

The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill's World War II Speeches

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When Curt Zoller compiled his *Annotated Bibliography of Works about Sir Winston Churchill* [\(1\)](#) in 2004, the number of books about Britain's best-known prime minister was close to 700. In the decade since, that number has grown larger still, leading to an obvious question: What more is there to say about the man and his career, particularly about his leadership during the Second World War? Judging from Richard Toye's latest book the answer is, a great deal.

Toye, who has already contributed to the Churchill canon with his acclaimed *Churchill's Empire* and a dual study, *Lloyd George & Churchill* [\(2\)](#), tackles a subject that until now largely has been ignored by other historians. In *The Roar of the Lion* he examines Churchill's wartime speeches –how they were written and delivered and, not least, how they were received both at home and abroad, by friend and foe alike. To produce this study, Toye deftly combines secondary source material with archival research, especially in Churchill's own, often overlooked speech-writing files. The result is a book that is by turns informative, engaging, and, all too often, frustrating.

In many ways, Churchill's reputation as a speechmaker has been a prisoner of the success he achieved between the fall of France in 1940 and the victory at El Alamein in 1942. What most people know of these speeches is largely 'confined to a few famous phrases excerpted from a limited number of radio broadcasts in the summer of 1940'. The result is that these 'quotable bits' have crowded out other equally important, if less memorable speeches made throughout the war (pp. 2, 229). Nothing better illustrates this point than a speech delivered by Churchill that same summer. With their nation's defeat, it was altogether likely that the French navy – the world's fourth largest – would fall into German hands. Before he would let that happen, Churchill took what he later called 'a hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned'. With much of the French fleet anchored at Mers-el-Kebir near Oran in North Africa, he ordered the Royal Navy to destroy his former ally's warships before they could be used by the Nazis against Britain. Churchill's address to the House of Commons the following day, like the attack itself, is all but forgotten, at least in the English-speaking world; but the immediate impact of both could not have been more significant. The ruthlessness of the assault demonstrated to the world, and especially to the United States, that Britain, in Churchill's own words, would 'prosecute the war with the utmost vigour'. For the first time,

Conservative MPs joined their Labour and Liberal colleagues cheering the new prime minister, one witness recorded, 'like mad' (pp. 62–3). Even if, as Toye suggests, this show of support was stage managed, the Chamberlainite MP, Henry 'Chips' Channon, detected a change. 'At the end of his speech', Channon recorded in his diary, 'the House rose, cheered, waved Order Papers – as I have so often seen them do for Neville. Only it was not little Neville's turn now. Winston suddenly wept',⁽³⁾ (Toye does not fully quote this part of Channon's diary, which is unfortunate. It is a minor oversight, but there are others that are not – about which more later.)

While it is impossible to scrutinize every public utterance made by Churchill between 1939 and 1945, one of this book's strengths is that it examines a number of speeches made during the war's later years which, at the time, caused quite a stir even though they have long since receded from memory. On at least two occasions, for instance, Churchill caused major diplomatic rows with Britain's wartime allies: first, in 1943, when he suggested that planning the post-war world should be left to 'the three great victorious powers, the British Commonwealth of Nations, the United States, and Soviet Russia' (p. 157). This triumvirate pointedly excluded China and sparked outrage not only among Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists but also among their American supporters, the so-called China Lobby. Much the same thing happened a year later, when Churchill told the House of Commons that his government would oppose any attempt to overthrow the Franco regime in Spain, this time arousing the displeasure of both Washington and Moscow. While the Spanish tempest was soon overshadowed by the D-Day landings in Normandy, it was not forgotten. During the 1945 general election, the Labour-supporting *Daily Herald* resurrected the incident with an article headlined, 'A VOTE FOR CHURCHILL IS A VOTE FOR FRANCO' (p. 182).

