Opinion
News
NCR Voices



Then-British Prime Minister Winston Churchill doffs his hat as he takes the salute as the Civil Service Home Guard marches by him on review on the Horse Guards Parade, Sept. 17, 1942. (AP photo)



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It is a regrettable fact of secular history that its key inflection points are wars. We might wish it were otherwise, but it isn't and so we ignore the study of war and its relation to political developments at our peril.

Military historian Anthony Tucker-Jones' book *Churchill: Master and Commander, Winston Churchill at War, 1895-1945* examines the great man's experiences of, and involvement with, the many wars that shaped his career. It is an important read not just for admirers of Churchill, but for anyone who wants to understand how the moral challenges posed by war were profoundly changed by the technological developments of the first half of the 20th century.

Churchill's first experiences of war came, in part, as a journalist when he went to Cuba as both a war correspondent and an official observer for the British government. The experience thrilled him, and for the next few years Churchill traveled to the front lines in the Sudan, then in Afghanistan, and finally in South Africa, each time blurring the lines between combatant and journalist. It was in the last conflict that he was captured, and after successfully escaping a prisoner of war camp and traversing hundreds of miles of enemy territory, the escapade made him a celebrity. He stayed on, now as a military man, to join the victorious British forces when they lifted the siege of Ladysmith and affected the conquest of Pretoria.

These different experiences offered lessons Churchill would imbibe, refine and deploy later in life. For example, in Cuba, "although Churchill thought highly of the performance of the Spanish troops, he was dismayed that they then threw away the initiative and did not pursue the retreating rebels," Tucker-Jones observes. "He could not understand why, after ten days of enduring all sorts of hardship, they were content just taking a low hill."

In South Africa, Churchill was impressed by the effectiveness of the Boers' small raiding parties, which were able to attack the larger, less mobile British forces and cause significant damage, if not alter the overall trajectory of the conflict. Later, this

impression would form the basis of his insistence on and support for commando operations in World War II.

Churchill also learned how to make a living during these years. In addition to filing articles from the war zones, he would compile them into book form when he finished. "This was a doubling-up technique he was to employ for the rest of his life," Tucker-Jones notes. This attention to the craft of writing would serve the future prime minister well when he "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle" as Edward R. Murrow said of his speeches in the dark days of 1940.

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The future prime minister turned his celebrity towards politics and entered parliament in 1901 at age 25. Popular and pushy, he made his way into the Cabinet and by the outbreak of the First World War, Churchill was first lord of the Admiralty, equivalent to our U.S. secretary of the Navy. In that post, he led the "landship committee," which oversaw the development of the modern tank because the British army was not yet interested in the idea of armored vehicles.

Churchill also championed an attack at Gallipoli, where a British attempt to force the Dardanelles, take Constantinople and open a sea route to its ally Russia came to naught. The episode stalked his reputation for years, but the failure of the operation was more the result of a lack of inter-service cooperation, and the ambivalent support for the operation from Gen. Herbert Kitchener, secretary of state for war at the time. Churchill drew two lessons from the fiasco. First, that people are ill-advised to try and launch a cardinal operation from a subordinate position. Second, that in wartime, the government needed one person with authority over the whole scene, someone who could demand cooperation from the different services. Consequently, in May 1940, when he became prime minister, Churchill also gave himself the title "minister of defense." The British Constitution being less rigid than our own, he preferred not to define the duties or rights that attended this new job title. When, for years later, it came time to cross the Channel and storm the beaches of Normandy, the vast military operation was mostly unmarred by the kinds of rivalries that had doomed the effort to force the Dardanelles 30 years prior.

Tucker-Jones ably considers the criticism and the praise of Churchill's wartime leadership. He had been wrong about India, wrong about Ireland, wrong about free

trade, but he was right about Hitler at a time when almost no one else was, and that turned out to be the most consequential issue of the 20th century. It does not excuse the many miscues and mistakes he oversaw.

One mistake stands out as significantly larger than the others from a moral perspective: Churchill agreed to the indiscriminate bombing of German and later Japanese cities. Tucker-Jones relates that, at first, Churchill was reluctant to approve the bombing of urban centers, and how, on March 14, 1933, he had said in the House of Commons that any country that "threw its bombs upon cities so as to kill as many women and children as possible … had committed the greatest crime." But, when the war came, Air Chief Marshall Charles Portal and, later, Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, wore him down, arguing that strategic bombing could break the will of the German nation.

Churchill knew better — and so did his military advisers. The indiscriminate bombing of London during the Blitz had not broken the will of the British people. Yet, he went along with his military advisers, who really had no better argument for the indiscriminate bombing campaign than the fact that they had not mastered precision bombing of military targets. It is hard not to read these painful accounts of the decision-making in Whitehall and conclude they are so much rationalization of the urge to revenge.

World War II finished with the horror of the nuclear mushroom clouds over Japan, and the prospect of yet more powerful nuclear weapons. So, it is understandable that in the postwar era, the focus of moral attention was to prevent a nuclear holocaust. But those killed by the firebombing of Tokyo and Dresden were just as dead as the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tucker-Jones' book does not consider, but it does invite, this question: Might not the world have been better served if, in the postwar era, the focus of moral concern had been to eliminate bombing any civilian targets, especially from the air, rather than on the unique horror of nuclear weapons? Might the suffering in Ukraine today have been less severe if the injunction against targeting civilians, which is a pillar of just war teaching, had been the central focus of moral analysis, rather than the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons?

It is impossible to answer such hypotheticals, but they do stir the intellect and the moral sense. Murder and war as are as old as humankind, and we ignore the lessons previous wars teach us at our peril. Some of those lessons are the provenance of military historians, while others require moral analysis, and the two intertwine

extensively and in ways that are complicated. Tucker-Jones' achievement in this book is to relate, sympathetically but not uncritically, with attention to the contingencies of the time and place, how the outstanding personage of the 20th century wrestled with these issues throughout his life. That is no small achievement. This is a very fine book.