

'A powerful corrective ... an unreserved polemic against the man usually celebrated for standing up to Hitler' *Independent*

The modern Churchill cult is out of control, closing down historical debate and encouraging support for twenty-first-century wars. The man has become a household god for many, preserving an antiquated vision of Britain. In this coruscating portrait, Tariq Ali audits Churchill's crimes – both globally and at home – and shows the celebrated wartime leader to be Britain's most shameless imperialist.

'In Ali's telling, which draws on more honest existing historical scholarship than most popular biographies of Churchill, the two-times prime minister emerges not so much as deeply racist – some of his contemporaries remarked on it in shock – as profoundly authoritarian, with a soft spot for fascist strongmen, and a hostility to working-class assertion' Priyamvada Gopal, *Prospect*

'Ali portrays Churchill as cruel, incompetent and blinded by prejudice' *Spectator*

'For Tariq Ali, Churchill debunking, like Churchill worship, is a political act' David Aaronovitch, *The Times*

'A Marxist insult to history' Simon Heffer, *Telegraph*

'An essential antidote to the Churchill myth ... This book could not be more timely' Lindsey German, *Counterfire*

'An important addition to the Churchill debates and a warning against political deification' *Conversation*

'Deserves to be compulsory reading in every school across the country ... debunking the myth of Churchill far more effectively even than those who daubed paint on his statue' *Morning Star*

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Winston Churchill His Times, His Crimes

TARIQ
ALI



'A powerful corrective ... shining a light on the nasty parts that his supporters conveniently ignore. This book is an unreserved polemic against the man usually celebrated for standing up to Hitler' *Independent*

Winston Churchill His Times, His Crimes



TARIQ ALI

Churchill in His Own Words

'There is no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution, by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews; it is certainly a very great one; it probably outweighs all others. With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews.'

'The women's suffrage movement is only the small edge of the wedge, if we allow women to vote it will mean the loss of social structure and the rise of every liberal cause under the sun. Women are well represented by their fathers, brothers and husbands.'

'I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes.'

'If I had been an Italian, I am sure I should have been wholeheartedly with you [Mussolini] from the start to finish in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism. But in England we have not yet had to face this danger in the same deadly form. We have our own way of doing things.'

'I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly-wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.'

'I hate people with slit eyes and pigtails. I don't like the look of them or the smell of them – but I suppose it does no great harm to have a look at them.'

'Keep Britain White'

PREFACE

Is another book on Churchill necessary? I've asked myself this question more than once, but it seems very few others have. Most people I spoke to, including many who do not share my political opinions, argued strongly in favour of this project. Their motivation was simple. The Churchill cult was drowning all serious debate. An alternative was badly needed and instead of moaning I should get on with it. This is not to suggest that all historians who focus on Churchill are uncritical. There are some fine books out there, and I refer to them later in these pages. It's not now simply a question of providing an alternative, but of defending the right to do so. Churchill himself, whatever his shortcomings, relished a political duel and gave as good as he got. His epigones feel less intellectually/politically secure and regard any serious criticism as *lèse-majesté*. Not to be tolerated. This is unacceptable.

Participants in an anti-capitalist demonstration in 2000 sprayed Churchill's statue in Parliament Square with paint and gave him a turf Mohican. The prime minister at the time, Tony Blair, was livid. According to his spin doctor's diary, he 'went a bit over the top saying "This sort of thing must never be allowed to happen again" and suggesting that such demonstrations should be kept out of London'. The spraying continued at irregular intervals over the following years, reaching a peak in 2020 when Black Lives Matter activists painted 'Churchill Was a Racist' on the plinth.

This is one of the mildest criticisms of Churchill that can be made, but it caused a furore. More was to follow. In February 2021, as I was engaged in completing this book, I received a Zoom invitation

to attend a virtual conference organised in Churchill College, Cambridge to discuss the politics of its namesake. Two of the panel members were academics of South Asian origin. One of them, Priya Gopal, was and remains a Fellow of the College. Unsurprisingly, the tone was critical since the discussion centred on the colonisation of India and its aftermath, especially the Bengal Famine.

It was a sober discussion, but a hullabaloo followed, orchestrated by the Tory press. The *Daily Telegraph* headlined its 11 February report: 'Churchill College panel claims wartime PM was a white racist and "worse than the Nazis"'. In fact nobody had said that, but it was enough to push Sir Nicholas Soames (Churchill's grandson) to become the standard bearer for the outrage. As any regular reader of *Private Eye* over the years will be aware, intellectual weight is not one of Soames's attributes, and his interventions on this occasion only confirmed the fact. But he was a descendant and made himself available to be used to crush dissenting voices.

Donors threatened to withdraw funding, the family was displeased, and the College hurriedly disbanded its working group on 'Churchill, Race and Empire', which had organised the offending conference. To protest this capitulation, that same night local Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists neatly daubed 'Churchill Was a Racist' on one of the brick walls of Churchill College.

Soames had characterised the panel discussion as marking a 'new low in the current vogue for the denigration in general of British history and of Sir Winston Churchill's memory in particular', and threatened the College by wondering aloud and in public whether it should be allowed to benefit from the Churchill name after permitting such an appalling event. In fact, both sides of the debate could come up with better names: Wellesley or Curzon for the glorifiers of empire, and Gandhi or Mandela for the other side. Meanwhile, the rapid response unit of XR Cambridge replied to Soames:

Across this city, there are so many institutions whose money comes from exploitation and colonialism. We are not going to let Cambridge colleges censor the truth about their harmful historical

and modern connections. As a city and a country, we desperately need to face up to the legacy of the British Empire, which did so much damage around the world and is still causing harm today. It is increasingly evident that there is a deep connection between global, racial, social and climate justice. The idea that those with money, power and military strength have the right to exploit the earth and its people is responsible both for colonialism and the climate and ecological emergency. We have learned so much from anti-racist activists – we won't let Britain's racist history be swept under the rug.

The debate continues. This little book is another pebble in the pond. It does not concentrate exclusively on Churchill and is not a biography in the traditional sense. It situates Churchill within the ruling class that fought against workers and dissidents at home and built a huge empire abroad. It was this combination that enabled defeats of working-class organisations in Britain and the colonisation of large tracts of Asia and Africa. Without understanding the histories of those who resisted at home and abroad it is not easy to understand the hostility towards Churchill that still exists in this country.

