



*Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937–1941* by Daniel Todman.

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*Britain's War* is the first of a two-volume work<sup>1</sup> on the diplomatic, economic, political, social, and military aspects of Britain's effort, first, to avoid war and, then, to prosecute it effectively beginning in September 1939. Its author, historian Daniel Todman<sup>2</sup> (Queen Mary University of London), covers Britain's appeasement of Germany and Japan, its late but strenuous rearmament program, its failure to keep France in the fight in spring 1940, and its lonely struggle thereafter until the European war became a world war, bringing the United States and the Soviet Union into the fray. By late 1941, neither Adolf Hitler's Germany nor Winston Churchill's Britain could hope to prevail alone. Both would have to "find the resources they needed to secure a decisive victory" (5). In December 1941, the balance of the war tipped slightly in Britain's favor, when Prime Minister Churchill left for Washington and Foreign Minister Anthony Eden for Moscow "to meet the men who were going to win it" (718).

The book comprises twenty-six chapters in five parts. Part I deals with British politics and society starting with the shift in national mood from the time of the Abdication Crisis and coronation of George VI to the change of national political leadership from Stanley Baldwin to Neville Chamberlain. Part II addresses political and military developments during the time of appeasement of the Third Reich. Part III treats the German invasion of Poland, the "Phoney War," and the calamitous fall of France. The author stresses that Britain overestimated German strength and underestimated Hitler's willingness to hazard enormous risks. Part IV concerns the turning point of the war, Britain's successful repulse of the Luftwaffe assault, with welcome attention to the aspects of national mobilization that foreshadowed postwar reconstruction under Labour governments. Part V concludes Todman's interpretation of Britain's part in the early stages of the European conflict.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many in Britain feared the United States would concentrate on the Pacific theater. Hitler, too, calculating that Japan would occupy the US Navy long enough for him to defeat the Soviet Union, declared war on the United States so that he could attack the American supply lines to Britain and the USSR. Thus, at a stroke, he acquired two superpower enemies and ceded the long-term strategic advantage to Britain.

Todman, in line with recent work on Britain in the Second World War, eschews the romantic David vs. Goliath war narrative, stressing the enormous resources the British Empire was ultimately able to mobilize.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the complexities of simultaneously defending both home and empire left Britain little margin for error. When Prime Minister Chamberlain, a much vilified appeaser, came to Downing Street in May 1937, he faced an already disastrous international situation drifting fast toward

1. Volume 2, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947*, was published in 2017.

2. His previous books include *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2005); *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914–18*, ed. with Gary Sheffield (Staplehurst, UK: Spellmount, 2004); and *War Diaries 1939–1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*, ed. with Alex Danchev (2001; rpt. Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2003).

3. See, further, David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2011), and Phillips Payton O'Brien, *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2015).

war with Germany in Europe, Italy in the Mediterranean, and Japan in the Far East. For an empire with much to lose and little to gain, winning such a war would require “a balancing act of global scope and epic complexity” (120).

The sacrifice of national honor that peaked at the Munich Conference of 1938 gained Britain time to prepare for the worst. Though appeasement diplomacy and fiscal orthodoxy delayed its rearmament, Todman astutely observes that “quite aside from its possible economic consequences, an all-out programme of military expansion in the mid-1930s would have lumbered Britain with a fleet of immediately outdated aircraft” (99). By September 1939, “British monthly aircraft production exceeded the equivalent German figure for the first time ... [and] twenty-six of the RAF’s thirty-nine fighter squadrons had been re-equipped with the most modern aircraft” (167) and incorporated in a quick-response air defense system against German raids. Meanwhile,

Chamberlain’s foreign policy had never been based on building a consensus at home, but one of the consequences of his pursuit of peace was that by summer 1939, any failure to compromise had to be laid at the German dictator’s door. The personal antipathy expressed against him during the Sudeten crisis only became more marked over the subsequent year. (187)

