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Christopher Catherwood, *Winston Churchill: The Flawed Genius of World War II*. New York: Berkley Caliber, 2009. Pp. ix, 326. ISBN 978-0-425-23244-6.

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I wish to dedicate this review to my much-loved sister, Kirsty M. Ruddin, who is a credit to our family. The necessary research would simply not have been possible without her support.

“Second Front Now!” chanted crowds in London’s Trafalgar Square and New York’s Madison Square Garden in 1942, a year after the German attack on the Soviet Union. Yet the Allied invasion of France was not launched for another two years. Was an earlier attack, in 1943, feasible, as some Western military planners suggested and all Russian patriots demanded?

The timing of Operation Overlord continues to spur historiographical disagreement.¹ British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was, to be sure, a key personality behind the delay of the invasion of German-occupied Western Europe, but were the Allied Powers right to charge him—even as they celebrated victory over the Axis Powers—with being midwife to the Cold War? Would a Western hold on Germany, for instance, have had any political impact on the postwar world?

Christopher Catherwood (Univ. of Cambridge) answers such questions in the affirmative. In *Winston Churchill: The Flawed Genius of World War II*, he reconsiders the roles of Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt in postponing D-Day from April 1943 to June 1944. He also takes a fresh look at the parts played by such figures as Alan Brooke and George C. Marshall during the campaigns in North African and Italy. Catherwood is eminently qualified² to provide what he calls a “*new perspective*” on both the flaws and the genius of Winston Churchill (9). Writing of his earlier book on Churchill and Iraq, a fellow historian has called him “an excellent guide at cutting through the mythology that surrounds [a] subject.”³ And this is just what he endeavors to be in his latest offering, but he does not succeed in producing the “*postrevisionist*” book he intended for students and scholars alike (273).

As Catherwood illustrates, Churchill made military blunders—in both world wars—but showed great wisdom when it came to the political issues of 1938–41. Unlike his predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, who deeply mistrusted the Soviet Union, Churchill recognized the importance of friendship with the country he forever called Russia. Though he was an arch-foe of Bolshevism (he had wanted to strangle the revolutionary state at birth), he disagreed with Chamberlain’s decision to exclude Josef Stalin from the Munich conference in 1938 and was proved right when Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact less than a year later.

Much has been written about Churchill’s love of the United States, but only after he had replaced the anti-American Chamberlain at Ten Downing Street did he cultivate a “special relationship” with that country. For he well understood that America, fast becoming one of the world’s two superpowers, was Britain’s best hope for survival.

1. See Tuvia Ben-Moshe, “Winston Churchill and the ‘Second Front’: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Modern History* 62 (1990) 503.

2. He teaches history part time at Cambridge and the University of Richmond (Virginia), where he is annual Writer in Residence. He has served as a consultant in 2002 to the Strategic Futures Team, Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit (now part of the Strategy Unit), for Her Majesty’s Government, working in the Admiralty building where Winston Churchill was based as First Lord of the Admiralty nine decades previously. Catherwood is also a fellow of the Royal Historical Society (2005–) and has recently been Crosby Kemper Lecturer at the Churchill Memorial Library in Fulton, Missouri (2008); Archives By-Fellow at Churchill College, University of Cambridge (2008); George C. Marshall Lecturer, Virginia Military Institute (2009); and Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellow (2010). He holds a BA and MA in Modern History from Balliol College, Oxford, an MLitt in Balkan history from Sidney College, Cambridge, and a PhD in Middle Eastern history from the University of East Anglia. Catherwood has written, among other books, *Churchill’s Folly: How Winston Churchill Created Modern Iraq* (NY: Basic Books, 2004).

3. John Charmley, “Last Exit from Mesopotamia,” *Guardian* (26 Nov 2004) www.miwsr.com/rd/1133.htm.

Catherwood rightly judges Churchill's personal diplomacy with Stalin and Roosevelt to be part of his genius.⁴ On the other side of the ledger, he carefully documents how Churchill's strategic errors⁵ hindered the Allied cause.

