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Carlo D'Este, *Warlord: A Life of Winston Churchill at War, 1874–1945*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2008. Pp. xvi, 847. ISBN 978-0-06-057573-1.

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Few figures in history have been as closely (and deservedly) scrutinized as Winston Churchill. As a war correspondent and a junior officer in the late nineteenth-century British army, his exploits had already made him a household name. His meteoric political rise landed him in high office before he turned forty. His fall after the disaster at Gallipoli was equally precipitate. Cast adrift in the sea of political uncertainty during the interbellum, Churchill returned to lead Great Britain to victory in World War II. He has been praised and scorned as a hero and a villain, a genius and a fool; nearly every aspect of his life has scrupulously analyzed. What new perspective, then, might shed light on a man who is already the subject of countless studies? In *Warlord: A Life of Winston Churchill at War, 1874–1945*, retired lieutenant colonel and highly regarded military historian¹ Carlo D'Este chooses to focus on Churchill's "military life" broadly defined, arguing that "his love of soldiering" was lifelong and profoundly influenced his civilian leadership as well (xi, xiii).

Comprising sixty chapters, *Warlord* is structured chronologically according to four phases in Churchill's life. In the first, his early years, D'Este presents a conventional image of the young Winston as an impetuous, disagreeable youth prone to tantrums and missing the acceptance of his distant father, Lord Randolph Churchill. Generally a poor student, he was schooled at two elite academies before his father deemed him "unworthy of being sent to Oxford to further his education and become a lawyer," enrolling him at Harrow to prepare for Sandhurst and an army career (18). D'Este stresses this crucial "practical turn" in the life of a young man who was happiest marshalling his legions of toy soldiers or leading playmates in war games on the family estate (20). Churchill embraced his military training and excelled in history and writing as well.

In the second phase of Churchill's life, he served as an officer in the British army, a six-year period when, as presented by D'Este, the lion of the twentieth-century was made. Against his father's wishes, after Sandhurst the newly commissioned and independent-minded first lieutenant joined the cavalry instead of the infantry, which offered better career opportunities. However, Churchill "never intended to make a career out of military service," viewing the army as a means to an end—a seat in Parliament (33). His "thirst for adventure" drew the young junior officer wherever the action was, earning him a reputation as a "medal and glory seeker" (35, 58). He came to the attention of the British public through his war correspondence and publication of books on the Malakand and Omdurman campaigns. Churchill's time as a correspondent, D'Este maintains, also proved to be pivotal in shaping his views on war:

The dozens of dispatches he wrote reflected not only his observations (and often criticism) but also his growing knowledge of weapons, their capabilities, their employment—and their frequent misuse. Read closely they were in fact a primer for a discerning reader to gain a profound impression of the [Boer] war and how it was fought. The war also significantly enhanced the military education of Churchill himself, and the lessons he learned from its few triumphs and myriad blunders were all duly noted and many years later put to effective use in other wars (115).

In the third phase of his life, Churchill rose to prominence by his actions during the First World War. In this portion of his study, D'Este demonstrates how his time in the British military influenced his behavior

1. See, e.g., *Decision in Normandy* (1983; rpt. NY: HarperPerennial, 1991) and *Fatal Decision: Anzio and the Battle for Rome* (NY: HarperCollins, 1991)—"enjoyable, thoughtful reading, ... establishes d'Este as a major writer of military history," A. Wilt, *Amer. Hist. Rev.* 97 (1992) 1305.

and decisions during his first stint as a civilian political leader, when he capitalized on his “newfound stature as a well-known and heroic figure” to win a parliamentary seat in 1900 (121). By 1908, he was president of the Board of Trade, but, as D’Este notes, Churchill “could never entirely divorce himself from military life” (131). He attended German military maneuvers, taking careful note of developments in the *Kaiserheer* and relishing his time in the army reserves. As First Lord of the Admiralty (1911–15), he initiated many reforms in the Royal Navy, including the development of larger, more powerful battleships, a naval air-arm that later became the Royal Air Force, and the conversion of the fleet from coal to oil propulsion.

