

## Churchill on the Far East in the Second World War: Hiding the History of the ‘Special Relationship’

**Review Number:** 1911

**Publish date:** Thursday, 17 March, 2016

**Author:** Cat Wilson

**ISBN:** 9781137363961

**Date of Publication:** 2014

**Price:** £60.00

**Pages:** 280pp.

**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

**Publisher url:** <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/churchill-on-the-far-east-in-the-second-world-war-cat-wilson/?isbn=9781137363947>

**Place of Publication:** Basingstoke

**Reviewer:** Chandar S. Sundaram

Today, a half-century after his death, Winston Churchill stands like a colossus over the political, diplomatic and military history of the 20th century, and of its most terrible armed conflict, the Second World War. The already voluminous number of historical studies devoted to him and his career continues to grow, and amounts to a full-blown industry – never mind the ‘cottage’ part. As recently as 2008, 38 separate research items on differing aspects of the man were published. And, besides the volume under review, 2014 alone saw the publication of weighty tomes delineating Churchill’s views on the British Empire as well as Churchill’s reading habits.<sup>(1)</sup> Indeed, one can be forgiven for asking if anything truly new can be written about the man. As the excellent book under review proves, the answer is an emphatic ‘yes!’

Wilson takes as her subject Churchill’s memoir *The Second World War*, which was a publishing sensation when it first came out in the late 1940s and the 1950s, and still continues to sell well. She correctly observes that a large part of its popular appeal was that, because of Churchill’s centrality in the Second World War, his unprecedented access to unpublished documents, and the title of the work itself – *The Second World War*, as opposed to something more accurate and innocuous, such as *Memoirs, 1939–1945* – Churchill’s multi-volume memoir was taken by the general public as history.

Yet this was a distortion, because Churchill was not an historian. Wilson writes that Churchill conceptualized his memoir of the 1939–1945 war as:

the vehicle through which he could not only bolster his own contemporary worth (and hopefully ease his way back to Downing Street) by highlighting how integral he had been to Allied victory and Allied relations, but also to cement the wartime foundations of the ‘special relationship’ [between the UK and the USA] into the English-speaking consciousness (p. 92).

Wilson argues that, though Churchill had a sophisticated understanding of the historian’s craft, in that he knew the power of shifting interpretations – and that they could be manipulated – he cannot be called a

historian. Wilson judges Churchill against the tenets of 'what might be called a basic code of historical practice'. Codified by the historian Mary Fulbrook, it consists of four elements: 1. the possibility of revision due to the emergence of new evidence; 2. creativity and good writing; 3. a 'commitment to basic honesty and integrity rather than deceit'; and 4. the 'absence of wilful distortions or omissions' (pp. 151–2).<sup>(2)</sup> Wilson thus finds Churchill's Second World War memoirs wanting on the final point, based on the treatment of the war east of Suez. Churchill himself was:

the prince of literary rogues, who always preferred the tale to the truth, and smirched or glorified great men and garbled documents accordingly as they affected his drama (p. 22).

These words are Churchill's, which he used to describe the 19th-century historian Macaulay. But, as Winston himself once said, probably with a knowing smirk, 'give me the facts ... and I shall twist them to suit my argument.' (p. 12)

Wilson maintains that Churchill's memoirs '... resonated with the post-war book-buying public', because '... they ... represented a wider, national and collective experience ...'. Churchill and his ghostwriters (known as the syndicate), managed to:

encapsulate the collective memory of recent events, when coupled with the swathe of documentation within the volumes, [and] gave the impression that Churchill's ... [memoir] ... was, in fact history. (p. 21)

Although he did not himself originate this idea, Wilson shows that Churchill did little to dispel it.

The effects of this memoir-as-history confusion were, according to Wilson, two: firstly, the establishment of the dominant 'Western-Europe-and-Middle-East' emphasis in the English language historiography on the War, at the expense of the Pacific, Eastern European, and mainland Asian theatres of the conflict; and secondly, the conscious construction of a 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States by papering over differences the two western allies had over the conduct of the war in the Asia-Pacific.

