

'I felt as if I were walking with destiny,' Winston Churchill wrote of the moment he became prime minister on 10 May 1940, 'and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.' In this well-researched, well-written and above all wise book, Alan I. Saltman, with insight from a psychiatrist, conclusively proves that all of Churchill's past life had also been a preparation for his refusal to negotiate peace with Hitler later that same month.

Through a profound mastery of all the most important sources, and several unexpected ones too, Mr Saltman establishes how the decision to fight on after defeat on the Continent rested largely on character traits that Churchill had been consciously and unconsciously evolving over the previous sixty-five years. While I am no psychologist and thus unqualified to judge from a medical perspective, it strikes me that remarks about what are called Churchill's 'psychodynamics' are substantially correct, and that the decision to fight on in May 1940 can indeed essentially be traced back to his personality traits.

What certainly cannot be questioned is the importance of Churchill's decision for the continued survival of Western Civilization. If in the wake of the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in May 1940 and the catastrophic Fall of France the following month, Britain had cobbled together some kind of ignoble compromise peace with the Nazis, then the fate of the world would have been very different, and the whole of Europe would have fallen into what Churchill called 'the abyss of a new Dark Age'. With no two-front war to fight, Adolf Hitler could have timed his invasion of the Soviet Union, Operation Barbarossa, differently, and moreover undertaken it with 100% of his forces. Victory over Russia would have left him master of everywhere from Brest to the Urals or even beyond. Britain would have lost all credibility with the United States, which could not have used the United Kingdom as its unsinkable aircraft carrier from which to launch any eventual liberation of Europe.

Everything therefore hinged on the War Cabinet's decision over those fateful five days in May 1940, and Mr Saltman's coverage of each hour of its deliberations, with the psychology and motivations of its members minutely analysed, is a fine work of psychohistory. Contained within these crucial chapters are observations about human nature that go beyond the historical, and have relevance both in ordinary life and in modern politics and foreign affairs. The statement that 'Bullies do not cease being bullies once they get their way', for example, applies equally to Vladimir Putin in the 2020s as it did to Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, and we would do well to remember that when we consider the various outcomes posited for the present war in Ukraine.

This book also provides an opportunity for readers, perhaps particularly in the United States, to consider anew the policy of Appeasement of the 1930s. The Munich Agreement that dismembered Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1938 came as the result of a policy that is too often seen in terms of black and white, but which was in fact far more nuanced, and Mr Saltman is right to accentuate that. For however disastrous, indeed sinister, Appeasement turned out to be, there were perfectly sound strategic reasons for the British Governments to try to pursue it, at least in the early years.

The British Chiefs of Staff consistently warned British decision-makers that Britain could not fight against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. The harshness of the Versailles Treaty had created a good deal of sympathy for Germany – the word 'appeasement' was originally a Christian one with no pejorative overtones. There was an assumption that the aerial bombing of London would lead to six hundred thousand deaths. The British imperial colonies and the United States supported Appeasement; President Roosevelt even cabled Neville Chamberlain the words 'Good man' about the Munich Agreement.

Churchill was seen as a warmonger by millions of Britons who signed the League of Nations' Peace Pledge Ballot, as few could believe Germany wanted to start another war so soon after the devastation of World War One. As Mr Saltman also rightly points out, Churchill had made plenty of blunders in his career, and many people thought his stalwart opposition to Hitler was merely the latest in a long list of them.

In fact, as we now know, Churchill had been completely correct and the Appeasers entirely wrong in their analyses, but the aim of well-written history such as Mr Saltman's must be to not cloud our view of the past by our knowledge of the present. Moreover, it is only when one considers quite how universally popular the Appeasement policy was in the mid-1930s that one can fully grasp the moral courage that Churchill displayed in opposing it.

The differing rules by which totalitarian countries conduct their foreign policies from democratic ones explains why in August 1939 Nazi Germany were always capable of outbidding Britain and France when it came to allying with the Soviet Union. No democratic country could offer Stalin half of Poland and all three Baltic states in exchange for a non-aggression deal, in the way that Joachim von Ribbentrop was able to do to V.I. Molotov in the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which set Europe on the path to war.

Churchill is today beset by revisionists who seek to detract from his reputation. As recently as February 2020 a conference took place – in Churchill College, Cambridge, of all places! – where four revisionist academics even concluded that Churchill 'was as bad as Hitler'. His statue in Parliament Square was vandalized three months later. What calm, sane, evidence-based books such as this one achieve is to redress the balance, by placing the unwavering spotlight of history on what actually happened and by putting the momentous events of May 1940 into their proper context.

Once that is done, objective readers will I believe emerge from the process with their appreciation of Winston Churchill's qualities and legacy even possibly enhanced, for, as Mr Saltman successfully delineates, Churchill's moral and physical courage were truly remarkable, and his foresight was also exceptional, something he showed both before World War One and after World War Two, as well as in his struggle against Appeasement during the Wilderness Years.

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