

'BRILLIANTLY INSIGHTFUL AND UTTERLY COMPELLING' JAMES HOLLAND

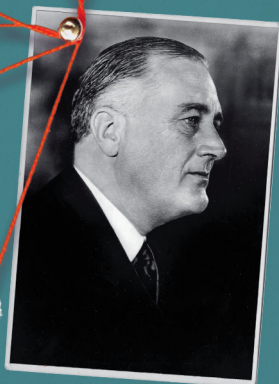
Phillips Payson O'Brien



CHURCHILL,
STALIN,
ROOSEVELT,



MUSSOLINI
AND
HITLER



THE STRATEGISTS

HOW WAR MADE THEM AND HOW THEY MADE WAR

The Strategists

The Strategists

*Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini and
Hitler – How War Made Them
and How They Made War*

PHILLIPS PAYSON O'BRIEN

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For Payson
May you know as little as possible about war

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Introduction

Strategy, War and Personality

On 29 October 1941, as Adolf Hitler picked at his ostentatiously simple vegetarian dinner and sipped his favourite fizzy mineral water, his mind raced. He could taste victory, the greatest triumph in military history. German troops had just captured almost three-quarters of a million Soviet soldiers around the city of Kyiv, the last of a series of smashing defeats inflicted on Joseph Stalin's Red Army since the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, on 22 June. From his spartan, bug-ridden headquarters in East Prussia, codenamed Wolfsschanze (Wolf's Lair), Hitler saw the unfolding campaign as confirmation of his own genius. Only his daring and strategic vision, he believed, could have brought his nation to this precipice of victory. Soon Germany would have a massive new empire in which to settle genetically healthy Germans, while wiping out anyone or anything that stood in Hitler's way.

With ideas cascading in his head, Hitler had taken to giving long monologues to hand-picked military officers and political cronies, who sat obediently at his dinner table. On this night, Hitler's guests included Günther von Kluge, a Prussian-born field marshal whose military service had commenced in 1901. Von Kluge was commander of the 4th German Army, one of the most powerful forces attacking the Soviet Union. As Hitler well knew, even as the German Army as a whole was winning battles, some senior commanders were worried that these victories were drawing their troops ever further into the unconquerable vastness of Russia, threatening to buckle the entire German logistical system.

Major problems were appearing for the Germans on both rail and road. Since the days of Tsarist Russia, railway lines in the Soviet Union had been built with a wider gauge than those of the rest of Europe. Knowing this, the Germans had hoped to capture Soviet railcars to keep supplies moving forward as quickly as possible.

Soviet forces, however, withdrew almost all their locomotives as the Germans advanced, and destroyed as much railway infrastructure as they could. Thus, the Germans were left with the laborious and time-consuming task of rebuilding the Soviet railway system to run their own trains and keep up their advance. It slowed their pace considerably.

The Germans were also running short of trucks. On paper, the German Army was one of the most advanced in the world. The troops that invaded Russia were carried in 600,000 motorized vehicles. But it was a motley force, drawn from across a conquered continent, and needed a wide array of tyres and spare parts, to say nothing of fuel, to keep going. There were far too few German-made military-grade trucks – the backbone needed to supply large, armoured breakthroughs and maintain a constant tempo of operations.

As the German Army struggled with both rail and road control, supplying troops scattered across a thousand-mile front was becoming a logistical nightmare. With trains stymied and trucks scarce, the Germans were forced to take long operational pauses to allow the supply situation to be rectified. Hitler, however, did not seem concerned. Mobility, he insisted, was overrated. ‘It’s the infantryman who, when all’s said, sets the tempo of operations with his legs,’ he informed his audience that night. He instructed them to focus on providing more and more firepower to the army to allow the German soldier to blast through any enemy, and stop worrying about moving too quickly. After all, ‘in the choice between mobility and power, the decision . . . is given too easily in favour of mobility’.¹

Adolf Hitler’s confidence was rooted in a conviction that he understood modern war. After all, he was no stranger to the battlefield. As a corporal in a Bavarian regiment, Hitler had spent almost all of World War I on the Western Front. Serving mostly as a dispatch runner, he was wounded during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and in 1918 was temporarily blinded by a British mustard gas attack. Such experiences had physically and psychologically scarred millions of soldiers, but Hitler looked upon the war as the most wonderful and meaningful experience of his life. Prior to the conflict, he had been a drifter with no prospects. The German Army and the war gave him

purpose, and he devoted himself to both, revelling in his new-found sense of direction.

World War I also stamped him indelibly with strategic ideas he would bring to World War II. One of them was that firepower and armoured protection were more important than speed and mobility. As a soldier he had marvelled at the largest German howitzers and mortars and became convinced that heavy steel was the way to victory. When, in 1918, he first came across tanks, adopted by German forces in response to the British Mark I, Hitler quickly found a preference for the biggest and strongest over the fastest with the longer range – hardly a surprise for a foot soldier in a trench war. As he told his audience in 1941, in the trenches he had learned that ‘only the heaviest and most thickly armoured tank had any value’.² As a dictator, he took this prejudice and forced it on the modern German Army. The next year, during another evening monologue, Hitler boasted how he had overruled those who insisted that ‘light and fast’ vehicles had value and ‘after a hard struggle, I imposed my will and ordered the manufacture of heavy tanks’.³

Hitler’s fetish for the heaviest and most powerful, and his disinterest in mobility and logistics, had a major impact on how World War II developed. The German armies, which he created and threw into battle, were woefully short of light vehicles and trucks, while large and inefficient investments were made in building ever heavier and more powerful tanks. Indeed, German industry developed some of the most awesome and complex tanks in the world, including the Panther, the Tiger, and the behemoth Tiger II, known to Allied troops as the King Tiger, whose heavy armour and massive long-range gun gave it a fearsome presence in combat. Yet the sheer size and technological complexity of these lumbering fortresses meant that Germany could only manufacture a small number of them when compared to the more robust and speedier Allied tanks. The stress Hitler placed on German industry to produce heavy tanks meant fewer resources to build trucks and other support vehicles; as a result, German troops were chronically short. The Wehrmacht often relied on horse-drawn vehicles to keep itself supplied and moving. The German Army may have had a great punch concentrated in a few

armoured units, but there was a surprisingly weak body of foot soldiers, supplied by horse.

As Hitler was pontificating in late October 1941, he was about to receive a lesson in the consequences of this lack of mobility. A month later, the German Army would fail before the gates of Moscow, its advance halted by supply problems, exacerbated by a Russian winter and a Red Army counterattack. Hitler, however, refused to learn from this lesson, and instead doubled down on his own perceived brilliance and understanding of war. Because of his fixation on power over speed – and his refusal to adapt – within a year the German Army would be on the defensive in every theatre of war. Two and a half years after that, Hitler would shoot himself while completely immobile, entombed in a concrete fortress hidden deep below the streets of Berlin.

The central role that Hitler played in determining German strategy throughout the war, with his particular prejudices, irrationalities and fundamental errors, does not fit easily into how we see grand-strategy-making, or foreign policymaking in general, in a modern state. There is a widespread discussion in militaries, governments and universities that likes to see strategy as emerging from a linked process of ‘ends-ways-means’. In this Clausewitzian world, strategic choice is seen as the pursuit of a clear political end through the employment of the means available to a state (such as its military force) in certain well-thought-out methods (the ways). It seems logical in theory, but as Hitler – and indeed all the dominant grand strategists of World War II – demonstrated, it’s typically a mirage.

In many cases that is because strategy, grand or otherwise, has been turned into something more complex than it actually is. A strategy is simply an implemented decision which starts a dynamic process. For the purposes of this book, the strategic decision is the choice by the leader, with or without the opinions of advisers, of the strategic plan that the state should follow. The implementation is the translation of that plan into action. This second step can be messy and disruptive at times, particularly in peace during moments of weak leadership. In the cases of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt in World War II, the bureau-

cratic checks that we like to think of as limiting leadership were often ineffective. The five were strong, ego-driven leaders, and often they were able to see their strategic plans put into action. In many cases they either crushed any possible bureaucratic challenges to their power, as did Hitler and Stalin, or they outmanoeuvred other power centres (government offices, political rivals, their militaries) that could have thwarted the implementation of a strategy that they wanted, as in the case of Roosevelt.

