

# Introduction: Sea Power in the Age of Churchill

Winston Churchill enjoyed a longer and closer relationship with the Royal Navy than any British politician of the twentieth century. In 1911, at the relatively young age of thirty-six, Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, the political head of the British navy. He threw himself into the task of preparing the service for war, and presided over its fortunes until May 1915, when a political crisis, partly of his own making, drove him from office in disgrace. His reputation as a strategist and war leader was badly damaged by his prominent role in the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign, although his political career soon revived. Churchill's part in the Dardanelles was eventually overshadowed in the public mind by his warnings about Adolf Hitler and high-profile fight for rearmament during the 1930s. Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty again on 3 September 1939, the day Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, but he remained at this post less than a year, during which time he presided over a second failed campaign, this time in Norway. This new disaster evoked memories of the Dardanelles and sparked another political crisis, but rather than being cast back into the political wilderness, as some observers hoped, Churchill emerged as prime minister. Acting as his own Minister of Defence, he shaped British grand strategy and oversaw all three fighting services for the duration of the Second World War.

Churchill's influence over the Royal Navy was not limited to his time in these offices. He helped to guide its fortunes in every Cabinet post he held over the course of his long career, and could claim some influence even when out of office. The navy felt the effects of Churchill in many areas over the years. Prior to the First World War, for example, he was responsible for completing the fleet's conversion from coal to oil; he oversaw the creation of the Admiralty's first fully fledged naval staff; he worked to improve conditions for seamen and non-commissioned officers (i.e. the 'Lower Deck');

and he opened up opportunities for naval ratings to become commissioned officers. There was no area that Churchill regarded as off-limits. As one officer recalled, Churchill's 'curiosity about the service for which he was responsible seemed to many of the older officers almost indecent'.<sup>1</sup> The famous quip that naval tradition amounted to nothing but 'rum, sodomy, and the lash' may not have been uttered by Churchill, but it nicely captures his impatient and irreverent attitude towards the service.<sup>2</sup> As First Lord, and even as prime minister, he did not hesitate to voice strong opinions on professional matters that civilian leaders typically steered clear of, such as warship design and naval strategy. Admiral Sir Reginald 'Blinker' Hall, the legendary Director of Naval Intelligence, observed that 'Even in matters of the extremest technicality [Churchill] would insist on elaborate presentation of his own views, and his powers of argument were so extraordinary that again and again tired Admiralty officials were hypnotised—I can think of no better word—into accepting opinions which differed vastly from those they normally held.'<sup>3</sup>

There are few aspects of Churchill's career that have not generated controversy, and his relationship with the navy is no exception. Inside the service, opinion on Churchill was invariably divided. Within months of arriving at the Admiralty in 1911, his forceful and sometimes unorthodox methods were already beginning to raise concerns. One officer, Captain Osmond de Beauvoir Brock, then the Assistant Director of Naval Mobilisation, observed at the time that 'the new 1st Lord is a young man in a hurry & what is more he is—in his opinion—a heaven born strategist both military & naval; whether all his schemes are quite sound I shouldn't like to say, but I do know that those which have come this way bear traces of great haste & little thought.'<sup>4</sup> In both world wars Churchill gained a reputation for pressing reckless and impractical schemes on his naval advisers, for demanding constant action, and for dealing harshly with officers who failed to meet his expectations. He also took a far more active role in shaping strategy and directing operations at sea than was normal for civilian leaders.

Given the force of Churchill's personality and propensity to intervene in all aspects of naval business, it is not surprising that naval leaders were often agitated. 'Mr Churchill proved himself to be a very clever and able First Lord in some directions,' wrote Admiral Sir John Jellicoe after the First World War, 'but his fatal error was his inability to realize his own limitations as a civilian with, it is true, some early experience of military service but quite ignorant of naval affairs.'<sup>5</sup> Similar views were expressed during the

Second World War. Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, Britain's First Sea Lord—i.e. the professional head of the navy—during the first four years of the conflict, confided to a colleague in 1940 that Churchill was 'quite impervious to arguments and sweeps them aside as if they did not exist'. His successor, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, complained the following year that Churchill was 'a bad strategist but doesn't know it and no one has the courage to stand up to him'. Admiral John Tovey, commander of Britain's Home Fleet, remarked that 'as a strategist and tactician' Churchill was 'liable to be most dangerous. He loves the dramatic and public acclimation. He has, to my knowledge, put up some wild schemes.' Looking back after the war, Admiral Sir William Davis concluded that Churchill 'thought he had a special knowledge and flair for handling matters maritime—alas many of his suggestions & ideas were juvenile & ill judged in the extreme'.<sup>6</sup>