Half a century ago I was enjoying a meal in Phnom Penh with Lawrence Daly, the Scottish miner's leader. The conversation was wide-ranging. The noise of the bombs dropping on Vietnam resounded throughout the region. Daly was an autodidact, an organic intellectual and attached to no political party. The discussion turned to Britain. How did he explain the British electorate voting Churchill out in 1945? What had happened to the projected images of the great war leader? Daly paused for a moment and then said: 'It's not a mystery. Thanks to the Tories, the country was neck-deep in shit. People felt that if they elected Churchill, he would force them to do sit-ups.'

After one hundred and fifty years of continuous growth, as Eric Hobsbawm pointed out in *Industry and Empire*, the British economy was in trouble and mass unemployment was threatening social peace. Churchill wished to reverse the process by any means necessary. His favourite method was the use of force. On this he would

never change, falter or repent. He never fully understood that American and German successes owed a great deal to scientific research and technological development. British universities were left untouched, continuing their normal pursuits, till it was too late to catch up with the US and Germany. A complacent ruling class in Britain, fed on the fruits of empire, was not capable of making up the ground. Despite what is hallowed as Churchill's 'finest hour', the 1945 victory was a huge defeat for the British Empire.

It took Churchill and his Labour mimics, Attlee and Bevin, some time to understand the full implications of this. Churchill accepted the role of second fiddle as long as he could pretend he was the first, issuing Cold War proclamations that generally amused and occasionally annoyed the new masters of the Western world. The US leaders humoured him, while getting on with their own business of taking over the European and Japanese colonies, with varying degrees of success.

Churchill's genetic racism never disappeared, trickling down homewards as labour shortages necessitated the import of colonial workers from the West Indies and South Asia. During his last weeks in Downing Street he was intransigent. His defence minister Harold Macmillan (later to be prime minister) recorded in his diary on 20 January 1955: 'More discussion [in Cabinet] about the West Indian immigrants. A Bill is being drafted – but it's not an easy problem. P.M. [Winston Churchill] thinks "Keep England White" a good slogan.'¹ A decade or so later, confronting a bout of heckling from racists at a public meeting, I shouted back: 'We're here because you were there. And we've got another century and a half to go.' They shut up temporarily, but I don't think they fully grasped the dialectic. Nor did Churchill.

This is what I explain in this book, accompanying Churchill's political life-line with a political and historical analysis that runs counter to his views and those of his many epigones. In highlighting the story of a defiant opposition (weak or strong), the book engages with a working-class history and colonial rebellions in a dialectical relation with the worshipful texts.

1 David Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951–1957*, London, 2009, p. 453.

The emergence of an anti-colonial movement on campuses in different parts of the world a few years ago was an added inducement to writing about Churchill. The fact that Barack Obama and, more recently, Joe Biden, removed the Churchill bust from the Oval Office was another push (before 9/11 and George W. Bush's war on Afghanistan and Iraq, few were even aware that the bust existed). They did so because of British atrocities in Kenya and Churchill's record on Ireland, two of the imperial crimes he is charged with in this book. Their removal of the bust, however, was largely symbolic. Obama and Biden spoke as re-colonisers, as the modern heirs of Churchill and Curzon, Leopold and Salazar. The country over which they preside is the only real empire today, in a position much stronger than that of the British Empire even at its peak, and with a record of war crimes second to none.

The decolonisers in Britain and the anti-racists in the United States have torn down or demanded the removal of statues of slave owners and scoundrels such as Rhodes (greatly admired by Churchill). Churchill's statue has merely been daubed with red paint, to mark a Remembrance Day for the victims of empire. I'm not in favour of destroying his statue or that of most other imperial warlords or underlings. That would be a wrong-headed attempt to wipe out three hundred years of British history. A similar process in the United States would entail destroying the statues of most of the Founding Fathers on the grounds that they were slaveholders.

Far better to demand or implement the right to install plaques that challenge the official view, so that visitors to the site can read both sides of the argument and make their own decisions. And, of course, to demand new statues of those who were on the other side. This book is written in that spirit – an irruption, I hope, into a historical-political order that appears hegemonic but remains vulnerable. And with it, history remains the roiling, contradictory, conflict-ridden, international human story that it has always been.

The Jewel in the Crown

Churchill's India obsession was many things, but it was not irrational. No other modern empire had succeeded in grabbing so much land and so many people in Asia as had the British. This posed some problems in India because there were too many people, making even a partial extermination difficult. Nor could they be confined in reservations or concentration camps. The advantages, however, vastly outweighed the problems.

Churchill never liked India. His first armed encounter was not a pleasant affair. He wrote of his shock at encountering the subcontinent, and was relieved to be put on active duty on the Afghan border. In a despatch to the *Daily Telegraph* on 6 November 1897 he wrote:

The rising of 1897 is the most successful attempt hitherto made to combine the frontier tribes. It will not be the last. The simultaneous revolt of distant tribes is an evidence of secret workings ... Civilization is face to face with militant Mohammedanism. When we reflect on the moral and material forces arrayed, there need be no fear of the ultimate issue, but the longer the policy of half-measures is adhered to the more distant the end of the struggle will be.

An interference more galling than complete control, a timidity more rash than reckless, a clemency more cruel than the utmost severity, mark our present dealings with the frontier tribes. To terminate this sorry state of affairs it is necessary to carry a recognized and admitted policy to its logical and inevitable conclusion.

A month or so earlier he had been shaken by the sight of thirty-six dead bodies, hurriedly buried by the British, that had been discovered and mutilated by Pashtun tribesmen. But this was no more unedifying than the violence meted out regularly by the British Army. Civilisation and barbarism are Siamese twins. Churchill confided to his diary:

The tribesmen are among the most miserable and brutal creatures on earth. Their intelligence only enables them to be more cruel,

more dangerous, more destructible than the wild beasts ... I find it impossible to come to any other conclusion than that, in proportion that these valleys are purged from the pernicious vermin that infest them, so will the happiness of humanity be increased, and the progress of mankind accelerated.

No word to explain why the British were under attack. The Empire had already lost wars against Afghanistan. The first ended in January 1842, with the defeat of a large British-led force under the command of General Elphinstone. The Governor-General of India, Lord Auckland, was so shaken by the news that it gave him a stroke from which he never recovered. In April the same year, General Pollock led a 'Force of Retribution' that destroyed the old sixteenth-century bazaar in Kabul and other old buildings. Having carried out their revenge, the British left Afghanistan and resolved never to attempt a take-over again.

However, in 1893 the Empire insisted on drawing a formal border between Afghanistan and India, and a civil servant, Sir Mortimer Durand, was despatched to do the job. He drew a line to establish a 1,640-mile border that divided the Pashtun tribes and was often ignored by the local people. It was against this purely arbitrary division that the 'wild beasts' were up in arms again.