Churchill made many mistakes in the vital months between June 1940 and December 1941. These include deploying British troops to North Africa and Greece, an obsession with the Mediterranean theater of the war, and dismissing Marshall's strategic plan, which might have brought victory in 1943. But, Catherwood writes, the establishment of the Special Operations Executive most clearly exposed Churchill's imperfect brilliance: "only a genius would concoct something so daring and unusual, but it was a plan that had as many minuses against it as pluses, and therefore, however brilliant, was ultimately flawed" (64–65).

Catherwood puts it even better in a prefatory summary of his book (deliberately) couched in the style of Churchill's popular history of the Second World War:

HOW WINSTON CHURCHILL WAS RIGHT OVER MUNICH
UNDERSTOOD THE REAL ISSUES ABOUT HITLER
REALIZED WAR WAS ABOUT ACTUALLY FIGHTING YOUR ENEMY
SAVED BRITAIN FROM DEFEAT FROM THE NAZIS IN 1940
KNEW THAT VICTORY WOULD ONLY COME WITH AMERICAN HELP
GAVE THE BRITISH THE MORALE TO HANG ON UNTIL THEN
AND PROVED FOREVER HIS SHEER GENIUS
NEVERTHELESS MADE SOME BIG STRATEGIC BLUNDERS IN 1941
REJOICED WHEN AMERICA FINALLY ENTERED THE WAR
YET TRAGICALLY FAILED TO UNDERSTAND
HOW TRULY POWERFUL ON AN UNPRECEDENTED SCALE
AND HOW TRANSFORMATIVE AMERICA WOULD BE
SO KEPT TO THE OLD WAR-WINNING WAYS OF
HIS GREAT ANCESTORS AND BRITONS BEFORE HIM
AND IN SO DOING
DELAYED THE US MILITARY PLANS THAT WOULD
IN ALL LIKELIHOOD HAVE WON THE WAR YEARS EARLIER
AND SAVED MILLIONS OF LIVES IN THE PROCESS
INCLUDING THOSE OF COUNTLESS JEWS
AND ALSO
AS CHURCHILL FINALLY SAW
WOULD HAVE PREVENTED STALIN FROM BEING
THE REAL WINNER OF THE WAR IN EUROPE
BECAUSE VICTORY THERE HAD BEEN DELAYED
AND BY SO DOING
SHOWED HIS TRAGIC FLAWS (IX).

Catherwood believes that, if the Minister of Defense had deferred to the wisdom of General Marshall, the Second World War would have ended in 1943, with dramatically different results. Employing the "Cleopatra's Nose" theorem,⁶ he shows how Churchill postponed Allied victory in Europe by snatching defeat from the jaws of victory in Italy and redeploying troops against Nazi forces in Greece: "Greece really did in the end make all the difference. It is the best example in World War II of the laws of unintended consequences, of how Churchill, the saviour of his nation in 1940, was increasingly losing the plot" (82). While Catherwood goes further than others in stating that this Second Dunkirk not only delayed the liberation of

4. That said, one misses any reference to Klaus Larres's pioneering *Churchill's Cold War: The Power of Personal Diplomacy* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2002), which explores the man's personal political style between 1945 and 1955.

5. Ironically, Winston's illustrious ancestor, John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, was Britain's greatest eighteenth-century general and the subject of his *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 6 vols. (NY: Scribner, 1933–38).

6. I.e., a small variation in a complex system of world history may have a big effect on the dynamics of that system.

North Africa, but also the invasion of German-held Europe, he does not support that claim with any new figures or archival material.

Moreover, such counterfactual history was already written a generation ago. Readers have long since been aware, for instance, that, had Operation Overlord occurred in 1943, the expeditionary force would have been five hundred miles closer to the German border than was the Wehrmacht, then concentrated on the Eastern Front. Had the Allies defeated the Axis on the Western Front in 1943 as quickly as they did in 1944, the thesis goes, they could have met the Red Army not on the Elbe, but on the Vistula, saving Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland along the way; Central Europe, liberated by the West, would have escaped a Cold War “Iron Curtain” located much farther east.