Once the strategic decision has been implemented, the process is far from over. The enemy always has a say and all strategies remain dynamic and subject to rapid changes or even destruction. A sign of a successful strategist and strategy is one that can cope with this process of challenge and change. This was in many ways the greatest test of the Five. If all of them usually got their way in getting their strategic choices adopted as policy, in many cases those choices had to be changed when confronted by an enemy response. Stalin's greatest advantage over Hitler was that, while both were bloodthirsty dictators with an innate desire to control as much as possible, he learned to respond practically when the reality of the war did not correspond to his expectations. Hitler, if anything, became worse at adjusting his strategies to reality when confronted with failure.

The difference between grand strategy and strategy, using World War II as a model, can be simply defined. To be considered an issue of grand strategy, two basic tests need to be passed. First, to be a 'grand' strategic question the implemented decision must be put into action by an authority that has nothing above it, such as a commander-in-chief or a dictator, to which it must defer. Only a Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Churchill or Roosevelt – for the purposes of this book, they will be called the Five – could make a grand-strategic choice. The second test is that it needs to be for actions above the conduct of operations on the battlefield. In other words, grand strategy is about the creation and allocation of armed forces. The creation step is often terribly understudied, but in many ways the most important, as it determines later choices. The militaries of the great powers were the result of years-long choices, balancing the industrial and technological capabilities of their nations with the personal priorities of their

leadership. One could not just wish up thousands of aircraft, tanks, trucks or naval vessels in a short period; nations had to have workable models in the production stage. In World War II all of these kinds of production choices were dominated by the Five, and reflected their own perceptions. The Allies were able to dominate the air-sea war, for instance, because Churchill from the start of the Battle of Britain prioritized aircraft and naval production, and Roosevelt in 1941 made air-sea weapons his clear priority.

The other part of grand-strategy decision-making in World War II was where to send the finished equipment. Except for Stalin – who had a relatively straightforward allocation situation (everything to the Eastern Front, to fight the Germans in a great land war) – the leaders had to balance different theatres and different types of war. Perhaps the greatest clash between Roosevelt and Churchill was over Churchill's desire to make the Mediterranean the primary area of Allied effort and Roosevelt's desire for a cross-Channel invasion.

Once you go below this level, you have left grand strategy and are in the area of strategy or even tactics. Some of the grand strategists – particularly Hitler, but also at times Mussolini and Stalin – blurred the lines between the two, almost always badly. One of the great tests of grand-strategic leadership is learning what not to do as well as what to do.

If it's not difficult to define grand strategy in World War II, what is murkier is to clearly make a connection between the choices and a definite set of intended ends. The five grand strategists were all riven with prejudices, preferences, irrationalities and mental tics that made their strategic choices highly individualistic, even unstable. When it came to the basic ends of the war, it is not easy to say exactly what they wanted, or whether their ends were remotely achievable. Moreover, the connection between these unstable ends and the ways/means available to them was often tenuous at best. They could create misshapen means, not actually understand the means they helped create, or have little idea how these means would behave when used in different ways. Grand strategy in World War II was made in a chaotic, dynamic situation, not a rational and planned one.

This analysis also directly attacks the idea that states in war are

following something comprehensible such as a national interest or the greater good – even when the structures of government are there to make it look like this is the case. The bureaucracies of each World War II government produced pages and pages of strategy documents, with numbered points, well-reasoned arguments, and in some cases definitive maps of eventual goals that the strategies were meant to obtain. They were almost all meaningless and in some cases were either entirely disregarded or quickly overruled by the Five in action.

The best example of this is easily the most famous strategic idea produced by the United States in World War II: the policy of Germany First, or Europe First. This grand-strategic concept, developed in the years before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, was the consensus view of many in the US military, State Department and the White House. The foundation of Germany First was that the United States, upon entry into the war, should throw the majority of its armed forces against Hitler and leave Japan to be dealt with later. Strategically, the view made some sense. Germany was the larger economic power, with more resources, and was in control of most of the European continent. Germany First was based on the idea that once Germany was defeated, Japan would have no strategic future, but that the defeat of Japan would play little role in driving Hitler out of the war.

Yet at no time did Franklin Roosevelt ensure that the United States followed a Germany First plan, and as such the United States fought a very different war than its strategic planners said that it should. For political and personal reasons, Roosevelt, who paid lip-service to Germany First, was happy to allow the US to divide its forces approximately equally between the Pacific and Europe.⁴ Roosevelt was content to adjust his strategy to the dynamic situation being presented by his enemies, an important sign of why he succeeded. The US would send as much equipment to fight Japan throughout the war as was dispatched to fight Germany.* This is

* In 1942 the United States dispatched considerably more war material (particularly aircraft and naval vessels) to fight Japan than it did to fight Germany. Starting in 1943, the US war effort diverged, with the Army and Army Air Force sending

why implementation matters. A great strategic plan can be announced, but if grand strategists take no steps to make sure it is followed, it cannot be called national strategy. As a rule of thumb, it could even be said that, during World War II, the more detailed a plan, especially if it was written down by a team of practitioners a few layers below the real centres of strategy-making – Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Churchill and Roosevelt – the more unimportant it was.

The Five might have believed that what they were doing was in the best interests of their people – but they were mostly doing what they wanted to do, and used the idea of national interest to justify their decisions, not to make them. This is even the case with Roosevelt, normally seen as the most benign of the Five. He had a very personal policy, in which his individual participation in many ways transcended what was best for the United States. That individual focus can best be seen when in 1944, as he was perceptibly weakening and coming close to death, he chose a new vice president with whom he rarely spoke and in whom he never confided. It was one of the most irresponsible decisions in grand-strategic history.

To demonstrate the personal, as well as the chaotic, nature of the actions of the Five, this book is divided into two sections. The first half covers the creation of their strategic mindsets, and their individual perspectives, by showing how they experienced and reacted to war long before they became the leaders of their respective nations. Beginning with Winston Churchill's first encounter with war as a young soldier in British India, and stretching through World War I then to the end of the Russian Civil War, the war experiences of the Five, along with their emotional and intellectual reactions, will be outlined.

The second part of the book will look at World War II as a series of clashes of these mindsets. The end result will not be an overall model about grand-strategy-making, beyond this focus on the

approximately 70 per cent of its material to fight Germany, while the US Navy sent more than 90 per cent of its material to fight Japan. Overall, the US war effort between 1942 and 1945 would have been spread approximately equally between the European and Pacific theatres.

process of those at the top of the strategic pyramid. In that sense it will bring the study of grand strategy away from the bureaucracies and the well-thought-out, written-down plans and towards the dynamic state of flawed individuals making personal choices.

As this book is being completed, the greatest example of this reality of personal grand-strategy-making is playing out before us. Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, an attempt to create a greater, more powerful Russia, shows once again that grand strategy can be hijacked by deeply flawed individuals over bureaucracies or structures. In no rational world could the Russian invasion of Ukraine be seen as something well thought out or in the Russian national interest. It was poorly conceived, based on a hopeless misreading of Ukrainian intentions and capabilities. The Russian Army was also constructed in such a way that it was far less than the sum of its parts. While Putin might have had an ends-ways-means plan in his own mind, we can say now that he had poorly constructed means, which he employed in wholly unrealistic ways in a vain attempt to achieve completely unrealistic ends. Yet just before the invasion he was considered perhaps the most savvy and intelligent leader of a major power in the world.

Putin's grand-strategic performance has in many ways combined the worst strategic traits of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. In a rational world, with a sober evaluation of the Russian Army, one would have imagined a state's decision-making bureaucracy would have tried to halt his invasion of Ukraine – as one would have imagined the Italian state might have restrained Mussolini from invading Greece, or German influences might have kept Hitler from attacking the Soviet Union with Britain still fighting. Yet the Five were usually not restrained, and for better or worse they did what they wanted.

I. Winston Churchill: The Making of an Imperial Strategist

In September 1897, twenty-two-year-old Winston Churchill first set eyes on the Himalayas. He was entranced, and a little horrified. Raised in the tidy countryside of southern England, he found the topography of north-west India all out of proportion. High slopes were intersected by deep valleys, fertile and green, watered by fish-filled rivers and dotted with prosperous villages swarmed by late-summer butterflies. On the slopes above, the change was stark. The vegetation became stumpy and sparse, eventually thinning out entirely. Constant wash had eroded the soil, exposing black 'primeval' rock.¹ Near the tops of the mountains the ground was completely barren, crowned by masses of jagged rock. It was a difference that would soon be a matter of life and death.

For the first time in his young life, Winston Churchill was going to war. He was joining a campaign of pacification, waged to force the local population to accept British rule. This was the border area of India, Britain's imperial jewel in the crown, and Afghanistan. These valleys were the homeland of numerous Pathan peoples.* For years the British had mostly let the Pathans alone, but now, under their 'Forward Policy', they had recently moved military forces as far north as possible. It was typical imperialist politics; the British wanted to secure the territory before the Russians, who were pushing southwards from central Asia, got too close.