Late one night in 1897, a Pashtun tribe (with whom the British wrongly assumed they were not in dispute) launched a stealth attack on the British encampment. Churchill, an eager twenty-something subaltern on his first visit to the turbulent northwest frontier, was outraged by the 'treachery'. The guerrilla attack cost the British Indian army forty officers and men as well as many horses and pack animals. To the young Churchill's delight, the commander of the operation, Sir Bindon Blood ordered an immediate retaliation. The new recruit joined General Jeffreys in the punitive expedition to 'chastise the truculent assailants'. The exciting encounter between the flashing swords of the Pashtuns and English rifles was all in a day's work, as Churchill later wrote in *My Early Life*, but what afforded young Winston the greatest pleasure was the disciplined accomplishment of a colonial mission: 'The chastisement was to take the form of marching up their valley,

which is a *cul de sac*, to its extreme point, destroying all the crops, breaking the reservoirs of water, blowing up as many forts as time permitted, and shooting anyone who obstructed the process.' Who can blame the Afghans in subsequent centuries for believing that in the second and third intrusions they were once again seeing the first in a new guise? What has changed is the technology and the rhetoric: helicopter gunships and drones instead of bayoneted rifles; 'humanitarian' explanations and lies instead of Churchill's straightforwardness.

The merciless Pashtun campaign was depicted thus in Kipling's poem 'The Young British Soldier':

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.
Go, go, go like a soldier,
Go, go, go like a soldier,
Go, go, go like a soldier,
So-oldier of the Queen!

An earlier poem, 'Das Trauerspiel von Afghanistan' (The Tragedy of Afghanistan) by the German poet Theodor Fontane, then living in London, struck a different note. Sombre and melancholic, it was a more accurate reflection of the magnitude of the 1842 defeat, as this extract reveals:

The snow falls quietly from the sky,
A lone, snow-clad rider stops in front of Jalalabad,
'Who's there!' – 'A British horseman,
I bring a message from Afghanistan.'

Afghanistan! He spoke it so weakly;
Half the city is crowded around the rider,
Sir Robert Sale, the commander,
Lifts him off the horse with his own arms.

They lead him to the stone watch house,
They put him down by the fireplace
How does the fire warm him, how does the light feed him
He breathes deeply and thanks and speaks:

'Thirteen thousand we started From Kabul city, beast and man,
Soldiers, leaders, child and maid,
Frozen, slain, and betrayed.
Our army wrecked ...'

And what of the victors? No poetry for them. Just stories of heroism and courage and the crimes committed by the foreigner, tales handed down orally from one generation of Pashtuns to another as the invasions kept coming. But what if you were a Pashtun fighter, captured by British-Indian soldiers and slowly roasted to death in an earth oven? Churchill described this too, without any trace of emotion or civilisational remonstrations. Imperial domination invariably leads to crimes against those who resist.

Carving Up Africa

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, with slavery abolished, the white imperialist powers went in search of substitutes. If the taking of people was no longer permitted, then by the impeccable logic of Empire the next question was 'Why not take the land?' Africa beckoned, the continent that had spawned humanity, given birth to ancient civilisations and, most importantly, was full of riches: diamonds, minerals and, later, oil. Tribal divisions and localised conflicts had weakened black Africa. Those countries with a recognisable political structure were a diverse and scattered group.

The oldest of these was Abyssinia, later Ethiopia, a region that formed part of the Amharic Empire. As European vultures divided the continent, it stood alone. Its independence had not yet been violated. The British had provoked a conflict in 1868 and built an imperial base at Zula, south of Massawa on the Red Sea, from which they successfully assaulted the ruler's mountain city of

and Jewish resistance groups in other parts of the country. When he first heard of the surrender, Hitler remarked to Goebbels that Paulus 'could have freed himself from all sorrow and ascended into eternity and national immortality, but he prefers to go to Moscow'. He did, and after the war he preferred to live in East Germany, only too aware of how many former Nazis had been integrated by the West into virtually every single structure of the Bundesrepublik.

Hitler never recovered from Stalingrad. According to Goering, it aged him fifteen years and he suffered a nervous breakdown, not showing himself in public for weeks. The German security service reported the public reactions to his first appearance on a newsreel after the Stalingrad defeat. He looked 'exhausted', 'tense' and 'aged'. But he was still determined to carry on.

In an attempt to avenge the defeat at Stalingrad, the German high command agreed on Operation Citadel, a battle to defeat the Red Army on the Soviet salient around Kursk in western Russia. This time the Soviet forces were fully prepared on every level and morale was high. The German offensive was halted before it could seriously penetrate the Red Army defences. German losses were huge, and after three days Hitler called off the battle. It was the largest tank battle of the war. The Red Army had triumphed. Grossman's equivalent in another medium was Dmitri Shostakovich, whose Leningrad Symphony and astonishing string quartets were a homage to those who had held out in the grimmest of circumstances.

There would be no more German offensives in the Soviet Union, only defensive battles, followed by retreats. Even as Hitler was digesting the latest disasters from the Eastern Front, he was informed that a combined American-British advance had led to the occupation of western Sicily. The Italians, as expected, had retreated, and there was little doubt that the two Allied powers would soon be heading upwards to the mainland.

10

The Indian Cauldron

*Life: enough of this poetry
We need hard, harsh prose;
Silence the poetry-softened noises;
Strike with the stern hammer of prose today!
No need for the tenderness of verse;
Poetry: I give you leave of absence;
In the realm of hunger, the world is prosaic
The full moon is scalded bread.*

Sukanta Bhattacharya, 'Hey Mahajibon' (O, Great Life) (1944)

During the interwar period India was in a state of continuous turmoil. The reforms of 1919 – which had promised increased political participation of Indians in government but denied them power – were regarded by most Indians as ill-intentioned and offering very little. In Parliament in 1917, Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India, had declared 'the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'. The result was a build up of pressure from below.

The British Empire clearly faced a choice: it could grant India dominion status or it could rule largely through repression. The failure to grant the first necessitated the second.

The Pashtuns, Punjabis, Bengalis and Malabari (now Keralans) saw the rise of mass movements and terrorism on the pre-revolutionary Russian model. Peaceful marches were violently broken up by the

police. The 1919 massacre in Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar is the best known, but there were others. The Moplah peasant uprising in Malabar in 1924 was deliberately misinterpreted by Raj ideologues. The Chittagong Armoury Raid in April 1930 was an audacious attempt to seize police and auxiliaries' weapons and launch an armed uprising in Bengal. The raiders were revolutionaries of various sorts, united by the belief that only an armed struggle inspired by the Easter Rising of 1916 (they called themselves the IRA: Indian Republican Army) could rid them of the British. The plan was to take government and military officials hostage in the European Club where they hung out after work, seize the bank, release political prisoners, destroy the telegraph offices and telephone exchanges and cut off all railway communications.