But Britain's naval leaders of the Second World War were also quick to acknowledge Churchill's positive attributes, and invariably concluded that these outweighed his defects. Admiral Pound, for example, maintained that Churchill was 'so magnificent in many ways and the ideal leader of the Nation in these times that I must put up with his idiosyncrasies'. As First Sea Lord, Cunningham confided to his diary in 1944 that 'It would be a tragedy if anything should happen to him now. With all his faults (& he is the most infuriating man) he has done a great job for the country & besides there is no one else.'<sup>7</sup> Admiral Tovey conceded that Churchill 'as Prime Minister is magnificent and unique'. Davis insisted that his criticisms 'must not detract from the greatness and grandeur of the old man', while Admiral Sir Reginald Drax concluded that the 'greatest commanders all make some mistakes in war and Churchill made fewer than most. His greatest quality however, which we all admired immensely, was his splendid leadership, his daunting courage and his inflexible determination that nothing could or should prevent us from winning the War.'<sup>8</sup>

As might be expected, Churchill has usually been judged according to the success or failure of his actions in wartime. However, no consensus has emerged on his record as a naval strategist. To his harshest critics, Churchill was a dismal failure. The inability of the navy to force the Dardanelles and the subsequent deadlock on the Gallipoli Peninsula are often treated as the first manifestation of an incompetence that led directly to the embarrassing defeat in Norway in 1940 and the needless loss of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* to Japanese aircraft in December 1941. If not for the resistance of his professional advisers, Churchill, it is argued, would

have forced even more wild and reckless schemes on the navy, with inevitably disastrous results. This school of thought holds that Churchill also exercised a destructive influence in peacetime. His efforts as Chancellor of the Exchequer during the 1920s to reduce naval expenditure have been treated as evidence of a dangerous inconsistency, a blindness to emerging threats, and a fundamentally poor grasp of strategy. Not only did he emasculate the navy, his critics claim, he was also responsible, through the propagation of the infamous 'Ten Year Rule', for the poor state of Britain's defences during the 1930s and the early stages of the Second World War.

Churchill's admirers, on the other hand, have no difficulty painting a more flattering portrait. In their version of events, Gallipoli was the one brilliant and original strategic initiative of the First World War. If it had succeeded, Britain might have avoided the stagnation and bloodshed of the Western Front and dramatically shortened the war. Its failure, they argue, was not Churchill's fault: his vision was undermined by less capable colleagues and inept subordinates. Churchill's attacks on defence expenditure during the 1920s are easily dismissed as an unfortunate by-product of the single-minded determination that would save Britain from disaster in 1940. After all, Chancellors of the Exchequer are *supposed* to reduce defence expenditure: Churchill's only fault was to do his job too well. Any negative effects of his cost-cutting in the 1920s were more than offset by his early recognition of the German danger and campaign to rearm Britain. As First Lord of the Admiralty in the Second World War, Churchill's boldness is contrasted with the hesitation and indecisiveness of Neville Chamberlain and other members of the War Cabinet. And, while Churchill may have made mistakes in Norway and other campaigns, they pale in comparison with his inspiring leadership after the fall of France in the summer of 1940, and the overall soundness of his strategic vision.

The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. This book aims to reach a balanced verdict on Churchill's record as a naval strategist and the most influential custodian of Britain's sea power during the modern era. To do so, it is necessary first to strip away much of the baggage that has accumulated over the last eighty years, beginning with Churchill's own highly influential accounts of the two world wars.<sup>9</sup> Recent scholarship has shown how effectively Churchill established the case for his own defence and set the parameters for much of the subsequent debate over the origins and course of the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> But the early publication of his memoirs did not always work to his advantage. In the case of the war at sea, Churchill

failed to anticipate many of the criticisms that would be raised, leaving his detractors with a relatively open field. The main outlines of the case against him were firmly established during the 1950s by Captain Stephen Roskill, a recently retired naval officer who was chosen to prepare the British official history of naval operations in the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Roskill's *The War at Sea* was unusually critical for an official publication, especially considering that Churchill was again prime minister when the first volume appeared in 1954. Roskill grudgingly submitted to pressure from the Cabinet Office to tone down his criticisms, but there were limits to how far he would go. As a result, volume one of the navy's official history contained two explicit criticisms of Churchill: that he intervened excessively in naval operations during the Norwegian campaign; and that he overruled his naval advisers and despatched the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore on the eve of war because he did not grasp the principles of naval strategy.

