

Sheila Lawlor. *Churchill and the Politics of War, 1940-1941*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xvi, 270. Cloth, \$69.95. ISBN 0-521-44545-0. Paper, \$19.95. ISBN 0-521-46685-7.

The first ten months of Winston Churchill's wartime leadership of Great Britain, from May 1940 to March 1941, are frequently portrayed as a heroic prologue to the Allied war effort, a period in which Churchill, having replaced Neville Chamberlain as prime minister, soothed all internal political discord, boldly directed Britain's solitary war against Germany, and came to the forefront as a man of destiny. In *Churchill and the Politics of War, 1940-1941*, Sheila Lawlor has set these months apart from their traditional context in order to reveal that, contrary to the orthodox historical view, the Churchill government was no freer of conflicting interests, factionalism, and vacillation than the preceding governments.

Shortly after becoming prime minister, Churchill faced the invasion and fall of France, the Battle of Britain, and crucial decisions of strategy concerning Britain's role in Europe, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Lawlor provides a summary of the 1930s and then focuses upon each of these areas, using excerpts from contemporary sources to illustrate the views of the principal figures, including Churchill, Halifax, Chamberlain, Eden, and others. These excerpts show that Churchill's government was not seamless; like so many others, it operated by compromise and expediency. Nor were its wartime policies always dictated by Churchill's celebrated resolve and fighting spirit; on many occasions, Churchill and his colleagues had to settle for the least-disastrous of poor choices. In early 1941, for instance, Churchill vacillated over the advisability of sending troops to Greece and decided that such an investment would be a costly mistake. Almost immediately, he received word that Eden, then in Athens, had signed an agreement with the Greeks, committing the British to intervention. The decision having been made, Churchill abandoned his doubts and threw his support behind Eden's actions.

The author's discussion of the historiography of this period is particularly interesting. Churchill consistently acted with a vigilant eye upon his own historical image and, from the first, carefully fostered the romantic notion that he was destined to lead Britain as the non-partisan proponent of a new political and moral order, to stand against the reactionary establishment, and to lead the war against Fascism. He chose always to appear in the guise of patriot rather than politician and was meticulous about maintaining that well-constructed popular image. In reality, Churchill was not only an astute political maneuverer, but a genius at public relations. Lawlor points out that Churchill's own accounts, notably *The Second World War*, further cultivated the mythology he had engineered. These accounts have influenced later historians to such an extent that Churchill's interpretation of his role is the one generally accepted, even by the revisionists.

Lawlor's convincing reappraisal, an extension of her Cambridge doctoral dissertation, is based upon impressive research in government documents, memoirs, and private papers. Her bibliography includes an exhaustive list of published and unpublished contemporary sources which should be valuable to advanced students of Churchill or World War II. Parts of this work may be visually difficult to read, however, as the author cobbles together short excerpts of quotations into a "mosaic" of snippets from the various sources, "to provide the wider picture." Lawlor's analyses are most effective when they appear in her own voice. *Churchill and the Politics of War, 1940-1941* provides a revealing assessment of Churchill's wartime leadership. As some historical background is required, this work is recommended as a supplement or for advanced or college courses.

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Teaching History 20(2). DOI: 10.33043/TH.20.2.103. ©1995 Jan Jenkins