They partially succeeded, but could not capture the British officers and civil servants. It was Good Friday. The European Club was empty. Despite this, the main leader of the uprising, Surya Sen, assembled their forces outside the police armoury, where he took the salute as IRA members (numbering under a hundred) paraded past him. They hoisted the Indian flag and declared a Provisional Revolutionary Government. The British swiftly took back control and guerrilla warfare ensued. The IRA was outnumbered. A traitor gave away Sen's hiding place. He was captured, tortured and, together with another comrade, hanged. Other prisoners were packed off to the Andaman Islands.

In Lahore, the capital of the Punjab, a twenty-two-year-old, Bhagat Singh, who hailed from a staunch anti-imperialist family, decided with a handful of supporters to carry out two missions in 1930. The aim of the first was to assassinate the British police officer who had badly beaten up the nationalist leader, Lala Lajpat Rai, at a demonstration in Lahore. But they shot the wrong police officer. The second was to throw a few bombs into the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi when it was empty. Bhagat Singh declared they did so because they wanted the noise of the blast to wake up India.

In prison he became a communist and wrote that terrorist tactics were not useful, but he refused to plead for mercy. Gandhi half-heartedly spoke on his behalf to Lord Irwin, the liberal Viceroy, but was rebuffed. Bhagat Singh and two comrades, Sukhdev

Thapar and Shivaram Rajguru (all members of the tiny Hindustan Republican Socialist Party), were hanged in Lahore Jail in 1931.¹

There were similar events on a lesser scale elsewhere, and peasant uprisings too, the largest of which, in modern Kerala, shook the landlords and their British protectors. The peasants were mainly poor Muslims. They were defeated and the leaders of the revolt despatched to the Andamans for fifteen years. In 1935, the British realised the seriousness of the situation and passed a second Government of India Act through the House of Commons.

Churchill was vehemently opposed to the new law but was out of office. The Act provided for a controlled provincial autonomy, with the governors in each province holding reserve powers to dismiss 'irresponsible' governments. The tiny franchise was somewhat enlarged, and in 1937 the dominant Congress Party virtually swept the board in provincial elections, with the crucial exceptions of the Punjab and Bengal where secular-conservative, landlord-run parties obtained majorities.

Within two years of these elections Britain was at war. The Congress leaders, astounded that they had not been consulted before India was dragged into the war, instructed all their provincial governments to resign in protest and refused to offer support for the war. All this confirmed Churchill's prejudices. He simply refused to grasp Indian realities.

The volume of protests and resistance from the end of the First World War till the late thirties had been rising with each passing year. Gandhi himself, in his South African phase, was a staunch Empire-loyalist. His view that 'the British Empire existed for the benefit of the world' neatly coincided with that of Churchill, and the Indian lawyer was not in the least embarrassed at acting as a recruiting sergeant during the First World War. He moderated these views when he returned to India and reinvented himself as a political deity. He was happy to mobilise the masses, but on a 'moral level'. He would leave statecraft to the politicians, mainly Nehru and Patel.

¹ In yet another example of narrow-minded fanaticism, Pakistan's Islamic extremist parties have, till now, vetoed any monument in their memory to mark the spot.

Though when they needed his imprimatur during crisis times (Partition and the Indian occupation of Kashmir), he always obliged.

Gandhi's decision to make the Congress a mass party by appealing to the vast countryside had increased its size and political weight. In an overwhelmingly Hindu country, Gandhi had used religious symbols to mobilise the peasantry. This began to alienate Muslims, and since the Brahmins dominated the Congress leadership, the 'untouchables' knew their grievances would never get a hearing. Despite this, Gandhi, Patel and Nehru built a formidable political machine that covered the whole of India. The 1937 elections demonstrated as much, and it's worth pointing out that in the north-western frontier province bordering Afghanistan, the predominantly Muslim Pashtuns had voted for the Congress Party as well.

The decision to take India into the Second World War without consulting its only elected representatives was yet another avoidable error on London's part. The British underestimated the change in mood among the masses and some of their leaders. Had they consulted Gandhi and Nehru, offering them a fig-leaf to support the war, things might have panned out differently. The Congress leaders felt they had been treated shabbily and, after internal discussions that lasted a few months (revealing a strong anti-war faction led by the Bengali leader, Subhas Chandra Bose), they opted to quit office.

The British Viceroy immediately began to woo the Muslim League, and vice versa. The League's leader gave full-throated backing to the war as did the conservative pro-British elected governments in Punjab and Bengal.

When, on 22 December 1939, the Congress Party announced its decision to resign and did so a week later, Jinnah declared that henceforth 22 December should be celebrated as a 'day of deliverance' from Congress rule. Ambedkar, the 'Untouchables' leader, provided strong backing, saying he 'felt ashamed to have allowed [Jinnah] to steal a march over me and rob me of the language and the sentiment which I, more than Mr Jinnah, was entitled to use.' Surprisingly, Gandhi also sent his congratulations to Jinnah for 'lifting the Muslim League out of the communal rut and giving it a national character'. Little did he know where this would lead.

Emboldened by the emergence of an anti-Congress minority, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow expressed some optimism:

In spite of the political crisis, India has not wavered in denunciation of the enemy in Europe, and has not failed to render all help needed in the prosecution of the war. The men required as recruits for the Army are forthcoming: assistance in money from the Princes and others continues to be offered: a great extension of India's effort in the field of supply is proceeding apace.²

With this in mind, Linlithgow was confident he could survive the storm. When the Congress ministers resigned en masse, the Viceroy ordered the arrest of its leaders and activists. They were released in December 1941 as the British attempted to reach some accommodation. Gandhi was carefully studying the development of the war in Europe as well as Japanese moves closer to the region, and wondering whether the British might be able to hold out. He was not yet sure. The local impact of Operation Barbarossa was the release of imprisoned Communist Party leaders and militants, who now came out openly in support for the war. Gandhi continued to wait. It was the humiliation inflicted on the British in Singapore in February 1942 that led to a change of course. The Congress leaders began to think about calling for a Quit India movement and, in this fashion, declared their own (partial if not complete) independence from the British. Gandhi had engineered Bose's isolation within the Congress, but he was very critical of Nehru's anti-Japanese militancy. Nehru had suggested that Congress should organise armed militias to fight against the Japanese were they to take India. Gandhi reprimanded him strongly. He should not forget that Japan was at war with Britain, not India.

