

Intelligence in Public Media

Churchill: Walking with Destiny

Andrew Roberts (Viking, 2018), 1105 pp., 32 unnumbered plates, illustrations, maps, genealogical table, bibliography and index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

This is a great book about a great man, making it a worthy addition to already well-stocked shelves on its subject. Andrew Roberts, a bestselling author of books on World War II and Napoleon, brings new material to this biography—King George VI’s notes on his meetings with Churchill, Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky’s diary, and reports of War Cabinet meetings. What really makes this book stand out is how well the author tells this tale. Roberts has a knack for correcting in a wry way many of Churchill’s exaggerations and, in some cases, outright lies. His understated sense of humor infuses the narrative, making this 1100-page celebration of Churchill feel much lighter.

The title suggests hindsight guided the biographer, but Churchill saw himself as a man of destiny. As a young man, he regarded life’s experiences as grooming him to be the savior of the British Empire. (2) These experiences, from 1895 to 1955, were sweeping: As a cavalryman and reporter, Churchill saw action in Cuba, India, Sudan, and South Africa. After election to Parliament, Churchill served in the following governmental capacities: undersecretary of state for the colonies, president of the Board of Trade, home secretary, first lord of the admiralty during World War I, a lieutenant colonel in France, minister of munitions, secretary of war, colonial secretary, chancellor of the exchequer, and prime minister when Britain, for a period alone, confronted Nazi Germany during WWII. He even served another term as prime minister from 1951 to 1955.

Churchill published 43 book-length works in 72 volumes and won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is hard to believe one man lived such a momentous life and that there could be so many stops on the way to reaching one’s destiny. Roberts makes clear that reaching this destiny took time—Churchill was 66 when he became prime minister—in part because his subject habitually showed off and basked in clever takedowns of his opponents, who never forgot and who found ways to pay him back. (98)

Despite having a critical eye, Roberts clearly gets a kick out of his subject and sprinkles the narrative with some of Churchill’s great zingers. When news broke that

former prime minister and Nazi appeaser Stanley Baldwin’s family business was bombed during the Blitz—the 1940–41 German bombing campaign—Churchill cracked “that was very ungrateful of them.” (570) When a guest refused an offer of alcohol, opting instead for water because “lions drink it,” Churchill replied “asses drink it, too.” Roberts aptly observed that, “as a drinker, smoker and carnivore, outliving (he lived to be 91 years old) teetotalers and vegetarians never failed to give Churchill immense satisfaction.” (953)

Churchill’s wit often was cutting, as when he started referring to his first chief of the General Imperial Staff, Sir John Dill, as “Dilly-Dally,” for his cautiousness in being “over-impressed with the might of Germany.” (689) On being informed that General Montgomery made his staff—and presumably himself—go on regular seven-mile runs, Churchill could not see the point of it: “The only exception might be the Italian army, where a general might find it useful to be a good runner.” (571) In recalling such rejoinders, Roberts has added color and sharpened the picture of Churchill’s propensity to make fun of others.

In an unusual touch for a “great man of history” book, Roberts gives a nod to the role of luck and calls attention to how even Churchill’s faults helped him reach his destiny. “Churchill was amazingly lucky, even in his defeats.” (975) Three consecutive parliamentary election losses in the 1920s allowed him to change from the Liberal to the Conservative Party, which in turn shunned him in the 1930s. These wilderness years in which Churchill was excluded from positions in two governments saved him from being tainted as a fellow appeaser and afforded him room to speak his mind about the Nazi threat. His zeal, obliviousness to others, and overall emotional character made him the right man to take on Hitler. “Churchill’s belief that the British were superior to every other nation was undoubtedly one of unquestioning prejudice, but did not leave him hesitating in 1940 in the way the crisis had left others skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved.” (970) The arguably rational, short-term, response to Hitler of a negotiated peace—on likely fair

