

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

Richard Toye. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 309 pp., endnotes, index.

Reviewed by R.J.A., PhD

The cigar, the fingers splayed into a “Victory” sign, the scowl and furrowed brow immortalized by portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh: Winston Churchill long ago seared his image into historical memory. And in these days of sound bites, teleprompters, and media handlers, his speeches—often delivered from memory—read like the classic Greek and Roman oratory from which they took their inspiration and cadence. (The wartime prime minister also received a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953.) Nevertheless, Richard Toye, professor of modern history at the University of Exeter, attempts to lend some proportion to his near-mythic subject. In this iconoclastic study, Toye analyzes the reception of his subject’s Second World War radio and parliamentary addresses among British, Allied, and even Axis audiences, arguing that Churchill’s words often failed to evoke the universal praise and epic effects that historians have attributed to them.

The intrepid scholar goes beyond newspaper editorial pages and Gallup poll results, supporting his findings instead with two relatively unexplored archival sources: reports by the Home Intelligence Division of Britain’s Ministry of Information and by the British sociological research organization, Mass-Observation (MO). Both groups purported to have captured domestic thoughts, opinions, and morale during the war. MO reports were also based in part on entries from over 200 diaries sent into the organization by ordinary British citizens, making them more interesting, if not necessarily more definitive pieces of evidence than statistical surveys.

The first chapter lays out a brief biography, emphasizing Churchill’s early recognition of the relationship between power and rhetoric as well as the path the future politician followed to become a master orator. The reader learns, for example, that the 13-year-old Harrow School student could recite 1,200 lines of *The Lays of Ancient Rome* by Thomas Babington Macaulay, himself no mean advocate for the British nation and craftsman of the King’s English. The young Churchill also honed his sense of style and irony through close acquaintance with

Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. And at 24, just back from a campaign to quell an Indian uprising, he wrote his first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898). Churchill enthusiasts tend to be an informed lot and certainly have decades and shelf yardage of scholarship with which to indulge their passion. They will find little new here; however, the material is a serviceable prelude to the chapters that follow.

Toye assumes reader familiarity with the more significant events of the war (e.g., the evacuation of Dunkirk, the Battle of Dakar, Operation Barbarossa), particularly with their political and diplomatic implications for Great Britain. This allows him to dispense with historical retelling and instead focus on widening the discursive context within which he asserts past historians have relegated Churchill’s speeches and radio addresses. His archival research reveals, for example, that not all members of parliament were pleased with Churchill’s address in the Commons after Hitler had invaded Norway. Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary how the prime minister hesitated, confused his notes, fumbled for the right pair of spectacles, mistook Sweden for Denmark, and gave an overall “lamentable performance” (38).

After France had fallen to the Nazis and Marshal Pétain had requested an armistice, Churchill spoke to calm British nerves and to steel British resolve, delivering his “finest hour” speech. An initial MO report registered general satisfaction with the address; however, at least one radio listener sent a telegram to 10 Downing Street to express concern about what he suspected to be the prime minister’s heart condition. (A ubiquitous cigar—not a cardiac ailment—had caused Churchill’s halting delivery.) And Toye does an excellent job of describing the fine rhetorical line Churchill traced after Germany invaded Russia. On the one hand, the prime minister welcomed the military strain of an eastern front on the Hitler regime. He had earlier promised British aid to anyone who fought the Nazis. On the other hand, he had been an implacable anticommunist since the First World War. Yet, *Pravda*

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published Churchill's Barbarossa speech—summarized and without comment—the day after broadcast, inflammatory remarks about communism understandably expunged.

Ultimately, however, the book's strength is also its weakness. The anecdotal evidence of diaries and memoirs makes for fascinating reading but cannot be taken to represent broader public sentiments nor fashioned into a systematic argument. Toye admits as much in several places, which also leaves him at times to conclude the obvious: "[Churchill's] speeches, from the beginning, did make many people more optimistic, but initially they

made plenty of others feel pessimistic too. The broadcaster did not send an instantaneous thrill through everyone, and they at first attracted a fair amount of criticism, of varying degrees of thoughtfulness" (71). One assumes a few grumblers and malcontents as well amongst the crowds surrounding Pericles and Lincoln. Further, the author several times suggests that historians have unanimously acclaimed the "almost mystical power of Churchill's oratory" (11) without ever naming one scholar who has done so. Still, if Toye has not succeeded in toppling the prime minister's oratorical reputation, he does offer valuable and unique insights into the composition, delivery, and reception of Churchill's speeches.