In contrast to Gandhi's handwringing and delays, the Bengali Congress leader, Subhas Chandra Bose, always deeply hostile to the notion of offering any support to the British war, went on the offensive. Of the entire Congress high command, he was the most

² Quoted in Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939-1945*, London, 2016, p. 25.

radical nationalist. He began to work out a master plan that owed more to the organisers of the Chittagong Armoury Raid than to Gandhi. Bose did not believe that peaceful methods could prevail. They were fine at certain times, but the situation was now critical. Britain had insulted India by taking its young men away once again to fight in inter-imperialist wars. Bose wanted to create an Indian National Army and began to explore all possibilities.

In 1942 Churchill agreed that Sir Stafford Cripps, the left-wing, former ambassador to Moscow, be sent to India to meet with Nehru, Gandhi and other leaders and plead with them to help Britain. If they agreed, he could offer a verbal pledge of independence after the war. However, before Cripps could depart, bad news came from South-East Asia: Singapore had fallen. Churchill blamed the men in the field. The British Army had not fought back effectively: 'We had so many men in Singapore – so many men – they should have done better.' As stressed above, it was a huge blow.

Cripps arrived in India, but few were willing to listen to his message. Jinnah's Muslim League and the Communist Party were backing the war, but so speedy was the Japanese advance that Gandhi genuinely believed they might soon be negotiating Indian independence with Hirohito and Tojo rather than Churchill and Attlee. When Cripps insisted he was offering Congress a 'blank cheque' they could cash after the war, Gandhi famously riposted: 'What is the point of a blank cheque from a failing bank?'

After Cripps returned empty-handed, Churchill pinned his hopes for a stable Indian army largely on Jinnah and Sikandar Hyat Khan, the leader of the Unionist Party and elected Premier of the Punjab, a province crucial to the war effort in terms of manpower and for being the granary of India. When, after Cripps's return, Churchill said 'I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion', he was expressing a long-held view, but in this instance was referring to the Hindus who had badly let him down.

Bose, now detached from the Congress Party, had already spent time in Berlin a year earlier. He had asked senior Nazi civil servants to facilitate the release all Indian prisoners of war held by the Germans to him. He would then create an Indian National Army (INA) and take it to India to open a new front against the British.

'How do you propose to transport them?' he was asked. Bose replied that he was intending to do so via the Soviet Union. At this point, the Germans, deeply immersed in planning Operation Barbarossa, told Bose that would be impossible. June 1941 was not far away.

Bose's single meeting with Hitler didn't go too well. He had read *Mein Kampf* and found that the Führer's insulting remarks regarding Indians were not that different to Churchill's. He argued with Hitler but was told that the Japanese might be a better bet and that he should get to Tokyo as soon as possible. Bose accepted the advice. The Japanese were far more receptive. After the fall of Singapore, Bose had his INA. It was a unified, secular force that fought against British army units in Burma.

Hatred for Bose intensified on the pro-British side, but the INA initiative increased his popularity in India as a whole. If the Japanese took Kolkata and Delhi, Bose would become the de facto leader of an Indian government. Gandhi and Nehru were only too aware of this possibility. Churchill's hatred for India and Indians grew each day as the bad news came in. Leo Amery, his old friend and secretary of state for India in the war cabinet, wrote: 'On the subject of India, Winston is not quite sane ... I don't see much difference between his outlook and Hitler's.' Amery had suggested a far-reaching deal with India which granted virtual dominion status before the war, but the Chamberlain government was not ready to agree to this. Churchill never would be ready to 'preside over the liquidation of His Majesty's Empire'.

In August 1942, the Congress leaders felt they could no longer remain inactive. The spectre of Bose and the fear of a Japanese occupation made the usually ultra-cautious Gandhi somewhat reckless. At the All India Congress Committee he launched the Quit India Movement, demanding that the British get out immediately. Huge crowds gathered; acts of mass civil disobedience were carried out. Thousands of Congress activists and all its leaders were locked up. Bose felt strongly that the Quit India Movement would not succeed unless Nehru and Gandhi armed the masses to fight back. This they would never do. It went against the grain of the strategy they had adopted for many decades. Bose was secure and confident in his own strategy, despite his over-dependence on the Japanese.

The Bengal Famine

In the middle of a world war, with political battles raging in different parts of the subcontinent, a new disaster occurred. This time in Bengal.

Bengal was the first region occupied by the British. From the late eighteenth century its land was ruthlessly used to grow opium, in what the historian Mike Davis has described as 'the biggest drug transaction in world history'. The gigantic drug profits accrued by the East India Company from the 1820s onwards paid for the direct costs and permanent overheads (the army in particular) involved in expanding the Empire to the rest of India.

Here was imperialism in action. Kolkata, designated as the imperial capital, was developed, and a sprinkling of natives were educated in English. In the rest of the province all that happened was the destruction of local handicrafts, the creation of a landed oligarchy and the modernisation of poverty. The opium grown in Bengal was transported from Kolkata to Canton. The Chinese market for the drug was expanded by the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) fought by the British to the detriment of China. They laid the ground for a huge growth in trade. 'This extraordinarily one-sided trade', writes Davis, had by 1868 led to a situation where British India 'supplied 36 per cent of China's imports but bought less than 1 per cent of its exports'. The sale of Bengal opium was a key link in 'the chain of commerce with which Britain had surrounded the world'.³

How did this global chain work? A. J. H. Latham described it in his classic account, *The International Economy and the Undeveloped World, 1865–1914*:

The United Kingdom paid the United States for cotton by bills upon the Bank of England. The Americans took some of those bills to Canton and swapped them for tea. The Chinese exchanged the bills for Indian opium. Some of the bills were remitted to England as profit; others were taken to India to buy additional commodities, as

well as to furnish the money remittance of private fortunes in India and the funds for carrying on the Indian government at home.⁴

Jute was not as profitable as opium, but then its trade did not require gunboats, though commodity sales were greatly helped by war: the Crimean War and US Civil War saw a huge rise in demand and profits. First shipped from Bengal in 1795 by the East India Company, four decades later pure jute yarn was being made and sold in Dundee. A report published by the Indian Industrial Commission (1916–18) – by 1918 consisting of ten members, only four of whom were Indians, and one of these was the Parsi magnate Sir Dorabji Jamsetji Tata – stated that 'the annual average value of the jute trade to Bengal has been computed at 10,000,000 pounds', and went on to point out that 'the association of the Calcutta jute industry with the east coast of Scotland has throughout remained intimate'.

