gallipoli/1915 redux. He hoped that the operation would lead Turkey to enter the war. In the event, the British lost about 4,800 troops, six destroyers and 113 planes. Churchill's emphasis on Mediterranean risked an east-west iron curtain that left more economically-advanced areas under Soviet

control, although, looked at differently, it was potentially a valuable supplement to a Second Front invasion of France.

Churchill was sensible in supporting delay in the launching of the Second Front, by means of an invasion of France. The deliberative, controlled style of attack supported by clear superiority in artillery that Montgomery had used at El Alamein could not be replicated in an amphibious attack.

In 1943, many key German units were allocated to the unsuccessful Kursk offensive on the Eastern Front, the Germans lacked the advantages of the build-up in munitions production that 1943 was to bring, and their defensive positions in France were incomplete. The Soviets, indeed, mentioned their suspicion of their allies' failure to open a Second Front to the Germans when probing the possibility of a separate peace.

Nevertheless, there was only limited equipment for, and experience in, amphibious operations, while it was still unclear how far, and how speedily, it would be possible to vanquish the U-boat threat, and thus control the Atlantic shipping lanes. Aside from the need to build up forces and experience for an invasion of France, there was also the requirement of assured air and sea superiority to support both landing and exploitation. Moreover, delaying the invasion until 1944 enabled the Allies to benefit from the problems that hit the Germans in 1943: failure at Kursk and subsequent large-scale Soviet advances chewed up part of the German army and air force.

Churchill supported a prudent stance over the Second Front, but his sometimes cavalier failure to note the constraints within which the military operated could lend an air of fantasy to some of his strategic speculations. For example, in March 1944, the Chiefs of Staff successfully responded to pressure from Churchill that they plan for a year's campaigning to restore British power in Malaya and Singapore, before British forces were switched to join the Americans in the Pacific in attacking Japan:

> This assumes a flexibility which would not, we fear, prove practicable. The administrative preparations for whatever operations may be decided upon, whether in the East or in the West, will be on a vast scale, indeed not beyond our power, to make these preparations in both areas. There is thus no question of retaining indefinitely an option in this matter. It is essential to make a decision within the next three months as to which policy is to be adopted, and to adhere to it.

As a salutary rejoinder to Churchill's hopes, the Chiefs of Staff also argued that there was a lack of necessary resources, unless they were lent by the Americans, and claimed «we shall not have sufficient British aircraft to equip the full number of fighter carriers required». Churchill, in contrast, had written:

> It is in the interest of Britain to pursue what may be termed the "Bay of Bengal Strategy" at any rate for the next twelve months [...]. All preparations will be made for amphibious action across the Bay of Bengal against the Malay Peninsula and the various island outposts by which it is defended, the ultimate objective being the reconquest of Singapore. A powerful British fleet will be built up based on Ceylon, Adu Atoll [in the Indian Ocean] and East India ports.

In the event, a powerful British fleet was to be sent to the Pacific where, while opposing Japan, it did not greatly contribute to Britain's imperial interests. When the Eastern Fleet was divided in November 1944, the British Pacific Fleet got the best capital ships, including the fleet carriers, while the new East Indies Fleet made do with escort carriers and only one battleship. The Chiefs of Staff had argued that a focus on the Pacific would make it easier to bring the war to a speedy conclusion, but it did not do so in the way Churchill had wished.

Churchill's interest in regaining control of Malaya and Singapore reflected his passionate commitment to the Empire, a theme seen throughout his years in power. Under American pressure, the Atlantic Charter, issued by Churchill and Roosevelt at the Placentia Bay conference (9-12 August 1941), had declared «the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live». Churchill, however, did not accept these views. Becoming leader of the Conservative Party, he had declared «Alone among the nations of the world we have found the means to combine Empire and liberty». Aside from being determined to protect the empire, a major theme already in his policies in office in the 1910s and early 1920s and in heated opposition to the Government of India Act in 1935; Churchill also sought gains, again continuing his earlier policy. He considered the annexation of Libya, while Italian Somaliland remained under British administration.

Ultimately, Churchill cut traditional national strategic culture with the particular pressures and needs of World War Two. In particular, his preference for operations in the Mediterranean, notably an invasion of Italy in 1943 and the unsuccessful Dodecanese operation in the Aegean later that year, was an instance of the so-called indirect approach. This was an

aspect of longstanding British strategic culture, notably navalist and imperial strategic culture, powerfully fortified by the lessons of World War One, notably the extremely costly struggle on the Western Front. In contrast, the Americans argued, throughout, that Italy was a strategic irrelevance that would dissipate military strength and, instead, sought a focus on the direct approach, especially an engagement with the major German forces in Western Europe. Such was the view also of the "Westerners" in Britain in World War One.

His flaws were heroic. That is a fair judgement, but not an extenuation. Churchill made mistakes, did not always appreciate how best to respond to the pressure of changing circumstances, and found the exigencies of alliance strategy difficult. Yet, he understood the Nazi menace and Soviet challenge far better than Roosevelt did, and also met destiny in the difficult days of 1940 and 1941 when the world seemed headed for an evil madness.