To impose British authority, a series of military outposts were constructed throughout Pathan country. One of these small fortresses controlled the traffic through the Malakand valley, a key route into Afghanistan. On 26 July 1897, local Pathans launched a surprise

* Today the Pathans are known in the English-speaking world as Pashtun, which might mean something to those interested in the continuation of futile wars.

attack against the Malakand camp, lighting a fuse that spread quickly to other valleys. More and more Pathans joined the attempt to drive the occupiers away, and by early August more than 150 British officers and soldiers had been killed or wounded in the fighting.²

When Churchill first heard about the attacks, he was on leave in England. A cavalry lieutenant with the 4th Queen's Own Hussars, then stationed in the south of India, he was desperate to see action and craved notoriety. He quickly pulled every string available in his socially rich shadow box and was taken on board by Sir Bindon Blood, the commander of the expedition sent to break the Pathans. The journey from England to the front was over 10,000 miles by train, boat and then train again, and even though Churchill set off immediately, it took well over a month. He was in such a rush that he left without all the necessary equipment and had to buy important items from the possessions of fellow officers who had just been killed in the fighting.

Churchill's first brush with combat took place on 16 September, when he was attached to a force of about a thousand soldiers whose job it was to 'chastise' the inhabitants of the Mamund valley. This valley was a cul-de-sac – approximately ten miles wide, pan-shaped and framed by rocky ridges. The Pathans of the Mamund, a particularly warlike bunch in British eyes, were to pay the price for joining the fray after the Malakand attacks. British troops were ordered to lay waste to the valley, executing any tribespeople who stood up to them. For Churchill it was 'lion-taming', needed to teach the Pathans about the inherent 'superiority' of the British race.³

The British troops that entered the valley – the majority of whom were Indians themselves, from regiments including the 35th Sikhs, 38th Dogras and 11th Bengal Lancers – believed that one day would be more than enough to inflict this devastation. Many expected that the Pathans, faced with an organized army, would simply run away; and during the first few hours of the day they would have felt rather smug. Starting just before sunrise, the troops advanced methodically along the valley floor. The Pathan fighters, who could see their enemy approach, kept their distance, occasionally waving swords that flashed in the early morning light. They waited until the troops

got close, and then slowly, almost insolently, retreated up the valley slopes. To try to force a fight, the British shot at them as they retreated, but the Pathans would not take the bait. They continued upwards, disappearing into the grey-black moonscape. By mid-morning, with hardly a casualty suffered and no enemy in sight, the British commanders decided to move into the hills. Churchill was attached to a unit of fewer than a hundred men aiming for the village of Shahi-Tangi, which stood at the end of a spur road high up along a ridge, at the end of the valley.

As they approached their objective, everything changed. Human shapes started dropping from much higher up, and five British soldiers were shot in an instant.⁴ The Pathans could move more quickly up and down the ridges than the British troops, and had decided to make a stand. Churchill, exhilarated that he could finally shoot another human being, grabbed a rifle from one of the Sikh soldiers under his command and started to pump round after round into the advancing enemy. Unconcerned with his own safety, he viewed the actions of others pitilessly. Perhaps that was all he could do, because the fighting in the Mamund quickly revealed the brutality of war.

British soldiers executed prisoners who came into their hands and blamed the Pathans for butchering their comrades.⁵ Churchill claimed to have seen British bodies, including one of his friends, savagely hacked to pieces. He considered the shooting of Pathan prisoners an understandable response.⁶ But if the Pathans seemed barbaric to the British, the feeling was more than mutual. For the first time in large-scale combat, British soldiers were armed with soft-nosed dum-dum bullets.* During the nineteenth century, as firearms had become more advanced, with stronger metals, industrially made fittings and more powerful mixtures of gunpowder, they were able to fire rounds with a far greater muzzle velocity. This could make them ineffective. By the 1890s, modern rifles fired hardened metal bullets with such

* They were so nicknamed after the British armoury in India, the Dum-Dum Arsenal, at which they were first developed. It took many years to declare them illegal because the British government waged a lone battle against international opinion, only relenting in 1907.

force that if they did not hit a bone or vital organ, they could pass smoothly through a human being, making only small, non-lethal entry and exit wounds. The dum-dums corrected this 'problem' by using a soft lead tip that would split and tumble in different directions when it hit flesh, gouging out swathes of the innards. Churchill told his grandmother that previously dum-dums had been used only on wild game such as tigers, but they had now decided to use them on the Pathans. They caused the most gruesome injuries, with 'shattering effects . . . which are simply appalling'. Nevertheless, in articles and books he wrote after the event, Churchill went to great lengths to defend their use. He described the dum-dums as having the 'wonderful' impact of a 'beautiful machine'.⁷ The purpose of a bullet was to kill, he pointed out, in which case the dum-dums did their job admirably. Dum-dum-type bullets were declared inhumane and illegal by the Hague Convention in 1899, but the British government refused to accept the decision. They would do so, belatedly, in 1907.⁸

Having access to dum-dums allowed Churchill and the others to stem the first Pathan attack. Armed with a mishmash of firearms – some smuggled, some stolen, some taken from British dead – the Pathans could not produce the sustained firepower of their enemy. Yet, no matter how many Pathans were shot, more and more dropped down from above and it became clear that the British position was in danger of being overrun. Spread out in small detachments throughout the far end of the valley, their entire force was engaged, with no reinforcements available for hard-pressed units such as Churchill's. The decision was made, however humiliating, to retreat.

The way back down the hill was perilous. Struggling to take the wounded and dead with them, the British had to crawl back slowly, with small groups holding off the Pathans while others carried the bodies. If the Pathans shot a carrier, the whole unit had to stop under fire and arrange another group to carry the newly wounded man. Eventually the number of dead and wounded proved too much, and one officer and twelve men were left behind on the hillside to 'be cut to pieces'.⁹ It was not until noon that Churchill's force was back at the beginning of the spur road and in touch with other British forces. Despite being exhausted and now broiling in the midday sun, the

officers determined to return and destroy the village and recover the body of the white officer. A much larger force, six companies, was mustered and ordered up the road. Faced with such force, the Pathans gave way. The British reached Shahi-Tingi by mid-afternoon and wiped the village from the map.

Retreat was once again ordered, and by the following morning, exhausted British forces were outside the valley. The cost was sobering. Of the thousand men who had marched into the Mamund, nine British officers, four Indian officers and 136 soldiers had been killed or wounded. Churchill claimed this was the highest casualty rate that the British had suffered for many years. Instead of admitting that the operation was a fiasco, however, he tried to argue that it was a success. After all, Shahi-Tingi had been destroyed and more than 200 Pathan fighters killed.¹⁰ It was a feeble effort on his part.

Blood, understanding that the Mamund Pathans now had to be broken beyond redemption, sent an entire brigade into the valley on 29 September. He told his men to 'lay it waste with fire and sword in vengeance'.¹¹ They did their job. All day the Mamund echoed with the booms of exploding buildings – so regular they sounded like an artillery barrage. In the end the soldiers levelled fourteen villages and forty different forts, and filled all the wells, broke all the reservoirs, cut down all the trees, and burned all the food and crops they could find. The Pathans, unable to resist such might, sat high up on the hillsides watching their lives below being obliterated.* Churchill supported the use of such terror tactics, telling his mother that the great slaughter of the Pathans had cowed them into submission.¹²

These battles in the Mamund valley were but one small part of a larger and more expensive conflict that went on for months. In private Churchill voiced some doubts about the Forward Policy, which had pushed the British into a position where they had to spend so much treasure defending this distant frontier. This has led some to

* Churchill, as an older man, would write about these operations with a hint of irony, saying that 'honour had been satisfied'. In his public writings at the time, however, he was a strong supporter of the policy of destroying villages. He made an explicit argument for it in his 1898 book *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*.

argue that Churchill was opposed to the whole plan. That is wrong.¹³ Winston Churchill in 1897 believed in only two things with conviction: his own destiny, and that of the British Empire. While he might have been sceptical of some of the finer details of imperial policy, he never wavered in his determination that the British Empire should be as powerful as it could be, and that he was the right person to lead it.