The discerning and up-to-date scholar and reader will no doubt think, as the present writer did when first approached to review this book, 'But wait a minute, hasn't Churchill's *The Second World War* already been subjected to sustained historical scrutiny in David Reynolds's magisterial *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War*?<sup>(3)</sup> Well-aware of this tome, Wilson is critical of it for omitting a detailed examination of Churchill's inadequate treatment of Britain's part in the Asia-Pacific theatre (p. 6). This reviewer is pleased to say that this book admirably fills this gap.

In six tightly-but-clearly written chapters – the seventh seems a bit superfluous, tacked on at what seems to this reviewer to be the behest of an external reader of the manuscript – Wilson more than proves her thesis. Rather than examining each volume of Churchill's memoirs individually, which was the approach of the Reynolds book, her approach is thematic. Her treatment is guided by the omissions in Churchill's memoirs concerning the war east of Suez. Here, three questions loom large.

What of Britain's role in perhaps antagonising Japan into aligning itself with the Axis and attacking the Western powers? What of the wartime British Empire, of the Raj, and of the vital role played by the Indian Army, the largest volunteer force in history? Why did Churchill weight his memoirs so heavily against these areas, and what, if anything, was he attempting to hide? (p. 5)

Chapter one addresses head on questions regarding 'the nature of history, memoir, myth and revisionism' (p. 7). Here, she posits that Churchill's history was 'essentially a personal and family affair. He believed that

history was irrevocably intertwined with politics, and was made by great individuals, who were ... men of destiny operating under a grand theme' (p. 13). Churchill clearly self-identified as a man of destiny, and his grand theme was one upon which the sun never set: the British Empire.

The British Empire, and Churchill's conceptualisation of it, forms the subject of the second chapter. Never forgetting that Churchill was a political animal par excellence, Wilson postulates that there were two phases to Churchill's imperialism: a 'genuine' pre-1931 phase, and a more 'rhetorical' variety he deliberately highlighted in order to make sure he still grabbed headlines in the 1930s after his break with the Conservative Party's mainstream over India.

Indeed, Churchill's belief that possession of India was key to the British Empire's greatness was a constant throughout his career. Wilson writes that,

[t]he Raj, for Churchill, was more than the embodiment of what was good and benevolent about imperial power: India was the cornerstone of imperial prestige and power. If the heart of the empire, the Raj, continued to beat, the imperial body would survive (p. 25).

In the first period, Churchill was influenced by the Conservative leader Lord Salisbury, who believed that the protection of the empire should rest on 'prudence, not sentiment'. Wilson argues that this helps explain Churchill's decision, when Chancellor of the Exchequer in the mid-1920s, to refuse to increase funding for the construction of the British naval base at Singapore (p. 38). However, he was pragmatic enough when he assumed the Prime Ministership in 1940 to realize that winning the war would necessitate coming to an understanding with the other great English-speaking ally – the United States – which, notwithstanding the Monroe Doctrine, 'Manifest Destiny', and an expansionist agenda in the Pacific, was 'anti-imperialist'. Indeed, by the 1930s, when Churchill, with the aid of a 'proto-syndicate' embarked on the writing of *The History of the English Speaking Peoples*, he was changing his imperialist rhetoric into an Anglo-American one. As Wilson ably demonstrates, the memoirs reveal a Churchill 'prepared to sacrifice the furthest outreaches of empire for victory in Europe' (p. 42).

