

Churchill

John Keegan

Mar 30 - Apr 1 2004

A short and thus refreshingly written biography by an author whom we have learnt to expect to produce long plodding works. It is in many ways in the nature of a hagiography, although it does not entirely evade criticism, most of it implied; but the final verdict of the author is that Churchill was one of the, maybe even the greatest figure in the 20th century, who fully deserved the honors bestowed upon him, including the Nobel prize in literature.

The beginnings were not auspicious. Born into one of the most distinguished families in England, the ancestor of which in later years would inspire Churchill to write one of his acclaimed biographies, it was nevertheless, what we nowadays would call a dysfunctional family, characterized by profligacy and compulsive adultery. Churchill himself was an indifferent scholar, being impervious to the charms of both classical languages as well as mathematics, but showing his mettle in history and English composition. Through his connections he was to secure a position in the army, something that would have been out of the question on his records alone, and with youthful exuberance he sought adventure, be it in India or South Africa, turning them into best-selling prose. Although physically frail and inept, and according to Keegan, hampered by a low sexual drive; he nevertheless, (or maybe as a compensation) thrived on danger and exulted in military glory, something which no doubt had inspired his interest in history, on which he read widely. His war-time experience would make him respect brave adversaries, of which he had a special fondness for the Boers; but he remained an imperialist throughout his life and looked upon with disdain the independence movement in India, surely the pacifist Gandhi was not to his liking. A fondness for war and killing is in our days something of an anomaly, and Keegan, who also has exploited a similar predilection to professional advantage, is quick to point out that Churchill nevertheless was not unmoved by the horrors of war. Maybe for people like Churchill and Keegan and countless others, war is a game, that unfortunately has casualties, how much better would it not be if everybody after the splendid fight stood up, brushed off the dust and wiped the blood away and readied themselves for the next engagement.

But military life was not enough for the ambitious Churchill he wanted public office. Such ambitions were of course natural for an aristocrat, and had no doubt been further fueled by his reading of history. He secured a seat in Parliament in his late twenties as a conservative. Maybe, as Keegan suggests, following his prematurely deceased father, his political credo was Tory democracy. Keegan makes a claim that Churchill has never received due credit for his concern for the working man, and that the postwar welfare-state really has its roots in Churchills tentative initiatives before the First World War. He crossed the floor to the liberals, a political move fraught with dangers, as there is never any guarantee that the friends and allies you desert will be replaced in the new setting, but his gamble worked and he secured a position in the Wartime cabinet. His tenure

was not a happy one, he got embroiled in a rash project at the Dardanelles leading to the debacle of Gallipoli, which would haunt him for years to come. Later on he would return to the Conservative fold, and one may either see this vacillating as fackless opportunism, or maybe, as Keegan implies, a singularly steadiness of political conviction, just as residents of certain parts of Eastern Europe changed their national residency repeatedly without budging from their spots.

Throughout the thirties Churchill warned against the rising militarism of Hitler when political concerns were internal and the spending on military politically impossible. One may see this in retrospect as great wisdom on the part of Churchill, on the other hand it could have been nothing more than a kind of fixed idea rewarded by the actual turn of events. His finest hour was on assuming the role of Prime Minister, an event he turned into a rhetorical celebration, parts of which are still quoted to this day.

The sketchy nature of the narrative has some definite advantages, as it allows an overview that usually is obscured by too many details. The events of the Second World War are compressed to a few pages thus laying bare its essentials. The German armies enjoyed great initial victories and Churchill was powerless, his only weapon being rhetorical defiance, whose psychological effect, however, should never be underestimated. The British tried a few peripheral operations, some ending in disasters like the adventures in Greece, others like the war in the desert suffered severe initial setbacks. The Germans invaded the Sovietunion in the summer of 1941, by next spring it was clear that it was only a matter of time before they would be defeated. To that defeat the Bristih could only marginally contribute, the Russians took the blunt, and it was American might and material superiority that sealed the fate. The rest is history, although in many sense a drawn-out one, as the immediate effects of the Second World War did not really cease until fifty years after its inception.

In the book there is no mention of the Holocaust. This is good, because it never figured in the equation, being more or less unknown. Hitler was seen as a Tyrant, a latter day Napoleon, who at all costs must be resisted. The real enemy for Churchill was Communism, and the alliance with the Sovietunion was in the eyes of Churchill only one of expediency. I recall from school how I was told that Churchill at the end of the war had been considering rearming German prisoners of War to stem the tide of the Red Army. I do not know whether this was true or not. Also I recall from a TV-documentary in the 60's how Churchill had advocated not a landing in the west but pushing through the Balkans and thus intercepting the Soviet advance. I remember my father thinking that was a clever idea. Later reflections has rejected it as impractical. As Keegan reports, Churchill was in the habit of coming up with ideas, nine out of ten were hairbrained and had to be deflected by his aides. But one wonders as to the deep-down attitude of Churchill. He did after all value military valor, and the German advance must have awed many a military man. This can to some extent explain the respect given to Rommel. The North-African theatre was a clean one, devoid of civilians and concomitant collateral damage: thus a pure military exercise. Rommel provided the perfect focal point for an admiration that was straining to be articulated, but could not very well be accorded to the formidable adversary. The rehabilitation of the vanquished Germans was very swift and very thorough, and it is remarkable that a country ruled by criminals and driven to unprecedented disaster, was

so little ravaged by the trauma. This is something to keep in mind when considering the emergence of the countries of south-eastern Europe after their Stalinistic oppressions, they appear permanently damaged.

The latter years of Churchill were uneventful, characterized by the writing of his version of history to be permanently included in that of posterity, and a brief return to political power. His health never good eventually got the better of him, repeated strokes deprived him of what intelligence and astuteness he had ever possessed, and as he turned ninety, I recall, he was just a dotty old man, maybe not even knowing whom he was. Shortly thereafter he succumbed, his longevity being something of a medical miracle, brought about, one would like to think, by pure will and concomitant vitality.

April 2, 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se