No need to guess who the dominant partner was. The majority of European staff working in senior and junior managerial capacities at the jute mills in Bengal were Scottish. By 1918, cheap migrant labour from other parts of India made up 80 per cent of the workforce. Locals were not trusted by recruiting agents. All the workers lived in abject conditions. A tiny proportion of the profits from opium and jute could have created a system in which health clinics, schools, sanitation and tolerable housing units were built throughout the province, as they were in the white dominions. This was the Bengal created by a ruthless Empire.

The institutionalised poverty that characterised British rule in India and led to countless deaths is often underplayed or ignored by 'culturalist' historians. The treatment of Bengal was particularly vicious, decades before the wartime famine. An official report written by Dr Bentley, director of the Public Health Department in Bengal for the year 1927/8 was unsparing in its details. A million and a half Bengalis were dying every year from malnutrition, curable diseases, and lack of health facilities. These included 750,000 children under fifteen years of age. It was a 'dietary on which even rats could not live for more than about five weeks':

3 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, London, 2001, p. 300.

4 Quoted in *ibid.*

Their vitality is now so undermined by inadequate diet that they cannot stand the infection of foul diseases. Last year 120,000 people died from cholera, 350,000 from malaria, 350,000 from tuberculosis ... On an average 55,000 newborn infants die every year of tetanus.

That is why many British administrators viewed famines as little more than added extras.

Nothing much had changed twenty-five years later. 'Over five million people in Bengal starved or died in epidemics because of the man-made famine in 1943.' This inscription appears on screen over the last shot of Satyajit Ray's searing film *Distant Thunder*, a masterwork in its own right. The scale of the Bengal famine, which lasted almost two years from late 1942 to 1944, was not known to many people in India at the time. The nationalist leaders were in prison, while the Muslim League and the Communist Party were immersed in the war. There was an additional factor: some narratives of the famine underplay 'the enrichment of Indian industrialists' – Gandhi's great friend and benefactor G. D. Birla among them – who enthusiastically supported stripping the countryside of rice in order to feed their factory workers engaged in wartime production. Their pursuit of profit played a role in the mass starvation, yet this aspect has been largely absent from most historiography of the famine – in part, one author suggests, by over-emphasising the explanatory power of 'culture' and underestimating or even ignoring political economy.⁵

That between 3.5 and 5 million people died only became known after independence, and the first serious scholarship on the famine only began to be published decades later. But the British knew. Linlithgow's successor as Viceroy in 1943 was Archibald Wavell, who received regular reports from Bengal and was taken aback by the scale of the catastrophe. Though 'official' statements by Leo Amery and his civil servants downplayed the casualties, they were challenged immediately by Bengali politicians and cultural figures.

Satyajit Ray, the finest filmmaker the subcontinent has ever

⁵ See Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, London, 2015.

produced, was convinced that the 5 million figure was, in all likelihood, an understatement. During the late 1970s and 1980s, I visited Kolkata regularly. We had informal conversations, one of which I recorded till he was discussing other film directors and told me to switch off. I kept notes, nonetheless. We talked mainly about the state of world literature and cinema, which was how the subject of the famine came up.

Distant Thunder, based on a novel by Bibhuti Bhushan, was Ray's take on the famine, filmed in colour. We discussed the politics of the 1975 movie, his most radical and for that reason subjected to criticism by Pauline Kael in the *New Yorker* and, for a different reason, by Jonathan Rosenbaum in *Sight and Sound*, among others. Ray was enraged by both reviews. Rosenbaum was 'ignorant, couldn't tell Indian women apart ... it appears he wanted an epic'. As for Kael, 'she can't understand that certain subjects require different faces and different camera movements'. Kael had found some of these shots 'jarring' and, while she liked the film, she was taken aback by its 'politics'. She suggested that Ray was trying to expatiate his own guilt.

It was this that angered him most. Why should he feel any guilt at all? Just for not having experienced the famine first-hand because he lived in the city? He had been in his early twenties when it happened, but 'we all knew about it, if not the exact numbers. Kolkata was full of refugees, begging on the streets. It was a heart-rending sight. We knew that thousands of people were dying in the villages and we knew why. Churchill was intensely disliked in Bengal.'

Of all the charges laid against Churchill in relation to India, one of the most damning is the accusation that he was responsible for the Bengal famine. Indian historians are not united on this issue. Some think that Churchill's verbal attacks on and utter loathing for Gandhi are even worse crimes. But rude words are usually ineffective. It is true that Churchill denounced the Indian leader as a 'malignant subversive fanatic' and 'a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace'. The governor of Bombay, Lord Willingdon, described Gandhi 'as a Bolshevik and for that reason dangerous'.

But had Gandhi been a subversive, Bolshevik fanatic, the British would have faced many more problems in the 1920s. Some got very worked up when Churchill suggested that Gandhi's 1932 'fast unto death' was fake, and alleged that glucose was being dissolved in the water he drank. The correspondence between Churchill and Linlithgow on this issue reads like satire today.

Most Indians at the time would have seen the invective as a badge of honour. To be insulted by the enemy was part of the struggle. The only reason for taking offense would be that since Gandhi was, in fact, fighting for a peaceful, orderly and gradual transfer of power, the abuse was unfair. For some Gandhi was a deity, and they were pained by the harsh words. In any case, insulting him was a joke compared to the mass starvation that swept Bengal in 1943, when crucial food supplies were diverted to the war effort, malnutrition was widespread, and millions of people starved to death.

The response to this is to compare India's share of world GDP to that of Europe. In 1700, India's share was 22.6 per cent, while Europe's was 23.3 per cent. In 1820, seventy-seven years after the British East India Company had taken Bengal, before expanding rapidly to the rest of the subcontinent, India's GDP share had fallen to 15.7 per cent while Europe's had risen to 26.6 per cent. In 1890, two decades after the year-long Great Uprising was defeated, India's share had tumbled to 11 per cent and Europe was now on 40.3. Five years after independence and seven years after the end of the war, India was on 3.8 per cent and Europe on 29.7. Prior to the British colonisation, as many modern historians have pointed out, Indian peasants and agricultural labourers were not the 'half-naked beggars' that some later became during British rule. Eighteenth-century figures indicate that the poorest agricultural labourers in Chennai/Madras earned more in real terms than their counterparts on English farms. By 1990, the income of the average British household was twenty-one times higher than its Indian counterpart. The reason? Industrial-capitalist imperialism. The huge burden placed on the shoulders of India was imposed by Britain.