Todman’s perceptive account of the Battle of France shuns the popular myth of Blitzkrieg crushing all before it.<sup>4</sup> The rout of the Allied armies was not the product of a military revolution; many of the Wehrmacht’s tactics dated to World War I. Operational savvy, not any strategic masterstroke, exploited Allied weaknesses to overwhelm the French Army and expel the British from the continent. Specifically, German commanders took significant risks “to concentrate strength against weakness,” deploying troops skilled in tactical innovation. German tanks were not better per se than British tanks; better communications and integration with infantry, artillery, and air support enabled them to make concentrated strikes on dispersed, uncoordinated Allied units lacking air support (329–31). While the British Expeditionary Force’s defeat in France testified to the neglect of modernization by successive interwar governments, its last-second evacuation from Dunkirk “demonstrated Britain’s continuing maritime predominance,” as there was “no prospect of a German surface fleet cutting off the BEF from the sea” (335).

Todman adeptly shifts his focus between military engagements abroad and political developments at home. In the wake of the Battle of Britain, Churchill enjoyed massive popularity with the public, but Conservative MPs thought him a turncoat and lunatic. Haunted by the memory of the Great War, he feared he might become not another Lloyd George but another Asquith, that is, not the prime minister who won the war but “the one who was removed along the way” (495–97).

Chapter 21, “The Battle of the British Empire,” broadens the book’s horizon to Britain’s coveted special relationship with the United States, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Asia-Pacific theater, and the one nation that fought both German and Japanese forces on its own frontiers—the Soviet Union.

Great Britain’s relationship with the United States was enigmatic, because President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose re-election in 1940 Britons greeted as a victory in itself, was not forthcoming about the extent and nature of American support. Todman is sensitive to FDR’s delicate political situation at home and touches on the lack of realism in British expectations. “To an extent that now seems remarkable, the British persisted in viewing America as a sort of particularly powerful but recalcitrant dominion that could be educated into accepting its responsibilities” (527). Ironically, though Churchill was a passionate believer in Anglo-American fraternity, his romantic imperialism made him “particu-

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4. So, too, Robin Prior, *When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2015) 71–109, and Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2016) 72–88.

larly ill-suited to the task of convincing Americans that Britain was the sort of modern, democratic society for which they should fight” (532). Canada, a British dominion, had the industrial capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the imperial war effort, but at the same time had to ponder the chances of British defeat. In August 1940, it signed the Oldenburg Agreement with the United States for the mutual defense of the North American continent (419–20).

Still, American and British interests in 1941 were convergent enough that Churchill and Roosevelt agreed on the principles of the Atlantic Charter for the reconstitution of global order following victory in a war they had yet to fight—even as they discussed a coordinated policy toward Japan. Roosevelt would not commit the United States to aiding Britain or the Netherlands if Japan were to attack their Far Eastern territories. This posture changed after Pearl Harbor, but not before the humiliation of the British Army in Hong Kong and Malaya and the loss of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser *Repulse* to the same Japanese airpower that had devastated Pearl Harbor (714–15). Berlin’s declaration of war against the United States put to rest any fears that Washington would devote all its energies to the Pacific.

British plans were rooted in the particularities of the Empire’s geo-strategic position and the contingencies of the first years of the war. To the American army, however, the emphasis on bombing, economic warfare, resistance movements and the Mediterranean all looked like peripheral dabbling designed to avoid the central issue. They thought that the only way to win the war was to go back into Europe and destroy Germany’s military power. This was something about which British and American generals were going to argue for years to come. (675)

British diplomacy, rearmament, strategy, and military performance in 1937–41 were sufficient at least to forestall defeat; thereafter, Britain’s war machine contributed mightily to destroying the Third Reich. That said, as early as December 1941, it was obvious that Britain had been most fortunate in both its friends and its enemies. Churchill and the British political and military elites were keen on fighting an ultra-modern, high-technology war, because they were determined not to repeat the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele. “Yet the main reason they were spared a higher casualty war was Germany’s decision to launch a new war in the east and its failure to overcome the Soviet Union” (657).

*Britain’s War* is a superb effort to link political circumstance with diplomacy and military leadership; it should be must reading for scholars and students of international and military history alike.<sup>5</sup>

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5. *Britain’s War* features twenty-eight photographs, twelve maps, six tables, seventy pages of endnotes, and a thirty-two-page index.