Chapter three addresses Churchill's depiction of the origins and the outbreak of the war with Japan.<sup>(4)</sup> Here, Wilson asks why Churchill paid scant attention in his memoirs to the outbreak of war with Japan. Did he ignore it to paper-over the fact his wartime government, like the British governments before it, had no credible policy to deal with an imperial rival in the Far East like Japan? Again, what did Churchill have to hide? Wilson argues that Churchill differentiated between long-term and short-term causes, and blamed the outbreak of the war in the Pacific on diplomatic failures by the United States. He blamed American pressure on Britain for allowing the Anglo-Japanese alliance to lapse, thereby exposing Britain's eastern empire to possible threat from Japan. Wilson acknowledges that this might seem counterproductive to Churchill's overall purpose of cementing the Anglo-American special relationship, but convincingly contends that he had little choice, since the alternative – '...the image of the weary titan unable to defend itself in the Far East if it were threatened at the same time in Europe or the Middle East...' – was absolutely unacceptable to him' (p. 52). However, the argument that this somehow dovetailed with Churchill's defeat-into-victory narrative needs a bit more explanation than Wilson offers. Wilson also asserts that the reason for Churchill's perfunctory treatment of the coming of war with Japan was his perhaps understandable reluctance to admit his government's inattention to a post-war world, and especially to a UK which he sorely wanted to lead again. Wilson contends that Churchill's memoirs:

... mirrored the concerns which he believed more relevant to the Cold War. This explained why Churchill's portrayal of the advent of war with Japan was so scattered and so scant (pp. 67–8).

The fourth chapter addresses Churchill's treatment in his memoirs of the major military defeats of Hong Kong, Malaya, and Singapore. Here, Wilson asserts that Churchill tried to hide the magnitude of his role in the weakening of the defence of the British empire east of Suez. She also assesses how successful he was in

shaping subsequent views of the British war effort. Wilson shows that Churchill's cursory treatment of the fall of Hong Kong concealed his admission in 1939 that the place was indefensible from a Japanese attack. Regarding Malaya, he strove to place the blame for the British defeat there not on the errors of his own government, and his own role in retarding the construction of the Singapore naval base in the 1920s, but on logistics. He maintained that the need to supply the Soviets in their perilous battle against Nazi Germany forced the British to neglect the defense of the Malay Peninsula. In the aftermath of Singapore's fall, there was no formal enquiry, as there had been after the disastrous first Mesopotamian campaign of the First World War. Wilson argues that this was because such an enquiry would have laid the blame for the 'worst disaster' squarely at Churchill's feet: the clear implication here being that Churchill's reputation, and his chances for another tenancy at 10 Downing St. would have been severely dented, if not destroyed outright (p. 81). Another prime reason for glossing over Singapore was Churchill's desire to divert attention from or conceal his part in the underlying causes of the military defeats in the Far East due to his concern about the damage this would do to Britain's prestige.

India, or rather Churchill's treatment of this 'central bastion' in his memoirs, forms the basis of chapter five. By mid-1942, with the Japan at the eastern ramparts of India, Britain's struggle was not only against the Japanese Army: it was also against a rising Indian nationalism impatient for full independence, the British political left, and the anti-imperialism of the American ally. Wilson effectively argues that Churchill, in his memoirs, sought to distance himself from the failure of his government's policy in India in the spring and summer of 1942 by scapegoating Cripps. Besides this, the fact that, when this part of the memoir was published, Cripps was a front-bench MP and Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Attlee government, and therefore, a potential hustings adversary, made it all the more imperative for Churchill to denigrate his efforts. Indeed, as the Indianist constitutional historian R. J. Moore has shown, Churchill and Linlithgow, the conservative Viceroy, actively conspired to ensure Cripps' failure in India.<sup>(5)</sup> In typical fashion, this part of the memoirs downplays Quit India, devoting only two pages to it, and never mentions Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru by name. However, Wilson is even-handed, wisely distancing herself from the typically laughable claim of a Bengali 'historian' that Churchill was engaged in a 'secret war' against India and deliberately caused the Bengal famine of 1943 (p. 210).<sup>(6)</sup>