When all is said and done, however, the timing of the Normandy landings was in fact strategically correct, both shortening the war and facilitating the western democracies’ most significant contribution to defeating the Third Reich. Counterfactual historians fail to consider that a premature D-Day would have made it impossible for the Allies to defend their interests on the continent against Soviet communism.

Compared with Walter Scott Dunn’s thought-provoking statistical study, *Second Front Now-1943*⁷ and John Grigg’s archive-based reappraisal, *1943: The Victory That Never Was*,⁸ Catherwood’s book is disappointing. While all three fail to answer convincingly the eternal “what if” questions, Dunn and Grigg give at least some attention to the problem of transporting supplies to the Soviet Union through the Arctic Circle, where the “long summer days exposed the convoys to German air attacks for twenty ... hours a day.”⁹ The British had to send “20 percent of their aircraft production ... to Russia”¹⁰ and the Royal Navy and merchant marine suffered “notorious losses.”¹¹

Though he uses Dunn and Grigg and quotes them often, Catherwood fails to appreciate that the Arctic convoys served to satisfy both Stalin and the Russian people that the Red Army would not, as many had thought, be abandoned to face the German juggernaut alone. This is fundamentally important to the wider historical debate, counterfactual or otherwise.

Catherwood is right to stress the significance of the Eastern theater of the war, a significance poorly grasped in the West in part because of the lack of balance and perspective in Churchill’s multi-volume history of the war.¹² Red Army soldiers showed themselves to be men of steel, while the Russian people endured bitter hardships for their motherland. It is hard for Western students to comprehend the scale of battles like Stalingrad (present-day Volgograd), which, Catherwood reminds us, involved seven times as many troops as the battle of El Alamein (108–9, 155).

Unfortunately, the presentation of history in Russia, as seen in textbooks and commemorations marking the seventieth anniversary of the war, is badly distorted by an overtly nationalist interpretation of what was an international war.¹³ The glaring omission of the Arctic convoys from the “Great Patriotic War” narrative shows that the Western Allies’ role in the war is either poorly understood in Russia or, more likely, an affront to Russian pride.

Catherwood claims that Stalin had “good cause” to believe Churchill held up the opening of a Second Front so the Führer’s invading armies could kill millions of what Nazi racial ideology deemed *Untermenschen* (112). But Churchill did not wait for the two greatest land armies of the day to slug it out till the death: he opened a Surrogate Second Front out of *political necessity*¹⁴ and because of promises made to Stalin, not

7. Subtitle: *An Opportunity Delayed* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama Pr, 1980).

8. NY: Hill & Wang, 1980.

9. *Second Front Now-1943*, 50.

10. *Ibid.* 51.

11. *1943: The Victory That Never Was*, 25.

12. See David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (NY: Random House, 2005).

13. John Sweeney, “Russian Textbooks Attempt to Rewrite History,” *The Times* (1 Dec 2009) www.miwsr.com/rd/1134.htm.

14. See Laurence Rees, *World War II: Behind Closed Doors—Stalin, the Nazis and the West* (NY: Pantheon, 2009) 138.

out of any *strategic reality*—something surprisingly unmentioned by Catherwood despite his claim to provide “coverage ... more political than strategic” (5). The redirection of aid northeast to Murmansk led directly to the humiliation of British and imperial forces in North Africa and Burma and stirred a groundswell of criticism of Churchill’s leadership in 1942.¹⁵

As Niall Ferguson has written, Churchill sacrificed the British Empire “to stop the Germans, Japanese and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all [his] other sins?”¹⁶ Catherwood does not think so. But, in the present book, rather than adding to our knowledge of strategic decisions, he merely offers a fresh(er) interpretation of familiar events.

15. See Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (NY: Hambleton and London, 2001) 256.

16. *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (NY: Basic Books, 2003) 363.