Nor was Churchill shy about involving himself in American domestic politics when he felt British interests were at stake. Even before the United States entered the war, the Anglo-Americans adopted a 'Europe First' strategy, meaning that Germany's defeat would take precedence over Japan's.⁽⁴⁾ After Pearl Harbor, and for much of the war, a vocal minority in Congress demanded that America's military might should instead be used to deliver a 'death-blow against the Japanese'. Worse, during Churchill's May 1943 visit to Washington, one Democratic senator, Kentucky's A. B. 'Happy' Chandler, falsely accused the British of doing little to contribute to Tokyo's defeat. Scheduled to address a joint session of Congress, Churchill, as he later told his Cabinet colleagues, gave the sort of speech more commonly heard in Westminster than on Capitol Hill. 'Let no one suggest that we British have not at least as great an interest as the United States in the unflinching and relentless waging of war against Japan', he told the assembled members of Congress, who were soon 'heartily with him'. Having won over his audience in much the same way as he did the House of Commons, the prime minister then rounded on Chandler, though not by name. 'Lots of people', he observed, 'can make good plans for winning the war if they have not got to carry them out'. It was a pointed suggestion that in America one man, Franklin Roosevelt, already had that responsibility and it would be foolhardy to hand it over to anyone else. As FDR was already contemplating an unprecedented fourth campaign for the White House in a year's time, Churchill's intervention did not go unnoticed. The American newspaper columnist Drew Pearson later wrote: 'it looks as if the Prime Minister had already laid the groundwork for '44'. More immediately, Churchill's speech did nothing to change the minds of Chandler and the other critics of 'Europe First'. But the policy didn't change, either (pp. 160–1).

Churchill was decidedly more circumspect when it came to domestic British politics, in particular when the subject was post-war reconstruction. For good reason. Though leader of the Conservative Party from October 1940, he was also 'national leader' of a coalition government. This forced Churchill to maintain a delicate balance in the House of Commons where Tory MPs still held a majority of seats, but where his administration depended on the participation of both Labour and the Liberals. Conveniently, for Churchill, he could argue that it was premature to talk of what would happen after victory. To his mind, the important thing – indeed, the only thing – that mattered was winning the war. After the triumph at El Alamein, soon followed by Sir William Beveridge's report on the future of social services, that position was no longer tenable. A post-war Britain could be detected just over the horizon, and the Beveridge Report laid out a blueprint for how that Britain could be a very different nation from the one that had emerged after the last world war.

Churchill tried seizing back the initiative with a March 1943 broadcast known as the 'Four Years' Plan'. Although its title made it sound more like a speech that would have originated in the Kremlin than in Downing Street, Churchill's intent was to sketch an outline of Britain's transition during the first few years of peace. According to Toye, the broadcast allowed Churchill to 'relieve pressure for immediate reform by paying lip service to its importance' – at some future date. This may explain why it caused so much confusion and why a government analysis found that public reaction to it was 'more varied than for any of Churchill's previous war speeches.' While one listener called the broadcast 'almost pure socialism', the *Liberal News Chronicle* chastised parts of Churchill's remarks as 'typically Tory' (pp. 203–6). Nor, for that matter, did the speech remove domestic issues from Churchill's agenda. Before the year was out, a threatened Labour rebellion over demands to nationalise the coal industry forced him to intervene. While making clear that he himself could support such a move, no government, he told the House of Commons, could take such a far-reaching step without first receiving a mandate from the people in a general election (pp. 170–1). That is just what happened in 1945, sweeping both him and the Conservatives from power.

Important as these later speeches were, Churchill's reputation as an orator still largely rests on the ones he gave during the war's early years. And that is where the trouble lies with this book. According to Toye, a 'powerful myth' envelops Churchill's role in the war, one in which through his speeches alone he rallied the British people by making them 'feel the same way' or by putting 'into words what they were all feeling but could not express themselves'. This myth, he explains, is 'crucial', not least when it comes to the 'popular image of the summer of 1940'. In fact, says Toye, historians would have us believe that whenever Churchill spoke 'people were reduced to a condition of helpless ecstasy every time he opened his mouth' (p. 3–4, 227–8).

Well.

Toye is surely right that Churchill did not command unanimous support during the war, a fact he demonstrates by lacing his book with contemporary reactions to the wartime speeches. Along with the published diaries of politicians and other officials, he has again turned to two other underutilized sources. Between May 1940 and December 1944, the Ministry of Information (MoI)'s Home Intelligence Division produced weekly reports on public reaction to, among other things, 'ministerial broadcasts and pronouncements' (p. 7). To that can be added the reports and, especially, the individual diaries collected by the sociological research organization, Mass-Observation (MO). Toye mines both of these rich seams of material to drive home the point that Churchill's oratory failed to win over all of his listeners even when, as the Home Intelligence Division reported, his prestige was at 'its highest level'. In a victory speech after El Alamein, Churchill famously told the nation 'this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.' His masterful phrasing was not enough, however, to impress the aunt of one MO diarist. After the broadcast, she turned to her niece and remarked: 'He's no speaker, is he?' (pp. 148–50)