It is common practice these days to ascribe the responsibility for famines to the decisions made by individuals. Liberal, anti-communist historians blame Mao personally for the disastrous famine that

followed the Great Leap Forward, and Stalin for the impact of the coercive, ill-conceived industrialisation in the Ukraine. According to this logic, Churchill's name should certainly be added to the list of those responsible for the millions of deaths in Bengal. A population of 60 million was reduced by 5 million in just under three years.

Churchill's callousness is not in doubt: Malthusian remarks such as 'Indians breed like rabbits' (similar statements are often made about Irish Catholics) were criminally negligent. What was also criminal, once it had become clear what was going on in Bengal, was the refusal to declare a state of emergency in the province, immediately reverse the policies that starved the people of food, and send in rice and flour from other parts of the country. This was a crime for which Churchill certainly, but also the entire wartime coalition including Attlee and Bevin, were responsible. They never protested or suggested counter-measures to deal with the crisis. Churchill thought the figures were being exaggerated by mendacious Indians, when the truth was that the British were trying desperately to stop the flow of information from spreading throughout India or reaching Britain.

Churchill made no direct reference to this horror in his history of the war. Perhaps a subconscious guilt led to his oblique and false statement: 'No great portion of the world population was so effectively protected from the horrors and pitfalls of the world war as were the peoples of Hindustan . . . They were carried through the struggle on the shoulders of our small island.'

Viceroy Wavell was a bit more sensitive, pointing out to the British government that the famine 'was one of the greatest disasters that had befallen any people under British rule'. He was concerned that it would hugely damage Britain's reputation. Here he was wrong. Official and tame historians made sure that the episode was wholly, or in large part, whitewashed.

How else to explain the absence of the famine from the entire volume of the *Oxford History of The Twentieth Century*. It gets a few lines (very few) in Max Hastings's 600-page opus *Finest Years*, on Churchill's war. Boris Johnson thought it best to leave the subject unmentioned in this Churchill biography, despite the fact of his having an Indian mother-in-law. Not a single historian writing on

Attlee, deputy prime minister in the war cabinet, mentions the famine or the discussions of it among ministers. For what was a man-made disaster, the refusal by so many historians to touch on the subject borders on the grotesque. Had Hitler taken Europe and done a deal with the United States, the Judeocide would undoubtedly have been treated the same way, and not just in Europe.

Three important books that have broken the wall of silence are Mike Davis's pathbreaking study *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* and works exclusively on the famine by two North America-based Bengali scholars, Janam Mukherjee and Madhusree Mukerjee. There are also innumerable articles, such that the picture we now have is virtually complete. What exactly happened?

Bengal at the time was a province of 60 million people, roughly half Hindu, half Muslim, 90 per cent of whom inhabited 90,000 villages. Its 20,000 miles of waterways wound their way through dense forests, making over half the villages inaccessible except by boat. Hunger stalked these villages even in times of normality. Livestock dependency (as in Ireland) was low, and the population survived on rice and fish. The word of the British administrator was law.

The province had always been prone to cyclones, and its eastern part, now Bangladesh, remains under constant threat on this front. A number of cyclones hit the coast in 1942, but it was the tsunami in November of that year that flooded the region around the Ganges Delta. The low elevation in Bengal meant that the tsunami rolled far inland, destroying farmland and rice fields. Salt water poisoned ripe crops. The wave also carried the fungal disease known as 'rice blast', which struck the paddy fields. This reduced the average rice crop in coastal and surrounding areas by a third. The effects of this disaster were made worse by the fact there had already been a drought. To add to the punishment, the Damodar River burst its banks, flooding the Burdwan district of Bengal, devastating villages, drowning even more rice fields and causing an outbreak of cholera.

Scarcity led to price rises and hoarding, and starvation was widespread. But the worst killers at this early stage were the epidemics, with malaria taking more lives than cholera. There was no free national health system in Britain, so it would have been utopian to

expect the same ruling elite to create one in India. The hospitals that existed were of reasonable quality, but were located only in the big cities and reserved mainly for the use of whites and the native rich.

With Japan's lightning conquest of British-ruled Burma in the spring of 1942, the restless mega-colony found itself at the forefront of an inter-imperialist war, waged within the larger configurations of the Second World War. Alas, it was the poorest Bengalis who were now facing a slow annihilation. Had the Japanese taken Kolkata, as many nationalists (and not simply supporters of Bose) had hoped, the jubilation would have been short-lived. The famine would have proceeded unchecked.

Despite all the disasters, the 1943 harvest was only 5 per cent less than the average of previous years. It was not the lack of food that killed millions. It was simply that the food was made inaccessible on orders from the highest levels of the imperial bureaucracy in Delhi, who were carrying out instructions from London. The feeding of armies and those engaged in daily production for the military were given priority. A further factor was the Bengali government's advice that people should stock up on grain after the Japanese advance, which further decreased supplies. There were also US and Chinese troops in northeast Bengal and Assam, creating a further drain on food.

The only Indian politician who offered more than sympathy was Subhas Chandra Bose. The news had reached him in Japanese-occupied Burma, where his INA was fighting the British. His offer to the Indian government to send Burmese rice to the starving Bengali villages did not even merit a reply, even though he had suggested it would be transported in civilian trucks.

Churchill had no doubt whatsoever where the food should be sent. His chief adviser on food distribution in Britain was a close friend, the scientist Fred Lindemann ('The Prof'), a German by extraction. He was not universally popular. His arrogance and closeness to Churchill angered many in Whitehall, who felt that their meticulously researched facts and statistics were being misused, twisted and unnecessarily abbreviated by 'the Prof' to cater to Churchill's prejudices and instincts.

The sobriquet attached to Lindemann was either 'Baron Berlin' or worse. When he worked at 'S-Branch' (a group of academic

economists tasked with analysing data), a few daring colleagues used to hiss 'SS' as he passed by. He clearly needed an English name. Churchill obliged. The Prof became Lord Cherwell. Nothing else changed. In an interview with *Harper's Magazine* after her book *Churchill's Secret War* was published, Madhusree Mukerjee explained how well-matched Churchill and Cherwell were:

Judging by a lecture that Cherwell gave in the 1930s, he regarded colonial subjects as 'helots', or slaves, whose only reason for existence was the service of racial superiors. In drafts of this talk, he outlined how science could help entrench the hegemony of the higher races. By means of hormones, drugs, mind control, and surgery, one could remove from slaves the ability to suffer or to feel ambition – yielding humans with 'the mental make-up of the worker bee'. Such a lobotomized race would have no thought of rebellion or votes, so that one would end up with a perfectly peaceable and permanent society, 'led by supermen and served by helots'.