Such self-confidence was no accident. Churchill was raised to be a servant of the empire and, in return, to view the empire as a servant of his greatness. He was born in the only non-royal house in England to be deemed a palace – Blenheim, the Oxfordshire seat of his grandfather, the 7th Duke of Marlborough. The creation of the architect Sir John Vanbrugh, Blenheim was gifted to the 1st Duke of Marlborough by the English government for that most important of acts, beating the French in battle. Three-sided, with soaring heavy towers and grand baroque architecture not offset with the slightest hint of whimsy, its immensity can only really be appreciated at a distance. Up close, its vastness overwhelms. Churchill's father, Randolph, was the third son of the duke. An ambitious, up-and-coming politician in the Conservative Party, from relatively early in his career Randolph was seen as a possible prime minister. Churchill's mother, Jennie, was American, though she much preferred life in refined and sophisticated Europe. Vivacious and alluring, she was the daughter of an alternately successful and bankrupt New York financier, Leonard Jerome. Randolph and Jennie met during a summer holiday in 1873 when he was twenty-four and she nineteen. They were engaged after three days, married after eight months, and Winston was born a little more than seven months after that, on 30 November 1874.

Randolph and Jennie were extremely well suited, both being emotionally stunted. Preferring their pleasures – including horse racing and love affairs – over all else, they spent as little time as possible with their new son. Winston was deposited with nannies, then tutors, and finally at boarding schools (most famously Harrow, which he entered and loathed in 1888). The young boy was desperate for parental affection and wrote them letters begging for visits or even just signs of attention. He was usually disappointed. At one point his mother cut off contact when she became irritated with his pleading,

admonishing him that his tone ‘does not please me’. His father was known to schedule meetings practically next door to where Winston was living, without ever informing his son.*

Churchill was not born into a meritocracy, or else he would have achieved little. As a young man he demonstrated at best modest talents and was prone to laziness. Uninspired by his upbringing, he hated school and studied erratically, receiving marks near the bottom of his class. The only thing that excited him was war. The first surviving letter he wrote to his mother was to thank her for sending him toy soldiers, flags and castles.¹⁴ As soon as he entered Harrow, he joined the school’s Rifle Corps, revelling in the smoke and confusion of the mock battles they fought. He learned to shoot and fence, believing that they would be useful if he joined the army.

During vacations, Churchill spent days playing soldier with his younger brother, Jack, and their friends. He was known to drill the young boys in proper military technique – building little fortresses on the estate grounds and then planning attacks. He threw himself into these games with a recklessness that he would later show on real battlefields. Once, when playing a game where he was on the run, trying to elude capture by his brother and a cousin, Churchill found himself trapped in the middle of a rickety old bridge with a pursuer at each end.¹⁵ Mortified at the prospect of surrender, he decided to leap twenty-nine feet to the ground below, hoping that the slender branches of the fir trees beneath him would break his fall. He ruptured a kidney and was unconscious for three days. It would take harder lessons than this before his childish idea of war matured.

Considering his fascination with war, it is not surprising that Churchill decided to join the army, yet even doing this proved to be

* In defence of Randolph and Jennie it is sometimes argued that aristocratic parents of the late Victorian era were societally conditioned to be distant from their children. This is a caricature used as a convenient excuse, however. They were not living up to some ideal; they simply did not want to spend time with their son and were much more interested in their own lives. Other elite Victorians could be and were loving and attentive parents, even if they sent their children to boarding school.

a challenge. To be accepted he had to pass the admission test for the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. Even with the help of tutors, he failed at his first two attempts (his mother took advantage of this to argue that because he needed to study, she couldn't see him at Christmas). Only in June 1893, on his third try, did he make the grade, just scraping by. With marks too low to gain admission into the infantry, his only option was to join the cavalry.* If he expected praise from his father, he was quickly disabused of this notion. Randolph, irritated that he had to bear the extra cost of supporting his son in the cavalry, sent Winston a stinging rebuke. He complained that, despite being given every advantage, Winston continued his pattern of 'slovenly' work.¹⁶

Once Churchill joined the cavalry, however, something inside him clicked. Preparing for war sparked an inner drive. He graduated from Sandhurst twentieth in his class of 130, having spent so much time in the saddle that his whole body ached.¹⁷ With the Hussars he finally found a happy home. He loved the nightly formal meals, the mess tables heavy with ornate regimental silver, the officers in dress uniform and the menus written in French (which, he admitted, was the only French thing about the food). He enjoyed drinking with his fellow officers – the beginning of a lifetime love affair with alcohol.

He was also willing to take on more responsibility. When Churchill was at Sandhurst his father's health had deteriorated. Randolph's speeches in parliament became erratic, gruesome spectacles, as his mind wandered uncontrollably. For decades it was thought by many (including Churchill himself) that Randolph was suffering from the advanced stages of syphilis, though this now seems unlikely. More likely he was suffering from an undiagnosed neurological condition such as a brain tumour. Regardless, his decline was humiliating. Lord Rosebery, the prime minister, famously said of Randolph that there 'was no curtain, no retirement, he died by inches in public'. Eventually his condition became so acute that it was considered necessary to hide him away on a world tour. In India in late 1894 Randolph

* The cavalry had a lower admission threshold because of the extra expense needed to join the service. The purchase and upkeep of the right horses were not cheap.

became so ill that he was shipped back to England, where he died in January 1895.

Randolph's death was a liberation for Winston. Now head of the family, he no longer had to endure constant paternal insults, and Jennie, with her husband gone, was transformed. She moved from being a distant, uncaring figure to Winston's greatest patron, and made furthering his career one of her overriding occupations. Churchill, slightly dumbfounded by the change, noted that henceforth he and Jennie worked as a team, though he was also careful to say more like brother and sister than mother and son.

One of Jennie's strongest skills was helping Winston secure the appointments he so desperately craved. And this is important in understanding the true wealth of Churchill's background. He was not capital-rich; Randolph's debts had been almost as large as his assets, and mother and son had only a modest living. What the Churchills possessed in spades was social capital. The family was one of the most famous and powerful in Britain, and Jennie spent much of her time cultivating connections throughout British politics and society (it was rumoured that among her many lovers was the future King Edward VII). When Winston wanted to bend the rules in his favour, which was most of the time, he could go right to the top.

This social capital was needed, for Churchill had a real worry: that he would fail to see combat. When he entered the army there was a generation of officers above him who had not seen real action.¹⁸ But the British Empire had been relatively quiescent since the early 1880s, with occasional outbursts of violence but no large-scale conflict. That would not do for Winston Churchill. His career in the army was not being undertaken for its own sake. It was part of his plan – indeed he believed it his destiny – to become a man of fame and political power.¹⁹ He was more than aware that the best way for him to gain notoriety was through the publicization of some dashing military exploits.²⁰

Therefore, he had to attract attention, even as an observer. In 1895 he heard that the Spanish were about to send 80,000 troops to their colony of Cuba, led by their most famous commander, Marshal Arsenio Martínez Campos. This force was being sent to crush an

uprising by the Cuban people, and Churchill wanted to witness the fight. Arranging this was relatively easy, as the long-serving British ambassador to Madrid, Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, was one of Randolph Churchill's oldest friends. The ambassador provided excellent introductions to everyone who mattered in the Spanish Army, and promised Churchill that Martínez Campos would personally welcome him in Cuba. Displaying for the first time the instinct for publicity and money-making that would typify his career, Churchill also contacted the *Daily Graphic*, the first daily illustrated paper published in the UK, which had previously published articles written by his father. He quickly received a contract to publish any stories from Cuba he might supply, at five guineas a piece.²¹

In the summer of 1895 Churchill set off to observe the 'thrilling and immense' experience of war.²² When he arrived off Havana, he later recalled, he felt like Long John Silver gazing upon Treasure Island.²³ He even got his hands on some excellent Cuban cigars, which helped kick-start another of his life's passions.

Once in Cuba, Churchill's connections proved invaluable and he received anything he needed. After an escorted trip on a specially protected train, he was welcomed warmly by Martínez Campos and advised where he could see action immediately. Churchill hurried over to the disease-ridden town of Sancti Spiritus, a place he judged as in 'a dreadful state with about four separate pestilences raging'.²⁴ He spent the night in a tavern waiting for a Spanish force of 3,000. The Spaniards were due to attack rebel forces hidden deep in the Cuban jungle and Churchill intended to march with them.