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terms, in Robert's view—was revolting to Churchill and his historical sense of Britain's greatness. "Nations which went down fighting rose again, but those which tamely surrendered were finished." (547)

Churchill was determined to go down fighting his way. He reasserted civilian control over military affairs to avoid the uncontested policies that resulted in stalemate and the tremendous loss of life in WW I. "There will be no more Kitchener's, Fishers, or Haigs"—secretary of state for war, first sea lord (of the Admiralty), and commander of the British Expeditionary Force. (524) Having observed Haig and his advisers, Churchill warned against the temptation to tell a chief in great position "the things he most likes to hear. One of the commonest explanations for mistaken policy." (518) This suggestion of open-mindedness sure could have fooled Churchill's subordinates, who were often driven to distraction by the prime minister's obstinacy. Dill's successor, General Alan Brooke noted, "every month of working with Churchill takes a year off my life . . . he is a peevish, temperamental prima donna of a Prime Minister." (469)

As a man of action suspicious of military advice, Churchill had a habit of "running with the intelligence," especially in the early stages of WW II, when it was important to show British defiance in the face of terrible odds. He put much stock in Ultra decrypts of communications within the German commands. Even though Ultra messages sent to operational headquarters would achieve a cumulative wartime total of 100,000, they nevertheless were snapshots in time and risked giving false senses of certainty about situations or policy directions.^a Not all military communications of significance were intercepted and translated. As late in the war as November 1944, 77 percent of Luftwaffe communications were solved but only 24 percent of Wehrmacht messages.^b The coming from the "horse's mouth" feature of these intercepts could mislead, as Adolf Hitler and his commanders changed their minds. Initial decrypts wrongly indicated that Hitler intended to abandon southern Italy in 1943 without putting up much of a fight. But, after seeing how poorly the Allied forces fought in Salerno, he decided to make a stand.^c Roberts flags a number of such instances, including:

a. Max Hastings, *The Secret War* (Harper Collins, 2016), 404.

b. *Ibid.*, 408.

c. *Ibid.*, 309.

•**Greece.** Churchill leapt on intercepts in late 1940 that indicated Germany was concentrating forces in the Balkans, indicating in his mind an intention to go to war with Greece. However, Hitler only intended to seize Greek territory in the north to protect his right flank for the planned invasion of the Soviet Union. The arrival of British troops in Greece caused Hitler to change his mind and take the whole country. (626)

•**Russia.** Churchill passed intelligence to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin that the German High Command had ordered in late March 1941 three armored divisions to move from the Balkans to Poland, the implication being the Wehrmacht was preparing to invade the Soviet Union. The countermanding of these orders—to deal with troubles in Yugoslavia—no doubt reinforced Stalin's suspicions that the staunchly anti-communist Churchill was trying to trick his country into an unnecessary war with Germany. (645)

•**North Africa.** In March and April 1942, Churchill tried to persuade General Auchinleck that his German counterpart Rommel had far fewer tanks than estimated. In using this supposed vulnerability as a reason to urge an attack, Churchill misread the decrypts, which referred to tanks in certain areas, but not overall. Churchill eventually acknowledged his mistake. (725)

These blunders and overreactions made it easy to dismiss Churchill as a hedgehog who knew only one important thing in his opposition to Nazi Germany. In his inspired conclusion to the book, Roberts instead views Churchill as a fox who knew many important things. "When it came to all three of the mortal threats to Western civilization, by the Prussian militarists in 1914, the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s, and Soviet communism after the Second World War, Churchill's judgment stood far above that of the people who sneered at his." (966) He accurately foresaw in December 1941 how WW II would play out strategically, despite his often impulsive tactical preferences. (699) Even his gravest failure, the Gallipoli operation in 1915, had promise conceptually, at least in some minds, but it was bungled terribly in its execution, and went on for too long. (197) The specter of a shortened life did not stop Brooke after WW II from thanking God for "having my eyes opened to the fact that occasionally such supermen exist on earth." (979)



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