Roskill's work on the navy's official history established his reputation as a formidable naval historian. His credentials were seemingly unassailable: he could draw on his unrivalled access to official documents, an extensive post-war correspondence with leading naval personalities, and his own experience on the naval staff during the Second World War. His criticisms of Churchill, written at a time when the British government's archives were closed to researchers, were highly influential. In a later book, *Churchill and the Admirals*, Roskill developed a more elaborate indictment of Britain's wartime leader. This work focused on Churchill's sometimes turbulent relationships with his leading naval advisers, and detailed controversial episodes that could not be fully treated in the official history. The list of mistakes attributed to Churchill is a long one. In addition to the Norwegian fiasco and the loss of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, Roskill maintained that Churchill's obsession with offensive operations led him to divert critical resources from the Battle of the Atlantic to the strategic bombing campaign against Germany. The book was not designed to give a balanced assessment of Churchill's relationship with the navy, however; Roskill saw it as an opportunity to address subjects that he had not been free to treat in his earlier work, and to correct what he saw as an overly favourable popular perception of Churchill as a war leader. The emphasis was therefore on controversial subjects, and he largely glossed over or ignored areas where Churchill's influence was either harmless or positive.

Roskill's criticisms of Churchill have been widely regarded as authoritative—so much so, in fact, that they have seldom been subjected to

rigorous analysis. But historians have not just accepted Roskill's interpretations: they have embellished them and, in many cases, amplified and distorted them. Thus, what began in the 1950s as relatively moderate criticism of Churchill for exceeding his authority during the Norwegian campaign, has gradually transformed into charges that his meddling and poor strategic judgement were largely, if not solely, responsible for Britain's defeat there. Virtually every misstep and miscalculation during this campaign has been attributed directly to Churchill at one time or another, even when unsupported by the documentary evidence.

This same trend is evident in recent writing on all aspects of Churchill's career. The passage of time has only served to heighten the prominence assigned to the greatest wartime prime minister in modern British history. While other politicians, statesmen, and warriors—many of them prominent figures in their own time—have virtually disappeared from the public's memory, Churchill's stock has steadily risen. The temptation always to place him at the centre of events—and to push other decision-makers to the sidelines—seems to be overwhelming. British strategic foreign policy during the 1930s is sometimes reduced to little more than a struggle between Churchill and Neville Chamberlain, and the summer of 1940 to a personal duel between Churchill and Hitler. Even during the war Churchill was widely viewed abroad as the personification of Britain's heroic resistance to Nazism, and this close association of the nation's collective war effort with its famous leader has only grown stronger over time. The popular narrative of this period has become highly personalized: the nation's history and Churchill's personal history are now more closely intertwined than ever.

Churchill himself is partly responsible for this. Through his memoirs and journalistic writings he constructed a simple and compelling narrative of critical events in the nation's history, with himself always at centre stage. He painted himself as a bold, dynamic leader, a far-sighted statesman, and a skilled strategist. In the summer of 1940, Churchill's self-image seemed almost to match reality. He became, for a time, the heroic figure he had always longed to be. And because of this, his view of British history and his role in it have been accorded a privileged place by both the public and historians for generations. This has been good for Churchill's reputation, but it has seldom made for good history. The romantic and personalized narrative Churchill constructed was never going to survive close examination, and historians have been chipping away at it for years. Churchill's almost mythical status continues to find fervent supporters, but it has also generated a

strong, often exaggerated, backlash. Those who would defend Churchill's every action are increasingly confronted by debunkers and iconoclasts just as eager to find fault. But both sides of this debate seem implicitly to agree on one thing: that Churchill was *the* driving force in British policy- and strategy-making during the periods he was in office.

Demythologizing Churchill is no easy task. The Churchillian view of British history is now firmly entrenched, and much cherished. It also contains more than a kernel of truth. Churchill *was* often present at critical moments, and he wielded a great deal of power and influence throughout his long and remarkable career. At times, his impact on the course of events was tremendous, and the role he played was unique. It would be just as wrong to write him out of the story as it is to give him undue prominence. The challenge, then, is to strip away the myths, to give other historical actors their due, and to recognize that Churchill was sometimes a supporting character rather than the lead. The figure that emerges from this process is more human, more fallible, and less influential, but hardly less impressive.

A re-examination of Churchill's record as a naval strategist serves several purposes. To begin with, it provides an opportunity to reconsider his role in a number of important and controversial episodes, to resolve conflicting interpretations, and to debunk a variety of myths that have gained currency. This book offers a new interpretation of Churchill's tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer during the 1920s, of his influence during the Norwegian campaign, and of his direction of British strategy as prime minister during the Second World War, particularly his policies relating to the Far East and the Battle of the Atlantic. Churchill made many mistakes over the course of his career, some of them costly and avoidable. The goal here is not to absolve him of blame, but to understand his motives, assess the extent of his responsibility, and evaluate the soundness of charges that have been levelled against him.