His first day witnessing operations was a shock. It began with an early, brisk march just as the sun was rising. The Spanish made surprisingly quick progress through the jungle and Churchill was impressed by how they used their machetes to slice through the dense growth with ease.²⁵ At nine in the morning the column halted, and a large breakfast was prepared, including a thick stew and, most delightfully, rum cocktails. Then, instead of the march recommencing, hammocks were slung between trees in the canopy for all the officers. Soon the entire force was asleep and did not move for the next four hours. Only in the afternoon were the troops roused from

their siesta and the advance continued. Churchill, much to his surprise, found this schedule remarkably efficient. He calculated that the men covered as much ground as they would have had they been forced to walk all day, and with the siesta they arrived at their destination more refreshed. Being a committed racist, Churchill attributed these Spanish successes to their being 'closer to nature' than the more analytical and technically advanced Anglo-Saxons.

Churchill also became restless. This pleasant rhythm of march-siesta-march continued for the next few days, with hardly an enemy seen or a shot fired. Finally, just when it looked like the campaign would achieve nothing, the Spanish came across some rebels. On Churchill's twenty-first birthday he gleefully experienced being under fire when a rebel bullet passed within a foot of his head and killed a horse standing beside him. For the next three days there was sporadic rifle fire between the rebels and the Spanish, though the enemy was desperately difficult to see, mostly visible only through the occasional puff of gun smoke.

Eventually, it seemed that a real battle would take place. The Spanish came upon a rebel camp and deployed their entire force to attack, the infantry and artillery aiming straight at the rebel line, with the cavalry sent to move around the flanks. Heavy fire soon erupted from all sides. To Churchill, the rebels' Remington rifles released a 'deep' moan, while the Spanish line, firing more efficient Mausers, emitted a 'shrill rattle'.²⁶ Yet for all the noise and smoke, the combat was unsatisfying. Though they were able to take the position – indeed, they were able to force the rebels from any area in which they were discovered – the Spanish were never able to kill or capture many of the enemy. The rebels were too skilled at retreating, carting away their wounded and dead. It was like fighting a phantom.

If this type of combat taught Churchill little concrete about war (except for its innate confusion), it revealed how important empire was becoming as the keystone of his strategic ideology. Churchill had gone to Cuba sympathizing with the rebels, thinking they were fighting against injustice. When he realized this was an anti-imperialist war, he flip-flopped. During one of the days of quiet jungle marching, he fell into conversation with a Spanish officer, who stunned him

by describing the mission of the Spanish Empire in Cuba in the exact same way Churchill himself portrayed the British Empire's presence in India. At first Churchill thought it showed real arrogance on the part of the Spaniard that he could dare compare Spain's imperial possessions to Britain's.²⁷ Yet being forced to view the Spanish as fellow imperialists was transformative, and Churchill became strongly sympathetic to their cause. When his tour ended, his hosts awarded him the Red Cross, a military decoration that was normally only awarded to Spanish officers.

Despite wanting the Spanish to win, Churchill worried they were immersed in an 'interminable' conflict that might overwhelm their limited economic resources. If Spain were to be forced out, the last thing he wanted was an independent Cuba. The idea of non-white people ruling themselves was something he would not or could not believe possible. An independent Cuba, he argued, would be taken over by its 'negro element' and descend into chaos.²⁸ In his final article for the *Daily Graphic*, the twenty-one-year-old confidently told his audience that all the 'impartial people' who lived in Cuba saw independence as a pipe dream and that a rebel victory would lead to a 'bankrupt Government, torn by race animosities and recurring revolutions'.²⁹ It would be better for all, he believed, if the United States stepped in as the new imperialists. His real fear was that the United States, which was criticizing Spanish rule with increasing vigour, might force Spain out of Cuba but not re-imperialize the island. In his eyes this would be 'monstrous'.³⁰

The future of Britain's empire as a strategic pivot would strengthen with Churchill's further exposure to war. His next major assignment was one of the most important in his life – the 1896 deployment of the 4th Queen's Own Hussars to India. When Churchill arrived in India, the British Empire seemed serenely entrenched. British rule had been in operation for more than a century and had developed its own institutions and traditions. There was a large Indian Army (with British officers), a British-dominated bureaucracy, and entrenched British business interests that controlled India's economy, all reporting to a British viceroy who lived in massive, ornate palaces while affecting an air of haughty supremacy. This entire bureaucracy operated under

the nominal authority of seventy-seven-year-old Queen Victoria, the crowned Empress of India (she never set foot on Indian soil), though the real oversight was exercised by the government in London, which maintained a separate India Office with a secretary of state who sat in cabinet.

This layered structure of control was needed because the British understood, if they did not admit, that their authority was maintained by the constant threat of violence. Since their arrival in India in the seventeenth century under the auspices of the East India Company, there had been a series of violent attempts to overthrow British rule. After a major Indian uprising in 1857, the British decided to institute direct rule with the creation of the 'Raj', but that was not able to stop the violence. As Churchill's time there would demonstrate, conflict could erupt at a moment's notice.

Naturally, Churchill wanted to believe that most Indians were delighted to be ruled by the British. When he reached the Hussars' camp near Bangalore, he discovered that he could hire three servants at tiny wages and all his needs would be met. 'If you like to be waited on and relieved of home worries, India . . . was perfection,' he later recalled. 'All you had to do was hand over all your uniform and clothes to the dressing boy, your ponies to the syce, and your money to the butler, and you need never trouble any more . . . [Your servants] would devote their lives to their task. For a humble wage, justice, and a few kind words, there was nothing they would not do.'³¹

Freed from mundane tasks, Churchill indulged two growing interests. He became one of the British Army's most enthusiastic and skilful polo players. The game's aristocratic nature appealed to him, and it stimulated his intensely competitive streak. Polo practice took up much of every day, primarily in the late afternoon when it was not too hot for the horses. But of more interest to the budding strategist was what Churchill did before this, when the heat of the day was at its most intense and the officers stayed in the shade. He started to read, trying to make up for his slovenly work at school. He began by devouring Edward Gibbon's six-volume, eighteenth-century classic, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It was not by

chance. Behind the imperial bravado, Churchill was worried about the future of his empire. When he read Gibbon, with its stories of the fall of Rome through religious weakness, internal corruption and the threat of ruthless barbarians, his mind raced.

Not long after he read Gibbon, Churchill made his first political speech. It was given while on leave in England, to the Primrose League of Bath on 26 July 1897 (the day Churchill first heard of the attack on the Malakand camp).^{*} In this political setting, Churchill ridiculed those who said that the empire was weakening ‘as Babylon, Carthage and Rome had declined’, and called for the British people to stiffen their resolve and fight to maintain the empire against the doom-mongers. ‘Do not believe these croakers . . . but give the lie to their dismal croaking by showing by our actions that the vigour and vitality of our race is unimpaired and that our determination is to uphold the Empire that we have inherited from our fathers as Englishmen.’³² After all, the British Empire was the greatest force for good in the world, bringing ‘peace, civilization and good government to the utmost ends of the earth’.³³

Over the coming years he would argue for different schemes – some to toughen up the British people to fulfil their mission, some to reward them so that they would love the system more, but all with the aim of reinforcing imperial strength. This need could occasionally drive Churchill to take more progressive positions, as he made clear in the third political speech he ever gave – to the Conservative Party membership in Southsea in 1898. There he argued that social reform was needed to make the British people better servants of empire: ‘To keep our Empire we must have a free people, an educated and well fed people. That is why we are in favour of social reform.’³⁴

He even devised his own version of a perfected British society, which would function as a vehicle to maintain the empire. He paid particular attention to the education and training of young men. In

^{*} Randolph Churchill had been one of the founders of the Primrose League in 1883. It was established to provide an organization to disseminate and discuss Conservative Party policies.