Once the war began, Churchill was directly involved in both planning and operations. He took charge in Belgium, acting “every bit the military commander of British forces” during the siege of Antwerp (185). Strategically, he advocated operations in the Baltic and the disastrous attempt to force the Dardanelles and take Gallipoli, which ultimately brought his fall from grace. Determined to have a continued role in the war “he had once helped to mastermind” and rehabilitate his reputation, Churchill naturally made a “return to soldiering” (210). Though his tactical and strategic abilities were never tested during his five and a half months commanding an infantry battalion on the Western Front, he was well regarded by his troops and returned to Britain and parliament “having done his duty and done it well” (229).

The fourth and most comprehensive portion of D’Este’s study focuses on Churchill’s return from the political wilderness and his leadership during the Second World War. Here, of course, the man finally found a role commensurate with his ambition and talents: he may have been the only person able to guide Great Britain through its darkest days. His second tenure at the Admiralty (1939–40) was largely a continuation of his first. The admirals were wary of him—his “reputation for meddling in operational matters was well known”—though pleased to have “inherited a tough taskmaster ... who had been the lonely voice of rearmament in a sea of appeasers” (267). After succeeding Neville Chamberlain as prime minister and effectively Britain’s “generalissimo,” Churchill “never lost his appetite for the attack,” viewing “defense as an occasional necessary evil”; D’Este notes that his audacity and willingness to ignore precedent set him apart from the “culture of failure” that permeated Britain’s military establishment (ix, 274, 286). This mindset did, however, lead to setbacks, including the early debacle at Anzio and the disastrous attempt to take Rhodes. Right up to the launching of Overlord, Churchill always tried to influence the direction of the war; after the opening of the second front in the West, however, Britain’s warlord was marginalized for the remainder of the conflict.

Given the generally positive reception of D’Este’s previous efforts, which include several campaign studies and biographies of generals Patton and Eisenhower,² the current volume disappoints. It is flawed by weak argumentation and fails to advance any significant, critical discussion of the military Churchill. D’Este is more concerned to refute critics who, he believes, unduly “demand perfection” with “no grasp or experience of the grave burdens that fell upon Churchill’s shoulders in 1940” and to demonstrate that, despite his flaws, the “benevolent warlord” should serve as a model “for successive generations of democratic leaders” (550–51). His didactic intent is evident in several oblique references to present-day conflicts with the Islamic world (65, 81, 122, 133, 550).

While D’Este obviously admires the man he feels “words alone are insufficient to portray” in depth, *Warlord* is no hagiography—Churchill’s many mistakes comprise a significant portion of the narrative (553). He rightly argues that his dogged insistence on action for action’s sake sometimes made Churchill fixate on ill-advised and impracticable operations and strategies. Besides the setbacks at Anzio and Rhodes, he notes that, throughout the war, Churchill never quite gave up on Norway or the Mediterranean, urging renewed or continued action there long after the Western Allies had decided to concentrate on a cross-channel invasion. In general, D’Este well contextualizes Churchill’s distinctly British approach to war—as the civilian head of the British Empire, his first priority was always to hold that empire together.

2. *Patton: A Genius for War* (NY: HarperCollins, 1995)—“a formidable accomplishment for D’Este after the torrents previously written about Patton during the past half century,” L. Sorley, *Journ. Mil. Hist.* 60 (1996) 786; *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (NY: Holt, 2002)—“a fine study and a welcome addition to the literature,” P. Nash, *Journ. Amer. Hist.* 90 (2003) 712.