Churchill emerges from this process with his reputation generally enhanced. In part this is because some criticisms have been exaggerated or distorted, and some are simply not supported by the evidence. As long as Churchill is treated as the only decision-maker who mattered, it is easy to assume that he was solely to blame when things went wrong, or that any mistakes he made must have had momentous results. There is also a tendency to oversimplify Churchill's motives, which were usually more complex than historians have recognized. By reconstructing his views and taking into consideration the decision-making process as a whole, a more sympathetic

picture usually emerges. However, there are exceptions. Some of Churchill's mistakes have attracted little attention. This is particularly true of the Battle of the Atlantic. Churchill's post-war claims that he was constantly worried about the U-boat threat and gave it his full attention are both inaccurate and misleading, yet they have been widely accepted as fact. Churchill's interest in the German attack on British trade actually fluctuated considerably. He consistently kept the navy short of air support in order to bolster the strategic bomber offensive against Germany, and he was perfectly willing to accept heavy losses to merchant shipping—and consequently a severe reduction in imports—so that he might maximize Britain's immediate offensive capabilities. Churchill clung to this policy despite mounting evidence that the Royal Air Force was not inflicting decisive damage on Germany. It was only when this strategy threatened to reduce British imports to critical levels and disrupt Anglo-American strategic plans that Churchill finally gave the anti-U-boat campaign his full attention and ensured that the necessary resources were allocated to it. Curiously, however, little blame has been directed at Churchill for prolonging the Battle of the Atlantic.

This study also addresses claims that Churchill attempted to initiate a 'naval revolution' prior to the First World War. Revisionist naval historians have argued that Churchill, inspired by Admiral Sir John ('Jacky') Fisher's radical views on submarines, secretly decided in 1914 to abandon Britain's battleship standard in favour of 'flotilla defence'.<sup>12</sup> This policy would have seen Britain protected from invasion by submarines and other flotilla vessels, while capital ships were freed up for the protection of British trade and overseas possessions. These claims do not withstand close scrutiny, however. Churchill was undoubtedly enthusiastic about the future of the submarine, as the revisionists have shown, and he was even willing to consider 'flotilla defence' as a means to protect British interests in a subsidiary theatre like the Mediterranean. But this study will show that he was not prepared in 1914 to abandon the capital ship as the Royal Navy's ultimate defence against the naval challenge from Wilhelmine Germany.

A critical examination of Churchill's role as a steward of the Royal Navy also makes it possible to measure his long-term impact on British sea power. Navies are particularly expensive institutions to build and maintain. They rely on a large and technologically advanced industrial infrastructure to provide warships and weapons systems. They require a network of bases and extensive logistical capabilities to project their power globally. And they need to be supplied with highly skilled personnel. As a rule, none of these



things can be improvised in a hurry; they required then, as they do now, a deliberate and long-term commitment by the state. This, in turn, requires that the nation's leaders recognize the value of sea power and possess both the resources and the will to maintain it. The need to invest continually in the industrial underpinnings of British sea power largely escaped Churchill, as it did most British politicians of this era. When he left office in 1945, Britain's resources were no longer adequate to the task. The explanation most commonly offered for the country's demise as the world's dominant maritime power is economic decline, but this does not fully explain the erosion of Britain's sea power over the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> British leaders also took deliberate decisions during the period that gradually but steadily undermined the nation's strength at sea.

Churchill took a leading role in this process, although the part he played has attracted little attention. It was not, of course, something that he wished to call attention to. He was conscious, like other politicians of this period, that the Royal Navy was not only popular, but also occupied a prominent place in British national mythology. He also had a genuine affection for the Royal Navy. But for all his romantic rhetoric about Britain's glorious naval past, Churchill's views on the utility of sea power in the modern era were unsentimental and pragmatic. They also evolved continuously over the course of his career in response to shifting geopolitical and technological developments. Churchill's early faith in the navy as a potent and decisive weapon was badly shaken by the navy's inability to strike a decisive blow against Britain's enemies during the First World War. After that conflict, he developed doubts about Britain's ability to protect its interests in the Far East against Japan through sea power alone. The rise of Nazi Germany during the 1930s began to reorient his strategic thinking towards air power as the foundation of Britain's future security.

Churchill came to view the navy as a predominantly defensive weapon. This was confirmed by his experiences during the early stages of the Second World War, when he was frustrated in his efforts to find an offensive role for the navy. After the fall of France in 1940, it was clear that Germany was immune to economic pressure exercised through maritime blockade. By the end of 1941, it was equally clear that amphibious raids could do little to challenge Germany's domination of Europe, and that the navy alone could not exert decisive pressure against even a second-tier power like Italy. Churchill concluded that the navy should only be maintained at the lowest level necessary to fulfil its essential defensive functions, and that national

resources should be channelled as far as possible towards the other services, and particularly the air force, to enhance Britain's offensive power. As prime minister during the Second World War, Churchill did not just neglect the foundations of Britain's sea power: he willingly sacrificed the nation's maritime interests in the pursuit of victory over Nazi Germany, and in so doing hastened the process by which the United States replaced Britain as the world's greatest maritime power.