Churchill's vision of Plato's Republic, manliness was to be prized over education. 'When they are sixteen or seventeen they [young men] begin to learn a craft and do healthy manual labour, with plenty of poetry, songs, dancing, drill and gymnastics in their spare time,' he said. 'They can thus let off their steam on something useful. It is only when they are really thirsty for knowledge, longing to hear about things, that I would let them go to the university. It would be a favour, a coveted privilege, only to be given to those who had either proved their worth in factory or field or whose qualities and zeal were pre-eminent.'³⁵

In private he was just as determined. In December 1897, right after participating in the brutal pacification of the Pathans, Churchill wrote to his mother and his brother. He urged Jack to travel and see as much as he could 'of this great Empire of ours – to the maintenance of which I will devote my life'.³⁶ To his mother he pledged, 'I shall devote my life to the preservation of this great Empire and to trying to maintain the progress of the English people'.³⁷

It is important to note that Churchill referred specifically to the English people – and not the English-speaking peoples. A romantic notion has been peddled that Churchill was naturally pro-American – or, as it has been termed, had a lifetime 'true love' for the United States.³⁸ This is bad poetry. Even though Churchill's mother was American, he always approached strategic affairs from a British-centric perspective. During his first two visits to the United States he was struck by how alien American culture was to his own. While he liked many things about the US – its newness, its aggression, its swagger – he loathed just as many, including its populism, its lack of respect for tradition, and what he considered its 'odious' foreign policy that only served to 'disgust polite people'.^{*} He certainly wanted friendship between the United States and Great Britain, but now and throughout his career he was worried that America could not be trusted to serve the needs of the British Empire. As he told his

^{*} Always the aristocrat, Churchill particularly hated American paper money, which he considered unspeakably common. He preferred heavy, precious-metal coins.

mother, 'One of the principles of my politics will always be to promote the good understanding between the English speaking communities. At the same time alliances nowadays are useless . . . As long as the interests of two nations coincide & as far as they coincide – they are and will be allies. But when they diverge, they will cease to be allies.'³⁹ When his mother proposed starting a new journal entitled *The Anglo-Saxon*, which would emphasize the close connection between Britain, the British Empire and the United States, Churchill tried to persuade her to rename it *The Imperial*.⁴⁰★ His allegiances were not to be diluted.

After Cuba, this focus on empire continued to fire his desire to get into war. It was why he was so desperate to see action in the Malakand campaign and, once that was over, to take part in a similar pacification campaign in the Tirah valley.⁴¹† It was also why he was furious when his first news reports failed to garner him publicity. To defray his personal expenses during the Malakand campaign (as Churchill's regiment was not assigned to the fighting, he had to pay his own upkeep), he had agreed to write reports for the *Daily Telegraph*. To his surprise, his articles were published as the work of an anonymous officer. When he found out, he fumed to his mother, 'I will not conceal my disappointment at their not being signed. I had written them with the design . . . of bringing my personality in front of the electorate. I had hoped that some political advantage might have accrued.'⁴²

Frustrated, he decided to push his efforts on the British public even more spectacularly by writing a book. Filled with an energy that surprised himself, he completed the manuscript in a few months and sent it off to publishers in early 1898. The book itself, titled *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, revealed that Churchill had a way with words, both in painting pictures and making arguments. He presented the war vividly, with sounds and smells, and peppered the

★ Jennie was indeed able to help produce a few issues of what was eventually titled *The Anglo-Saxon Review*, between 1899 and 1901, but the journal was not a success.

† Unfortunately for Churchill, he arrived at the Tirah after the fighting had died down, so he could not make a greater name for himself there.

narrative with different opinions (all arguing the same thing: that Britain was absolutely right to be doing what it was doing).

The book gained Churchill surprising notoriety. One of its greatest fans was the long-serving prime minister and foreign secretary, Lord Salisbury. A scion of another of England's most famous families, the Cecils, Salisbury had been a fixture in British politics for half a century. As a young associate of Randolph Churchill, he had originally been an opponent of attempts to democratize the British system. He later relented so he could play a role in his area of greatest interest: foreign and imperial policy. Salisbury was prime minister for all but three years between 1886 and 1902, serving as foreign secretary for most of that time as well. Courtly, distant and cynical, he physically embodied the British aristocracy holding modern life at bay, and Churchill loved him for it. In foreign policy, Salisbury worked to maintain the empire in the face of the relatively faster growth of its international rivals – the Germans, Russians and, dare it be said, Americans. It was Salisbury, very much ironically, who spoke of Britons wanting to follow a policy of 'splendid isolation' – while himself knowing that such a position was impossible.

After reading *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, Salisbury sent Churchill a letter 'out of the blue' asking for a chat. So, in the summer of 1898, the young lieutenant was ushered into the vast, ornate foreign secretary's office in Whitehall and given half an hour with the most powerful person in the world. Salisbury praised the book richly and told Churchill, 'If there is anything at any time that I can do which would be of assistance to you, pray do not fail to let me know.'⁴³

The timing could not have been better, for Churchill wanted a big favour. For months, a new war had been brewing, this time in East Africa. The war in question was a British campaign, waged to recover from perhaps their most famous defeat of the imperial age, the 1885 destruction of Major General Charles George Gordon and his force during the fall of Khartoum. Gordon, a Christian religious zealot, had tried to hold the largest city in Sudan against an Islamic uprising led by another zealot known as the Mahdi, who was in charge of a force the British called the Dervishes. For most of 1884, the British

population had watched transfixed while Gordon and his soldiers were besieged in Khartoum (Gordon refused to follow orders and retreat). In January 1885, with a relief force heading down the Nile and only a few days away, Khartoum fell and Gordon was killed – quickly entering the pantheon of imperial heroes.

By 1898, the British were ready to wreak their revenge. The Mahdi had died, but his regime lived on, with Khartoum the capital – a constant reminder of their earlier defeat. A large force was collected in Egypt and put under the command of the dramatically moustachioed Sir Herbert Kitchener, referred to as the sirdar (leader) to maintain the fiction that he was doing the bidding of the Egyptian government.* Churchill was desperate to take part in the campaign but had run into a Kitchener-shaped road block. The sirdar, like many senior officers in the British Army, had grown to despise Churchill as a shameless self-promoter who was using the army for personal advantage. Kitchener thus coldly rebuffed every attempt by Churchill to gain a posting to the theatre. With no one else left to ask, Churchill went to the prime minister for help. Even though Kitchener remained hostile, a special, bureaucratic exception was found just for Churchill. Certain units taking part in the invasion – including the 21st Lancers, a new and unsung cavalry regiment – were formally under the control of the War Office in London, and not Kitchener. Taking advantage of this loophole, Churchill was assigned to the Lancers at the very last minute and hurried off to war.

And what a war it was. The battle with which the campaign culminated was fought in front of the city of Khartoum (however, much to Kitchener's chagrin, the battle was officially designated Omdurman, not Khartoum, by the War Office) and marked the end of one particular era of imperial warfare. Methodical and humourless, the sirdar had no intention of doing anything but wiping out the Sudanese forces and regime. He had a modern railroad constructed

* Not formally part of the British Empire, Egypt was a client state of the United Kingdom and its government was completely under the control of British officials – most famously Lord Cromer, who for more than twenty years ruled in Cairo as a new pharaoh.

across the Sahara desert so that troops and supplies, including Maxim guns (early machine guns) and artillery pieces, could flow unhindered down the hundreds of miles from the Egyptian border to Khartoum.⁴⁴ He even sent modern gunboats, in pieces, down the railway, and had them assembled on the upper Nile. Kitchener's army was thus bristling with firepower as it approached its objective. Though his army of 25,000 men (17,000 of whom were Egyptian or Sudanese) was still considerably smaller than the Dervish army of approximately 60,000, he was never going to lose. The Dervishes had only 20,000 rifles, a motley collection at best, and most of their men were armed with swords and spears. Churchill went into battle with a light heart.

He would also have one of the most spectacular views of the coming clash.⁴⁵ By 1 September 1898, Kitchener had camped his army along a bend in the Nile in a defensible crescent shape, just north of Khartoum. Two large ranges of hills provided protection for both of his flanks, and funnelled all approaching troops onto a flat, sandy plain directly in front of his line. To provide more cover for his troops, he had them fortify their position with a zariba, lines of tightly packed, thorn-covered vines. Kitchener had created a killing field, and on the morning of 2 September the Dervishes marched directly into it.

The 21st Lancers were at first kept within the zariba, but early in the morning Churchill was given a special assignment to scout Jebel Surgham, the rocky ridge which protected the left flank of Kitchener's camp. Taking seven soldiers with him, he trotted as quietly as possible up the uneven terrain, unsure whether the Dervishes had already fortified the hill. In the half-light of early morning, Churchill ordered his men to separate themselves by one hundred yards, so that if they did stumble into the enemy, those at the rear could get away and warn Kitchener.

When they finally reached the top of Jebel Surgham, the first strong rays of morning sun were peeking over the horizon, revealing that the ridge was unprotected and also uncovering almost the entire Dervish army on the move. At first the Dervish formations looked like miles of long, dusty smudges in the distance. As they came

closer, however, they became frighteningly distinct. Churchill could see the Dervishes in their white robes, waving colourful banners in the morning air and raising their weapons in exultation. Soon their indistinct low rumble of a war cry became piercing and loud, as the Dervish lines generated the courage needed to march to almost-certain death. For Churchill, it was 'an hour to live'.⁴⁶

The first part of the battle went exactly to Kitchener's script.⁴⁷ The Dervishes went straight for his well-defended lines. At more than 2,000 yards, British artillery opened fire into the attacking troops, cutting down masses of closely packed men. Those Dervishes lucky enough to survive the artillery were then mowed down by machine-gun and concentrated rifle fire, starting at about 1,000 yards. Still, they pressed forward until their forward line was cut down almost entirely, allowing only small groups of disorganized, disheartened men to retreat. Any Dervishes unlucky enough to be captured by the British Army were often summarily executed.⁴⁸★ Hardly a British soldier had been touched. Churchill, on his ridge, was so high up he could feel the air-pressure rushes from the British artillery shells as they dropped onto the Dervishes. Later, when he saw their white-clad, dead bodies piled in heaps before the British lines, he likened them to 'snowdrifts' on the desert floor.

