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Max Hastings, *Winston's War: Churchill, 1940-1945*. New York: Knopf, 2009. Pp. xv, 555. ISBN 978-0-307-26839-6.

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In a telling and poignant touch, the cover of this splendid book shows the unmistakable back of Prime Minister Winston Churchill as he gazes upon an empty field, while a Boeing B-17 "Flying Fortress" flies overhead. The British built magnificent bombers, but, almost from the moment they won the 1940 aerial Battle of Britain, their country was effectively bankrupt.<sup>1</sup> Churchill spent most of the war as a supplicant of the United States, and especially of President Franklin Roosevelt, needing their war machines to pursue his unequal struggle against Adolf Hitler's Germany.

Journalist and historian Max Hastings has never been an admirer of American diplomacy or military prowess, and his books about the 1944-45 slog in northwestern Europe are almost comical in explaining why the Americans succeeded despite their ineptitude.<sup>2</sup> In *Winston's War*, he has mellowed somewhat, but repeatedly rates American and British infantrymen as uninspired amateurs compared to their German counterparts, claiming the western allies would have failed without the blood, powder, and armor of the Red Army on the eastern front. He argues that the Royal Air Force turned to "area bombing," because the only targets British bombers could reliably hit were German cities; so too, the 1940 North African campaign succeeded only because

Churchill owed a perverse debt of gratitude to Mussolini. If Italy had remained neutral, if her dictator had not chosen to seek battle, how else might the British Army have occupied itself after its expulsion from France? As it was, Britain was able to launch spectacular African campaigns against one of the few major armies in the world which it was capable of defeating. Not all Italian generals were incompetents, not all Italian formations fought feebly. But never for a moment were Mussolini's warriors in the same class as those of Hitler (104).

This badly underestimates the difficulties of an amphibious landing against a defended shore of the European continent, where a splendid railway network enabled German strategists to shuttle whole divisions from front to front. The bloody debacles of Tarawa and Anzio would have paled against a Normandy landing in 1942 or even 1943. Geography, not the genius of the German infantryman, made Fortress Europe so daunting. Churchill understood this and wisely resisted American enthusiasm for a frontal assault, preferring to engage the Wehrmacht in North Africa, Italy, and the Balkans, while savaging the German homeland with aerial bombardments. That he clung to these reservations almost till the eve of D-Day was one of his few strategic errors.

Of the war leaders, only Churchill and Stalin had a real grasp of strategy. But the prime minister, tragically lacking the tools to pursue his vision for a postwar Europe, had to depend on US industrial might and ultimately manpower. The Americans, alas, were not interested in furthering what they regarded as Churchill's imperial ambitions for Britain into the postwar era. General Eisenhower, for example, saw no point in occupying German territory already allocated to the Soviets by the politicians at Yalta. For his part, President Roosevelt had an ill-founded trust in Joseph Stalin. Hastings tells this story brilliantly, as a kind of love affair sadly gone wrong, with Churchill cast as the suitor, Roosevelt the choosy debutante, and Stalin the unworthy other man.

What was true of grand strategy was less obvious in the day-to-day management (or micromanagement) of military affairs:

Churchill believed himself exceptionally fitted for the direction of armies, navies and air forces. He perceived no barrier to such a role in the fact that he possessed neither military staff training nor experience of higher field command (102).... There was always a paradox about Churchill as warlord. On the one hand, he had a wonderful instinct for the

1. To the point that there was a discussion of raising £20 million by melting down the nation's wedding rings (79).

2. See *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1985) and *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-1945* (NY: Knopf, 2004), both admirable histories despite their biases.

fray, more highly developed than that of any of his service advisers. Yet his genius for war was flawed by an enthusiasm for dashes, raids, skirmishes, diversions, and sallies more appropriate—as officers who worked with him often remarked—to a Victorian cavalry subaltern than to the director of a vast industrial war effort. The doctrine of concentration of force, an obsession of the Americans’ and especially of [Gen. George] Marshall’s, was foreign to his nature. Though Churchill addressed his duties with profound seriousness of purpose, he wanted war, like life, to be fun (318).

One such diversion was his support for the European resistance movements. “Postwar claims for the damage inflicted on the enemy by the French Resistance and its SOE [Special Operations Executive] sponsors were grossly exaggerated,” Hastings concludes (372). The most effective such force was Tito’s Partisans in Yugoslavia, but even there, as the SOE historian himself pointed out, “It is a little doubtful whether the [British supply and training] missions served any purpose save to give adventurous occupation to a number of very tough young men” (378).<sup>3</sup>

*Winston’s War* contributes most to our understanding of the end game of the Second World War in its discussion of Operation Unthinkable, a study commissioned by Churchill in May 1945:

Within days of Germany’s surrender, Britain’s prime minister astounded his Chiefs of Staff by enquiring whether Anglo-American forces might launch an offensive to drive back the Soviets by force of arms. Churchill was enthused by the robust attitude of [President Harry] Truman, whose tone suggested a new willingness to respond ruthlessly to Communist flouting of the Yalta terms. [Gen. Alan] Brooke wrote after a War Cabinet meeting on May 13: “Winston delighted, he gives me the feeling of already longing for another war! Even if it entailed fighting the Russians!” (462).

Churchill felt a great debt to Poland, on whose behalf Britain and France had gone to war in September 1939, whose pilots had helped defend England in the aerial battles of 1940, and whose infantrymen under British command had stormed Monte Cassino in 1944. (Understandably, Roosevelt felt no such obligation.) Churchill wanted to know how many American, British, and German—yes, German!—divisions would suffice to push the Red Army back far enough to guarantee that a democratic Poland would rise from the ashes. The target date for the assault was to have been 1 July 1945. As usual with British war plans, the scheme was promptly leaked to Moscow, and first appeared in print in the memoirs of Marshal Georgy Zhukov. Not till 1998 did the British National Archives release the relevant papers (462–63).

The Polish government in exile would no doubt have disagreed, but we can be grateful that Churchill’s Chiefs of Staff lined up against his plan. The British Army commander said that “The idea is of course fantastic and the chances of success quite impossible” (464). Hastings writes that forty-seven “Anglo-American divisions” (in fact, overwhelmingly American) might have been deployed, with forty divisions held back for defensive and occupation tasks. (German manpower seems to have slipped out of the equation by this time.) The invaders would have faced 170 Soviet divisions holding the trump card (played in 1812 and again as recently as 1942) of Russia’s “abysses of space,” once remarked upon by Vladimir Lenin. As problematic as the military challenge was the effect on the British populace of wartime propaganda about the wonders of Soviet resistance to Germany. “The huge popularity of the Soviet Union in wartime Britain was a source of dismay, indeed exasperation, to the small number of people at the top who knew the truth about the barbarity of Stalin’s regime, its implacable hostility to the West and its imperialistic designs on eastern Europe” (6). If American public opinion was a bit less starry-eyed, pro-Soviet sentiment in the Washington bureaucracy was even more evident than in Churchill’s London.

The Unthinkable file was finally closed in July 1945, when President Truman made explicit his intention to adhere to the occupation zones decided upon at Yalta. But what a tribute to the grand old man of British politics that, after six years of war, he even contemplated pursuing such a goal, as a matter of principle, against such a formidable foe.

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3. Quoting William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE* (London: St Ermin’s Pr, 2000) 434.