



Churchill and the Bomb in War and Cold War by Kevin Ruane.

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Few historical actors have been as thoroughly studied as Winston Churchill. But historian Kevin Ruane (Canterbury Christ Church Univ.) has found an important new dimension of this complex figure. To his roles as “politician, sportsman, artist, orator, historian, Parliamentarian, journalist, essayist, gambler, soldier, war correspondent, adventurer, patriot, internationalist, dreamer, pragmatist, strategist, monarchist, democrat, egocentric, hedonist, romantic,” Ruane adds “atomic bomb-maker, atomic diplomatist, [and] nuclear peace-maker” (xiii). *Churchill and the Bomb in War and Cold War* is a dense, well researched account of its subject’s evolving understanding of the atomic bomb’s military potential against the Axis, its diplomatic utility against the Soviet Union, and its existential threat to the United Kingdom.

Many works on the Anglo-American nuclear relationship¹ focus on the (post-Churchill) Cold War period of greatest collaboration. Others² examine the British strategy abstractly, minimizing the role of individuals, prime ministers included. Books on Anglo-American wartime cooperation tend to subsume both the bomb and the “Former Naval Person” into a narrative of a complex global alliance. Ruane supplements rather than supplants these excellent studies.

The author begins with a sketch of Churchill’s interest in speculative fiction about atomic weapons, the reality of wartime airpower, and his decision to pursue an atomic weapon in the early days of the Second World War. He describes the essential role of British physicist Frederick Lindemann (later Viscount Cherwell) in convincing the prime minister to begin atomic research before a German program could produce a weapon. Ruane notes the tense relations between Churchill and Lindemann over the latter’s preoccupation with postwar economic exploitation of the atom as against the prime minister’s determination to develop a weapon and cement an Anglo-American postwar alliance. As the war moved on, Churchill relied on his fragile personal relationship with Pres. Franklin Roosevelt as the basis for wartime cooperation and future trans-Atlantic collaboration. After FDR’s death, Churchill increasingly saw the bomb as a diplomatic tool with which to intimidate Moscow; that is, he was becoming an atomic diplomatist.

Churchill’s time in the opposition (1945–51) strengthened his resistance to early schemes for international control of atomic technology. His famous “Iron Curtain” speech (5 Mar. 1946) in Fulton, Missouri, enunciated key premises of this diplomatist period: the severity of the USSR’s threat to peace, the vital necessity of Anglo-American partnership, the need for Western political cohesion and military strength, and the desirability of a negotiated settlement with Moscow. As

1. E.g., Ian Clark, *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain's Deterrent and America, 1957–1962* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994).

2. E.g., Beatrice Heuser, *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France and the FRG* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1998).

long as the West monopolized atomic weapons, Churchill—unaware of their paucity in the US arsenal³—continued to press for their use as leverage.

Churchill quickly adopted a peace-seeking posture after the Soviets detonated an atomic bomb in 1949, though Ruane documents a brief flirtation with the idea of a preventive war. Following his reelection in 1952, however, Churchill was pleased with the progress Prime Minister Clement Attlee had made with Britain's atomic bomb program. The detonation that year of an atomic device off the coast of Australia gave Great Britain a weapon, but not a deterrent. Working in concert with the United States, Churchill kept pressing for a viable, independent British atomic capability. Despite growing fears about thermonuclear weapons after the irradiation of a Japanese fishing vessel at the 1954 Castle Bravo test, Churchill approved a British H-bomb program. His defense of this decision in Parliament (among his final acts as prime minister) evinced a nuanced position: the H-bomb would certainly give Britain the independent deterrent needed for its survival, but the ultimate solution to the nuclear arms race was disarmament. Hence, Churchill's vigorous but futile efforts to arrange an Anglo-Soviet summit.

The author stresses, too, the critical role of individual actors in Britain's development of the atomic bomb and subsequent thermonuclear deterrent. While Roosevelt and Pres. Harry Truman figure prominently in the story, Ruane spotlights a less familiar cast of secondary characters. On the British side, Lindemann emerges as Churchill's essential atomic advisor throughout the period of the narrative. James Conant, Leslie Groves, and others associated with the Manhattan Project appear as skeptics of British intentions and foils for Churchill's plans. Ruane's discerning treatment of the political maneuvering of Churchill and his American counterparts avoids reducing their subordinates to mere shadows of their masters.

Ruane also unravels the intricacies of the Anglo-American connection, arguing persuasively that Churchill misperceived the Quebec Agreement (19 Aug. 1943) as more meaningful and binding than it actually proved to be. This distorted view influenced his passionate reaction to Attlee's seeming inaction on the atomic front. Later, Churchill's insistence on a summit meeting antagonized Eisenhower exactly when he was seeking closer ties with the Americans.

The book helpfully clarifies Churchill's changing conception of the bomb as a diplomatic tool rather than a weapon of war and the strategic evolution of Britain from a great power to a middling one, at best able to throw its thermonuclear weight to right the East-West balance. The story of Churchill's evolution is also the story of his acceptance of Britain's diminishment.

Ruane addresses several vexed questions. For example, regarding Britain's "missed chance" in 1941 for atomic cooperation with the United States on an equal basis, he concludes that the imbalance of resources would in any case have left the two allies on an unequal footing. Regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he sees the attacks as decisive in bringing the Japanese surrender. On a related note, Ruane contends that Churchill, even this early on, was more an atomic diplomatist than an atomic statesman. He sought "an atomic-themed showdown with the USSR" (144), but only with strong private moral misgivings (302). In the end, rather than clinging to power, Churchill demonstrated "a real clarity and wisdom in his shifting nuclear outlook" (313), specifically in his realization that "In different ways, a British H-bomb would deter both the USA and the USSR from embarking on actions which could result in the immolation of the United Kingdom" (314).

3. The McMahon Act cut the United Kingdom off from even basic information on the subject.

The book has its shortcomings. It portrays Eisenhower's approach to nuclear strategy as more reckless than does the best current historiography.⁴ Ruane also accepts at face value Eisenhower's attempt to enlist British help to bail out the French at Dien Bien Phu; in fact, he was likely confident Churchill would never agree to such a plan and only using the prime minister to shift domestic blame for nonintervention away from himself.⁵ Ruane could also have made a better case for the operational readiness of the Royal Air Force to act as an atomic deterrent force. The decline of the RAF and the development of the V-bombers, skipping a generation of aeronautical technology, are critical to assessing the credibility of Britain's independent deterrence and thus of Churchill's policies.

These quibbles do not diminish the value of *Churchill and The Bomb* as an astute chronicle of a long overlooked aspect of Churchill's service to Great Britain. The book also remedies overly American-centered views of atomic weapons development and strategy. The Manhattan Project was as much a part of the Anglo-American wartime alliance as was Ultra. Finally, Ruane makes a compelling case for the atomic bomb as *both* a military and a diplomatic instrument, as seen from the perspective of a power vulnerable to Soviet devastation a decade earlier than the United States. Winston Churchill "boldly and ultimately bullishly ... set out to end the Cold War. For only if détente obtained would Britain, and the rest of the world, be safe from the doom that nuclear weapons threatened to unleash" (312). Kevin Ruane has refined our understanding of a towering figure of the twentieth century.

4. E.g., Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1998).

5. George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (NY: McGraw-Hill, 2002) 44.