Once the first Dervish attack was broken, Kitchener decided to move his troops forward to engage the rest of the Dervish army closer to Khartoum. This promised to be a trickier task, as his army would have to leave the safety of the camp. As part of this movement, the 21st Lancers were ordered out of the zariba to scout out the territory between the camp and Khartoum. Moving around Jebel Surgham to the left, they were isolated on the edge of Kitchener's army. As they came around the hill, they were the first British troops who could see the great mud-built city in the distance, with its large minarets and cityscape dominated by the grand tomb of the Mahdi himself. Coming across what looked like a small group of Dervishes,

★ Once again Churchill was more than aware that soldiers under British command were responsible for war crimes such as the killing of helpless prisoners. In the case of Omdurman, he tried to blame most of the killings on non-white troops.

the commander of the Lancers ordered a charge, and Churchill took control of a squad of twenty-five men for what he thought would be one of the great moments in his life.⁴⁹

The desert, however, had played a deadly trick. As the 21st Lancers pounded down on the enemy, at full gallop with swords drawn, they had no idea of what they were doing. Instead of there being a few hundred enemy on a flat plain, the Lancers were charging directly into a large depression they could not see, full of 2,000 crouching Dervishes. The unseen enemy forces, in ranks ten to twelve deep, leapt to their feet as the cavalry crashed in on them, slashing with swords and firing weapons. The Lancers wheeled around frantically, all with one thought – to stay on their horses. If dragged out of the saddle, a rider would be consumed by a furious mass of enemy, like a whale eviscerated by sharks. There might be a few pathetic cries, then the man was gone.

Churchill, in the midst of the mayhem, grabbed his pistol – a Mauser semi-automatic that he had fortuitously purchased when back in London – and started shooting all around him. He kept his horse moving, and once again gave thanks for the dum-dums that could stop an enemy dead in his tracks, a necessary advantage as the fighting was so intimate. One Dervish he shot was so close that when Churchill pressed the trigger, the barrel of his Mauser was touching its target. He was convinced that he had shot at least five men in a few seconds.⁵⁰

Yet he also experienced something new. For the first time during a battle, maybe for the first time in his life, Winston Churchill was truly afraid. The charge of the 21st Lancers, the last real charge in British cavalry history, was stupid and unnecessary and he very well might have died.⁵¹ Many others did. In less than five minutes, the regiment suffered 70 killed and wounded out of the 300 officers and men.⁵² Compared to the extraordinarily light casualties in the rest of Kitchener's army, it was an appalling toll.* Churchill, however, was

* Kitchener's entire army suffered fewer than 500 casualties at Omdurman, fewer than 50 of which were killed. So, in a few minutes, the Lancers suffered almost half of all the soldiers in the army killed during the battle.

still unwilling to learn from his fear. Like much of the British public, he focused on the heroism of the Lancers, not the pointlessness of the attack. The charge was considered so brave that three men received the Victoria Cross, the nation's highest award for valour. Even that was not enough for Churchill. He wished that more of his men had died. He complained to his mother that if only the 21st Lancers had suffered fifty or sixty additional casualties, it 'would have made the performance historic – and have made us all proud of our race and blood'.⁵³

Still, Churchill did his best to capitalize on those soldiers who did die, by entering politics. When he finally returned to England in 1899 (after a redeployment back to the 4th Hussars in India so that he could compete in a polo tournament), he left the army and tried to enter parliament. He was selected as one of the Conservative Party candidates for Oldham, a marginal two-seat constituency full of industrial workers and not a naturally Conservative borough. The party had won both seats in its national landslide of 1895, but it was feared that the opposition Liberal Party might win them back. Churchill, a young, energetic candidate with one of the most famous names in the country and a budding reputation as a war hero, was considered the perfect candidate to try to hold on for the Conservatives.

The election itself was an eye-opener. By-elections were short and intense. Churchill's campaign went from late June 1899 to early July, a blur of speeches and discussions of local issues. He ran as an orthodox conservative. He was strongly opposed to women's suffrage, though did call for improvements to the conditions of the working poor (the only sensible thing he could do in a working-class district).⁵⁴ What excited him most, however, was the issue of the empire.⁵⁵ He ended his opening address with an enthusiastic call for the British Empire to be strengthened, even enlarged – saying he would support a government that took as its mission to 'consolidate the Empire, to strengthen the bonds of union between its widely scattered posts, to preserve its frontiers from aggression and to encourage a healthy principle of growth'.⁵⁶ The voters had different priorities. Indeed, the question of the power of the Church of England proved far more contentious (and motivating) than the empire.

In the end Churchill lost, but ran a creditable campaign. It made him realize that as a domestic politician he needed to broaden his appeal. He would put this lesson into practice when he next ran for office.

Before Churchill could try, though, one final war – the most important in his early career – exploded into action: the Boer War. The Boers were Dutch settlers who had moved to South Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*boer* is the Dutch word for ‘farmer’). Like the American Puritans, they were religious fanatics looking to create a holier world by conquering a territory and subjugating the people who already lived there. For decades, no one in Europe had paid them much attention, but in the late nineteenth century, gold and silver were discovered in South Africa, and everything was transformed. The British, who had colonized most of the region, started casting envious eyes on Boer territory and arguing that they were the region’s imperial overlords. In 1895, a group of pro-British adventurers, led by Sir Leander Starr Jameson (a business associate of the famous diamond miner Cecil Rhodes), launched a raid into Boer territory, trying to bring the area under the British umbrella. The Jameson Raid, as it came to be known, was a disaster. After a few days the Boers surrounded and arrested the raiders. They then utilized their new-found wealth to equip their forces with modern weapons, and the tensions between Great Britain and the Boer republics ratcheted up.*

Churchill was as determined as anyone to add the gold, silver and diamonds of South Africa to the British Empire. He supported the Jameson Raid when he first heard about it in 1897, and in perhaps the most hyper-aggressive article he ever produced, called for a pre-emptive war to crush the Boers. ‘Sooner or later,’ he wrote, ‘in a righteous cause or a picked quarrel, with the approval of Europe, or in the teeth of Germany, for the sake of our Empire, for the sake of our honour, for the sake of the race, we must fight the Boers.’^{57†}

* By the late nineteenth century the Boers had established two large republics in South Africa: the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

† Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, after hearing of the Boer capture of Jameson, wrote to the Boers congratulating them on their success. For British imperialists such as Churchill this was an insult that needed to be avenged.

He would get his war, but it would be very different from the one he expected. In October 1899, negotiations between the British government and the Boers over the control of the region broke down and war was declared. Churchill was overjoyed. He was instantly hired by the *Morning Post* to head to South Africa for the huge salary of £250 per month plus all expenses (which probably made him the most highly paid war correspondent in the world). He considered the Boers a 'miserably small people' and was confident that the might of the British Empire would crush them quickly in another jolly victory.⁵⁸ Churchill told his mother that he believed the British Army would be ready to strike by Christmas Day and that all the major Boer cities should be safely conquered within two months – making it possible that he would be home in time to see the Derby.⁵⁹

Once in South Africa, it became clear that this war was something else entirely. The Boers were at home on horseback and could move over the South African plains with a rapidity and decisiveness that the British found disconcerting. The Boers were also determined to fight by their rules, not those of nineteenth-century imperial warfare. British forces soon found themselves on the defensive, and the early battles were almost all won by the Boers. What British forces remained near Boer territory were often besieged, most famously in the town of Ladysmith. The situation grew worse in December 1899, during what was known as Black Week. The Boers inflicted defeats on three separate British armies, leading the British government to understand that they would have to mobilize almost the entire empire to put down this force of angry Dutch farmers.⁶⁰

Churchill's personal experience of the early war was just as disastrous. Almost immediately after arriving, he went deep into the war zone and joined some units in Natal being organized for the relief of Ladysmith. It was a chaotic time, the British having little idea where the elusive Boers were deployed. Befuddled, they had to send patrols into the countryside daily to see if the enemy was anywhere around.