In chapter six, Wilson focuses on Churchill's depiction of the Indian Army and the re-conquest of Burma. This reviewer has often wondered why the Imperial Japanese Army's worst defeat of the entire war, which occurred, not in the islands of the southern and central Pacific, but in the jungles of the Indo-Burmese border, has been largely overlooked. Moreover, even when this is acknowledged, it is attributed to 'British' troops, thus ignoring the fact that the army that inflicted this defeat upon the Japanese was largely composed of Indian Army units. This reviewer initially attributed this to the pernicious influence of Hollywood's Americanization of everything, but Wilson makes the plausible case for a more concrete culprit: Churchill's memoirs. Churchill's view of the Indian Army was characterized by his inability to distinguish between it and, for want of a better phrase, 'political India'. This led him to denigrate the Indian Army's importance as a strategic reserve during the First World War, depicting it merely as a relief force (p. 119). Moreover his references to it as 'the British-Indian Army' show that he thought of it as an essentially British force with 'unreliable' Indian troops, as opposed to what it really was: a British-*officered*-Indian Army. Doing so would have undermined another of Churchill's post-1945 beliefs: that Indian reverses in the Far East in 1942 were squarely the fault of poor-quality Indian troops, instead of their feckless British political and military leadership. Churchill's narrative also championed his personal favourites – the dilettantish Alexander and the unstable Wingate – the implication here being the old imperialist saw that Indian troops, to be successful, required 'a white officer among them when fighting' (p. 123).<sup>(7)</sup>

The quibbles with this book are minor. Its title would have been made much clearer had the word 'real' been inserted, because Wilson's thesis is that Churchill sought to hide the special relationship's true history. In chapter three, Wilson accuses Churchill of making a 'spurious' link between Pearl Harbor and the 11 November 1940 British torpedo-bomber raid on the Italian fleet at Taranto, and uses the evidence marshalled by historian Arthur J. Marder to prove her point. (p. 62). However she is unaware of Gordon Prange, who, in his magisterial *At Dawn We Slept*, reports that Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, who was tasked with leading

the entire Japanese aerial attack on Pearl Harbor, was so interested in finding out about the Taranto attack that he pumped a brother officer who had personally visited Taranto in the British raid's aftermath, for information about it. Fuchida was reportedly greatly encouraged by what he learned.<sup>(8)</sup> And finally, the marvellous and insightful illustrations of Wilson's doctoral thesis could have been reproduced, had not copyright restrictions been too daunting.

In short, this book is an excellent treatment of Churchill's historical sleight of hand. Closely-argued, it deserves a wide readership. Perhaps finally historians of the Second World War, and the general public, will be able to liberate themselves from Churchill's distorting sway.

## Notes

1. See: L. James, *Churchill and Empire* (New York, NY, 2014); and J. Rose, *The Literary Churchill* (New Haven, CT, 2014).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Elements three and four of Fulbrook's enumeration, being essentially the same, can be conflated.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, 2004).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The title of chapter three of Wilson's University of Hull doctoral thesis, upon which this book is based, is clearer than that in her book.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See: R. J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps, and India, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 1979).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See: M. Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: the British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York, NY, 2010).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For the persistence and prevalence of this belief, see the present reviewer's 'Reviving a "Dead Letter": Military Indianization and the Ideology of Anglo-India, 1885-1891' in P.S. Gupta and A. Deshpande, eds., *The British Raj and its Indian Armed Forces, 1858-1939*, (New Delhi, 2002), pp. 45-97; and "'Treated with Scant Attention": the Imperial Cadet Corps, Indian Nobles, and Anglo-Indian Policy, 1897-1917.', in *The Journal of Military History*, 77(1) Jan. 2013, pp. 41-70.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Prange based this information on a 1964 interview with Fuchida. See: Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: the Untold Story of Pearl Harbour* (New York, NY, 1981), pp. 320, 764. This reviewer is inclined to believe Prange, because a proud Japanese naval officer would be rather hesitant to admit inspiration from a foreign source if that inspiration were not, in fact, true.[Back to \(8\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1911>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/129135>