



Ministers at War: Winston Churchill and His War Cabinet by Jonathan Schneer.

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In *Ministers at War*, historian Jonathan Schneer (Georgia Tech) has written another fine study of British political history.¹ It is also a compelling demonstration that, as Carl von Clausewitz famously noted, “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.”² Much of the political information provided here will be new to students of military history, especially in the United States.

As the author himself indicates (93), Winston Churchill’s war cabinet during World War II might be nicknamed “Team of Rivals, British-style.”³ His approach has the great merit of enriching the old “great man” approach to history by a corrective emphasis on political party organization and the role of personalities and relationships so often neglected in standard narratives of modern nations’ conduct of politics “with other means.” In so doing, Schneer has added to a rich vein of new scholarship on the strategic and grand strategic direction of the Second World War by the Allied leadership.⁴

The author begins in 1940 with the political crisis caused by the ineffectual response to the war by Neville Chamberlain’s government (1937–40). It closes with a similar political crisis created not by the war per se, but by wartime domestic problems that ended Great Britain’s most successful coalition government. Schneer offers a dramatic account of the process that led to Churchill’s appointment as Prime Minister, his formation of a new government as France was falling, and then his war cabinet’s role in waging the war. The book comprises three main sections: the first concerns Churchill’s formation of a unity cabinet with the Labour and Liberal parties (and some independents); the second, the bulk of the volume, describes this cabinet’s prosecution of the war and its various mutations during the conflict. Readers who want to know why Churchill’s government fell so precipitately at the moment of his greatest triumph will find the answer in the book’s third and final section. The focus throughout is on the central war cabinet, although the larger cabinet is discussed as well.

A great strength of this book is its portrayal of the various ministers, often in their own words and those of associates and private secretaries. Schneer masterfully explains British political processes and trends, the inner workings of the Labour Party, the actual functioning of Britain’s Parliamentary government during the war. As the book proceeds, the author tends to concentrate on the ministers who most influenced the course of events, in two cases threatening the unity of the government during the war:

1. His earlier work includes *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (NY: Random House, 2010) and a half dozen other volumes.

2. *On War*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1976) 87.

3. Alluding, of course, to Doris Kearns Goodwin’s popular study of another leader and his political allies/competitors in *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

4. E.g., Mark A. Stoler, *Allies in War: Britain and America against the Axis Powers* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2005); Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009); David Rigby, *Allied Master Strategists: The Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2012); and David Kaiser, *No End Save Victory: How FDR Led the Nation into War* (NY: Basic Books, 2014).

[Churchill] had now the core of the War Cabinet that would see him through: [Clement] Atlee and [Ernest] Bevin for Labour, [Anthony] Eden and [Canadian Lord] Beaverbrook for the Conservatives. Of course there would be others of greater or lesser importance. Beaverbrook, by his own choice, would leave and return more than once. Even now the members of the War Cabinet did not love each other... But taken together they represented a formidable group. (93)

Each of these cabinet ministers (including also the Labour party's Herbert Morrison and the Christian-socialist Stafford Cripps) is the central subject of one of the book's chapters. These men compromised in joining Churchill's government so that Britain could win the war, but their expectation of a return on their cooperation ultimately led to Churchill's fall.

The book closes with a succinct Coda summarizing the "rest of the story" of its fascinating cast of characters. Churchill emerges as an exceptionally deft manager of talented but often prickly individuals, some of whom disliked him, but served him and their nation. Almost hidden in the Coda (251) is another major argument: that Great Britain has been well served by coalition governments—including that of David Cameron—throughout its modern history. One suspects that Schneer is gently encouraging the British to bring Labour in once again and see what might be accomplished.

The narrative style here will evoke for American readers what I call the "Downton Abbey Effect"—with its personal, almost intimate, even gossipy stories about Britain's ruling and cultural elites. The result is an extremely accessible and perceptive account of just how Britain's political leadership, as brilliantly managed by Churchill, weathered wartime crises, developed a grand alliance, and effectively cooperated to secure ultimate victory. One drawback is that Schneer's compelling depictions of his subjects are not accompanied by photographs (except of Churchill); a few maps, too, would have assisted readers unfamiliar with the geography of World War II. On the plus side, the book's invaluable glossary of names (ix–xix) will be especially helpful to American readers, who may be forgiven for losing track of the party affiliations or previously held government positions of Schneer's dramatis personae. All in all, this admirable and instructive work is to be heartily recommended to all audiences for its readability and empathy for its subjects.