Normally these patrols were done by cavalry, but not long after Churchill arrived in November the commanding officer of the region had the bright idea of sending out some of his best infantry in an armoured train. Churchill, 'eager for trouble', happily jumped

aboard. This probably seemed wise. Made up of open-top train carriages to which thick steel plates with gun holes had been fastened, armoured trains bristled with weapons, looking like impregnable, mobile fortresses. They were not.

As the train trundled on into unknown territory, everything seemed under control. For fourteen miles it travelled without an enemy being seen or a shot being fired. Then, looking back, Churchill and the rest could see Boer troops that had quietly come up behind them. The Boers started peppering the cars with rifle fire, and even brought into play one of their artillery pieces. Their fire caused a great racket, but the train was completely unaffected. It was thought better to head back to camp, and the locomotive, which was kept in the middle of the train for safety, was set in reverse and quickly picked up speed.

It was a ruse. The Boers wanted the train to speed up. As it came around a bend, the heavy carriages ran smack into an obstruction that they had laid across the tracks. Churchill and the soldiers went flying in different directions, and the cars at the front of the train derailed and were left lying scrambled across the tracks.

Churchill instantly gave up the fiction that he was a war reporter and almost tried to take command. While many of the soldiers refused to leave the protection of those cars still on the tracks, he strode up and down the line under constant fire, trying to find a way to escape capture. They had one chance. The centrally placed locomotive car had not been dislodged, so some of the train could still move – if a way could be found to clear the tracks. It was decided to use the engine, decoupled, as a great battering ram to force a way open to safety. For an agonizing while the plan seemed to work. The obstructing cars were gradually pushed outwards. When it seemed that one more shove might finish the work, the locomotive was sent at full force into the last blockage. It smashed its way through, but when Churchill looked back things were worse. In knocking the last block out of the way, the locomotive had caused a cascade, forcing some of the derailed cars back over the rail line behind it. The locomotive was now stranded from the troops in their armoured cars. When Churchill started running back to what was left of the train,

all hell broke loose and Boer soldiers descended, taking him prisoner. He only just had time to throw away his beloved Mauser before they apprehended him.*

Brought to Pretoria a prisoner of war, he and other British officers were kept in a schoolhouse, under relatively light guard. Churchill hated being a prisoner, finding it even worse than Harrow, and maybe for the first time in his life he started to show the signs of clinical depression that would emerge regularly later. He became desperate for escape, to keep his sanity as much as anything else.

On 12 December 1899, he took advantage of a gap in the patrolling of the school perimeter to leap over a wall, but certainly not to freedom. He was still marooned hundreds of miles from British forces, with little in the way of provisions, no weapons, and no knowledge of the terrain. First, he had to get out of town, a trick he achieved by simply walking. Thinking no one would pay attention to an individual going about his business in a large town, Churchill strode right through the Boer capital until he reached the outskirts of Pretoria, where he was able to find a place to hide out.

From there he had the foresight to use the train lines. He would hop on trains at night, when no one could see, and ride in the direction that he thought meant freedom. Eventually, luck intervened. Near the end of his tether, with food running out (for a while he had survived eating just a few slabs of chocolate), Churchill entered a small mining camp at the end of a spur railroad. There he was discovered not by the Boers, but by a friendly English mining official whom the Boers had allowed to stay behind. Now with an ally, Churchill had a chance. For days he was hidden away, deep in an abandoned mine shaft, eating roast chicken and trying not to be bothered by the masses of rats always underfoot. Eventually a plan was hatched to bury Churchill in a trainload of wool and send him not through British lines but to the Portuguese colonies to the

* Churchill was in the process of throwing away his trusty dum-dums when he was captured. For a moment he was worried he might be executed for having such ammunition, but the Boer who captured him did not recognize what they were, so let him throw them away.

east. Cooched in downy comfort, Churchill rode without event to the town of Lourenço Marques, where he presented himself to the British consulate. News of his escape made it out to Britain just as the war seemed at its darkest, and it helped make him a national hero.

Churchill would even decide to return to combat. Finding that his celebrity had made him an outcast in the army, he signed up to fight with a locally raised, pro-British unit, the South African Light Horse. This allowed him to take part in the large invasions of conquest that the British Army undertook in 1900. Sending almost a quarter of a million troops from around the empire, the British overwhelmed the Boers, eventually seizing their major cities. At this point Churchill left for home, to reap the political benefits of his new-found notoriety.*

He was a changed man – in a few respects. He had learned the value of moderating some of his earlier harsh rhetoric and strategic notions about the need to crush imperial resistance. Having been a Boer prisoner and been surprised by the generosity and kindness with which he had been treated, he decided that a punitive peace would be counterproductive – at least against whites. He publicly supported giving the Boers a great deal of self-government, even committing the British government to providing medical care to the Boer wounded. In a public letter he chided those who wanted to punish the Boers. ‘Beware of driving men to desperation. Even a cornered rat is dangerous. We desire a speedy peace and the last thing we want is that this war should enter a guerrilla phase. Those who demand “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” should ask themselves whether such barren spoils are worth five years of bloody partisan warfare and the consequent impoverishment of South Africa.’⁶¹ Of course, Churchill’s gentle peace came at a steep cost. The Boer republics would be wiped from the map, and the Boer knee had to be bent to accept the supremacy of the British Empire: ‘the

* The war, however, would continue for a number of years, as the Boers resorted to guerrilla warfare and the British imposed almost total control on Boer society, most famously using concentration camps to confine Boer women and children. These camps cost the lives of tens of thousands of their inhabitants.

Republics and the Dutch flag must go. I would rather fight another year and leave a Republic the size of a sixpence in South Africa.’⁶²

Churchill needed to have the empire as his focus because, as he admitted about himself, he had few strong convictions. As he told his mother, ‘I do not care so much for the principles I advocate as for the impression which my words produce & the reputation they give me. This sounds v[er]y terrible. But you must remember we do not live in the days of Great Causes.’⁶³ He had come to view human beings as base, self-interested animals, and admitted that he was one – just a spectacular one. As he said after the Boer War, ‘We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow-worm.’⁶⁴ For the rest of his career, he would change his political positions on almost every issue, putting on and discarding ideological stances like fashionable clothes – but the empire remained his lodestar.

By the time of Churchill’s return to Britain, the wars he had fought over the previous five years had started him along the path to developing the strategic mindset with which he would fight future wars. He was coming to understand the relationship between cost and benefit, though he instinctively favoured the most daring, bloody or famous of actions. What had already been fixed, however, was that preserving and strengthening the British Empire was and would remain his great strategic goal. His ideas were encapsulated in one of his favourite songs, which he had loved belting out at night with his fellow officers, a few drinks in his belly and a warm glow in his heart:

Great White Mother, far across the sea,
Ruler of the Empire may she ever be.
Long may she reign, glorious and free,
In the Great White Motherland.⁶⁵

2. Joseph Stalin: The Making of an Ideological Strategist

When World War I erupted in August 1914, the man who would be the worst and best grand strategist of the next world war was isolated in one of the most remote spots on Earth. Joseph Jughashvili, better known as Stalin – Bolshevik revolutionary and gangster – was a prisoner of Tsarist Russia, exiled in the tiny Siberian fishing village of Kureika. Located above the Arctic Circle on the Yenisei River, Kureika was inaccessible by road and lay hundreds of miles of rolling tundra and dense forest from the closest railway. Its flat landscape, punctured by a few low-rises, was uninspiring, lacking the pastoral beauty one would hope for in such a wild location. ‘In summer the river and in winter the snow, that’s all nature offers here,’ Stalin lamented.¹ It was so remote that in late 1916, when the Russian Army was desperate enough for soldiers that they even called up politically unreliable criminals, it took Stalin a six-week sleigh ride to reach the draft board.*

Isolated and irrelevant, Stalin spent much of the first two years of the war brooding. He alienated his fellow Bolshevik exile and rising star in the party Iakov Sverdlov with his selfishness and slovenly habits. He seduced the youngest girl he could find and stole a dead man’s books. He even claimed to be better than the locals at fishing. If an area of river was not producing fish, Stalin would move to a new one in the hope that it would produce more. He later claimed that the locals were amazed at this technique and considered him a great angler – though this seems to be another example of Stalin trying to convince himself and others that he was superior. His need to be dominant in even the wilds of Siberia could not

* Stalin failed the physical examination for entrance into the army, due to his left arm being permanently weakened because of a childhood injury.