This points to a problem with Toye's use of these two sources. More than once, while the Home Intelligence

Division reported overall support for a Churchill address, Toye is quick to highlight negative comments about the same speech found in the MO files, even when those comments represented 'minority feeling' (p. 108). Moreover, these negative reactions often say less about Churchill's oratory than they do about a war-weary, but also fickle public. According to one MO report, by mid-April 1942 what most Britons wanted was 'more action and less talk, they are feeling that the present is no time for oratory'. Yet even as this same report noted complaints about the 'flatness' of Churchill's recent speeches, and that some Britons were now calling him an 'old windbag', they nonetheless had come to expect him to deliver 'great and moving speeches every time' (p. 138).

As Toye concedes, 'MO diarists were self-selecting, and were disproportionately drawn from the middle classes' (p. 8). But the problems do not stop there. John Lukacs has praised the MO diaries, saying they 'breathe with the presence of authenticity'. But he also notes that the organization's researchers 'made no pretense to anything "scientific" and did not attempt to quantify all their data'.⁽⁵⁾ And, it must be said, at times the diarists sound like a ready-made awkward squad, or 'confirmed grouchers' as one of them called Churchill's critics (p. 149). There was no greater collection of grouchers than those serving in the military, where the words 'bastard' and 'Winston Churchill' seemed to go hand-in-hand. (pp. 131, 174, 269, n. 39). According to one sailor, the Royal Navy had 'special dislike for him, as we do all his dirty work' (p. 140). Contrast those remarks with reaction to one of Churchill's most controversial actions: his 1944 intervention in the Greek Civil War. Thanks to censorship summaries of their letters, Toye reveals that Churchill's policy was 'highly popular' with British soldiers sent to Greece to carry it out (p. 191). Instead of a random letter here, or a diary entry there, these censorship reports promise a broader, invaluable insight into the feelings of British servicemen and women and, perhaps, their relatives and friends. But Toye only refers to these summaries in this one instance.

Public opinion surveys were conducted during the war by the Gallup organization and these, too, show widespread support for Churchill. Yet, Toye by and large dismisses these findings by noting that questions have been raised about the polls' methodology. Beyond that, he argues that, especially during the war's early years, there was a lot of pressure to conform, to give 'socially acceptable' answers (p. 7). Why Toye believes that average Britons would have been any more honest when interviewed by an official from the MoI's Home Intelligence Division (a government agency after all), or why they would have been more open with MO interviewers or, even in diaries handed over to these same strangers, he does not say. Even after making allowances for sampling errors and the like, the fact remains that Churchill's popularity during the war was, in Toye's own words, 'astonishingly high' (p. 6). This was still the case when large discrepancies appeared between Churchill's MO 'satisfaction figures' of 66 per cent, and a Gallup approval rating of 81 per cent for the same month (p. 228). That month, March 1942, happened to be one of the worst of the war: British forces were reeling under hammer blows from the Japanese, including the loss of Singapore just weeks earlier; Axis forces threatened Egypt; and German U-boats were winning the Battle of the Atlantic. What is astonishing is not the gap between these surveys of public opinion but that they were still so high despite this string of disasters.

For the purposes of his study, Toye also disregards public opinion surveys because most were 'not directed to the reception of speeches per se but to approval/disapproval of Churchill as Prime Minister' (p. 227). The fault, though, is with his premise, that Churchill's oratory, and its impact, can be assessed in isolation. Toye admits as much when, at the end of his book, he quotes a December 1942 MO report. According to this assessment, Churchill's personal popularity along with reaction to his speeches, rose or fell in 'very close association with the general feelings of cheerfulness or depression about the war situation' (p. 227). Which is rather stating the obvious.

This leads back to the crucial year between May 1940 and May 1941. Toye is adamant that Churchill's speeches during this period did not 'rally the nation', nor were they 'the decisive factor influencing Britain's willingness to fight on' (pp. 44, 72). But oratorical skills are but one tool of leadership, and focusing on the impact of one speech or another without placing them in context is to miss the point. Churchill understood that. Unlike Chamberlain, he made full use of the powers and prestige of his office as well as other media.