However, D'Este's concern to mitigate Churchill's involvement in controversial situations leads him to downplay or ignore some critical moments in his subject's career. For instance, he mentions Churchill's involvement in labor unrest only in passing, as cases of his being "willing, as always, to do the unpopular thing" (139). Chris Wrigley has provided a better explanation, noting that, as home secretary (1910–11), "his role was not to judge who was right or wrong but to maintain the peace."³ While admitting that his presence at the scene of the notorious Siege of Sidney Street (omitted altogether by D'Este) was a poor decision on Churchill's part, Lewis Broad has argued that in storming the house where Latvian extremists had barricaded themselves against police in London's East End, the "experience of the man of war was of value."⁴ Indeed, the full complexity of the future warlord was on display. Concerned for the safety of the police and soldiers, Churchill offered prudent military advice and procured improvised metal shields for an assault. He was also ruthless, letting the building burn after it unexpectedly caught fire with the suspects still inside in an effort to flush them out.⁵ Since Churchill's actions certainly qualify as "military" as D'Este uses term, the lack of treatment is curious.

Warlord is blemished by many smaller but cumulatively irritating problems, including errors of fact. For example, Gallipoli was not the "south most tip of what was then Bulgaria" in 1915; Erich Ludendorff was not a "von"; the *Anschluss* occurred before the Munich conference; Austria was directly annexed to Germany, not made "a vassal state"; and the Nazi war-machine was not "dependent on the production of synthetic oil from coal" in 1940 (194, 234, 235, 253, 379).⁶ At the Battle of Tannenberg, and indeed along the Eastern Front, men did not fight and die "for scraps of terrain that were often measured in yards and were of questionable military value" (170).⁷ Colonel von Stauffenberg's failed attempt to assassinate Hitler took place not in the "underground bunker" at the *Wolfsschanze*, but in an above-ground conference room.⁸ And, to describe the immolation of Hitler and Eva Braun's bodies in the chancellery garden as "a scene befitting a Wagnerian opera" is romantic drivel (536, 524).⁹ Another frustration is the publisher's dispensing with superscript numerals in the text to designate endnotes in favor of keying quotation sources to their corresponding page numbers. This is a shame, since the work, despite its flaws, is well-researched.

For the popular audience *Warlord* aims at, these criticisms will not matter much. Its celebration of Churchill's many virtues and remarkable personal story will appeal to general readers. But for scholars and researchers, Geoffrey Best's *Churchill and War*¹⁰ is a more focused option. Indeed, D'Este's more explicitly biographical work is a missed opportunity. Though his assessment of Churchill's attitude toward war is sound, his narrative passes over the monumental social changes during Churchill's life. By contrast, Ian Kershaw, in his excellent two-volume biography of Hitler,¹¹ fully examines "the political structures and social forces" that brought the Nazi leader to power, while reconciling "the personalized method of biography" with the "contrasting approaches to the history of society."¹² Had D'Este adopted such a methodology,

3. "Churchill and the Trade Unions," *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.* 11 (2001) 282.

4. *Winston Churchill: The Years of Preparation* (NY: Hawthorn Books, 1958) 143.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (NY: 2006) 382, Dov B. Lungu, *Romania and the Great Powers, 1933–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke U Pr, 1989) 218–27, and Richard Overy, *Russia's War: A History of the Soviet War Effort, 1941–1945* (NY: Penguin, 1998) 53 for discussion and figures for the massive oil shipments Germany received from both Romania and the Soviet Union. Overy notes in *Why the Allies Won* (NY: Norton, 1995) 228–34 that in 1939 Germany was only producing one-third of its oil from coal and not till 1943 did that figure balloon to seventy-five percent.

7. See Robert Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005) 224–30, for a detailed account of Tannenberg and John Keegan's chapter on the Eastern Front in his *The First World War* (NY: Vintage, 2000) for discussion of the vast distances armies had to traverse there relative to the more familiar Western Front.

8. See Walter Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 1939–1945*, trans. R.H. Barry (Novato, CA: Presidio Pr, 1964) 440.

9. Contrast with Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (NY: Norton, 2001) 830.

10. NY/London: Hambleton and London, 2005.

11. See note 9 above and *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (NY: Norton, 1998).

12. *Ibid.*, xxix.

he could have given greater contextual depth to many of Churchill's actions and decisions. This is not the type of history he wanted to write, but to distinguish *Warlord* from previous studies on the subject, it is the kind he needed to.