His private secretary John Colville later recalled that during those desperate 12 months he seemed to be everywhere, inspecting military forces and munitions factories, and especially visiting the nation's bombed-out cities – all captured by the newsreels to be shown in cinemas throughout Britain and around the world. Contrast that with the approach taken by Adolf Hitler, who was seldom heard or seen when the war started to go wrong for Germany.

To be fair, there is something to Toye's argument that time has clouded memories of the impact of Churchill's speeches, especially those delivered in 1940. And here, perhaps, is this book's greatest missed opportunity: Are the Churchill speeches we hear today, those 'quotable bits', the same broadcasts that were made over 70 years ago? This is not to suggest, as have some, that an actor impersonating Churchill delivered the addresses on radio. Toye puts that fairytale to bed early on in his book (p. 11). But in at least one instance, Churchill's June 1940 'Finest Hour' speech, there are two, and possibly more, versions all purporting to be the original broadcast. That is impossible. Compare, for instance, this version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsKDGM5KTBY> [2]

with this:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/subjects/history/ww2clips/speeches/churchill_finest_hour [3]

The first, flatter version chimes with criticism of the broadcast noted by Mass-Observation. Some said Churchill sounded 'tired', others 'suggested that he was drunk' (p. 58). According to the BBC, however, the second, livelier version is the one that was broadcast on the evening of 18 June 1940. Worse, still, the BBC archive posts another version of the speech which, in fact, combines portions of this broadcast with Churchill's 'The news from France is very bad' address made the night before. It can be heard here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/11428.shtml> [4]

What is important is that the version found on the BBC's 'School Radio' site is the one used in documentaries, such as ITV's 1973–4 *World at War* series. It is the version that people, including those who listened to the actual broadcast, think of when they think of this speech. But is it what the British people heard in the summer of 1940? There are hints here and there that Churchill 're-recorded' some of his wartime speeches for Decca Records around 1949. Strangely, none of Churchill's biographers mention this, and neither does Toye. More's the pity. It is a mystery that, if solved, could help explain why reactions to Churchill's broadcasts when they were given differ from the impressions we have of them today.

Having said all that, *The Roar of the Lion* is a valuable addition to the study of Churchill's wartime premiership and demonstrates that there is still much to say about the man and his work. What is remarkable is not the number of complaints that contemporary listeners registered about this or that speech, but the number of times Churchill hit his mark. That was never more true than during the early days of the Blitz when his broadcasts helped reassure the British people. The novelist Naomi Royde Smith put it best when she described one of those broadcasts in September in 1940. 'The statement of facts made', she wrote in her diary, 'the danger is presented, [and] long successions of monosyllables beat on in the ear like the sound of an army marching to drums ... It sounds simple enough, but how few men can do it' (p. 74).

Notes

1. Curt Zoller, *Annotated Bibliography of Works about Sir Winston Churchill* (Washington, DC, 2004) [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (Basingstoke, 2010); Lloyd George & Churchill: *Rivals for Greatness* (Basingstoke, 2007). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Rhodes James, *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, 1967), p. 260. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941-1945*

(New York, NY, 2009), pp. 45, 50.[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. John Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940* (New Haven, CT, 2001), p. 34.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/16/roar-lion-churchill-war-speeches-review> [5]

History Extra

<http://www.historyextra.com/news/churchill%E2%80%99s-wartime-speeches-are-overrated-claims-academic> [6]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/342b63e0-08ec-11e3-ad07-00144feabdc0.html> [7]

War History Online

<https://www.warhistoryonline.com/reviews/roar-lion-untold-story-churchills-world-war-ii-speeches-review-mark-barnes.html> [8]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/books/review/churchills-bomb-and-the-roar-of-the-lion.html> [9]

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[3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/subjects/history/ww2clips/speeches/churchill_finest_hour

[4] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/11428.shtml>

[5] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/16/roar-lion-churchill-war-speeches-review>

[6] <http://www.historyextra.com/news/churchill%E2%80%99s-wartime-speeches-are-overrated-claims-academic> [7] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/342b63e0-08ec-11e3-ad07-00144feabdc0.html>

[8] <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/reviews/roar-lion-untold-story-churchills-world-war-ii-speeches-review-mark-barnes.html> [9] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/books/review/churchills-bomb-and-the-roar-of-the-lion.html?_r=0