In November 1943, Cherwell urged Churchill to hold firm against demands for famine relief. Else, he warned, 'so long as the war lasts [India's] high birth rate may impose a heavy strain on this country which does not view with Asiatic detachment the pressure of a growing population on limited supplies of food'. That is, he blamed the famine on the irresponsible fecundity of natives – and ignored the devastation of the Indian economy by the war effort. He also elided the fact that the War Cabinet was preventing India from using its ample sterling balance or even its own ships to import sufficient wheat.⁶

In response to rising prices in Bengal, families sold anything that was of any value: radios, bicycles and even the metal roofs of their huts. They would trade household items such as pots and pans for even a tiny amount of rice. They sold what little land they possessed. A quarter of a million families lost all their land during the famine. Increased prices also led people to turn to the cursed money lenders, leeches who did not forbear from charging high interest rates.

6 Scott Horton, 'Churchill's Dark Side: Six Questions for Madhusree Mukerjee', *Harper's Magazine*, 4 November 2010.

Less is known about the foraging that took place during the famine, as it was subsumed under the larger story of the Second World War and the area was closed to journalists for much of the time. We do know there were incidents of cannibalism and that some Brahmin women preferred death to going in search of food, let alone accepting it from 'lower caste' people or Muslims. It is difficult to feel sympathy for them. There were internal refugees, too, with the poor making long marches from the countryside to the city. Three-quarters of a million reached Kolkata and the suburban villages surrounding it. Some of the more enterprising peasants raided food depots. They had nothing to lose.

In the week ending 9 October 1943, just under 2,000 deaths were recorded in Calcutta alone, with 1,600 the week before. In contrast, Amery reported that from 15 August to 16 October 1943, roughly 8,000 people had died in Calcutta from malnutrition. The journalist K. Santhanam, a former member of the Legislative Assembly, believed 100,000 people were dying in Bengal each week.

The chief press adviser to the Bengal government did everything in his power to stop word of the famine from reaching Britain. The government itself ceased reporting daily deaths by starvation. Every possible effort was made to underplay the scale of the famine. The war had put everything else, including human lives, on hold.

Fearing the Japanese Army might soon be sweeping into eastern India, the war cabinet in London imposed a scorched-earth policy, known as 'Denial', which involved stripping Bengal's coastal districts of 'surplus' rice supplies and seizing local transport in order to prevent it falling into the hands of the invading forces. Wartime mobilisation brought an 'authoritarian resolve' to the predatory dynamics of colonial rule, Janam Mukherjee argues: the British Governor of Bengal, Sir John Herbert, sidelined the elected provincial government under Fazlul Huq – a genial anti-communist populist, whose somewhat misjudged slogan in the 1937 elections had been 'Lentils and Rice!' – and appointed an English official, L. G. Pinnell, to implement Denial at top speed.

Pinnell approached a well-known supporter of Jinnah's Muslim League, the rice merchant, M. A. Ispahani, offering his company 2 million rupees to carry out the operation. The predictable 'hue and

cry' from the other parties prompted Pinnell to appoint four more Denial agents on a party-communalist basis for 'balance' – leading, Mukherjee writes, to even more chaos and corruption. In April 1942 Pinnell called for a levy of 123,000 tons of 'surplus' rice; stocks were seized by force where farmers resisted, while compensation payments drove up prices across the board.

In May, Pinnell turned his attention to boats: 43,000 vessels were destroyed or confiscated over the next few months, crippling the 'essential riverine transport infrastructure' upon which millions of the poorest Bengalis depended; boat owners were compensated, but not those who leased them for their livelihoods; potters and fishermen were left destitute. At the same time, as Mukherjee points out, rice was still being exported from Bengal: 45,000 tons in January 1942 rising to 66,000 tons in April.

It was at this point that the refugees from Burma arrived. The Japanese victory there led to some 600,000 Indian workers fleeing the country, at least 80,000 dying on the 600-mile march to the Bengal border. While the British Imperial government did its best to look after Europeans fleeing the Japanese advance, the Indians were left to fend for themselves. The survivors increased the demand for rice in Bengal at precisely the time when Denial was stripping stocks bare.

Adding to the indigent were thousands of peasant families evicted wholesale by the British authorities for the purposes of military expediency: 36,000 people from Diamond Harbour, 70,000 from Noakhali and so on. Many of these deportees were left particularly vulnerable and would be among the first to perish with the onset of mass starvation.

Responding to the widespread anti-Denial protests, a Congress resolution of 10 July 1942 called for full compensation for any loss of landed property or boats, which it said should not be surrendered until compensation was settled. From London, the war cabinet declared that the Congress 'Denial resolution' – moderate enough – amounted to treason. Amery urged Linlithgow to adopt harsher measures with regard to Gandhi and the Congress leadership, rather than 'merely punish the wretched villager who refuses to hand over his boat or his bullock cart'.

Meanwhile, 'the poor were on the move by the millions, trudging

through the monsoon rains, now half-naked, falling by the wayside and dying, or straggling into urban areas to beg for food'. What passed for a health system was 'in shambles: under-organized, understaffed and lacking in basic supplies'. Bengal's official surgeon-general would describe the famished as 'mere skin and bone, dehydrated, with dry furred tongues, sores on lips, staring eyes'.⁷

Viceroy Linlithgow, whose attitude towards the mass starvation had been to ignore it as far as possible, was replaced in October 1943 by Wavell, whose imperial *cursus* included the suppression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, and humiliating defeat in Malaya, Singapore and Burma. Prior to that he had served in Kenya, Cyprus and Somaliland. This was the itinerary of many officers in the imperial legions. Churchill had found him a disappointing military commander (i.e. Wavell had disagreed with him), and sent him off to New Delhi to get him out of the way. Churchill regarded him as 'a good average colonel' who would have made 'a good chairman of a Tory association'. This was a bit unfair.

Wavell was far too well read and cultured to be just that, and in fact, after touring Calcutta incognito with his wife, he instructed the military to help with relief, committing a full division to the effort. On Wavell's orders, the destitute refugees were gradually transferred to army camps from November 1943 onwards and meagre rations were allocated. However, the compulsory round-ups in Kolkata, in an attempt to clear the city of begging skeletons, led to the separation of families and related social disasters. Husbands abandoned their wives, children were sold or left to die. Widows in joint family homes were discarded like unwanted rubbish. Mass prostitution flourished as isolated women and children were kidnapped and sold into brothels. By the end of 1943, well over 3 million Bengalis had died.

Wavell acknowledged the famine and tried to do something about it, despite being regularly thwarted by London. He remained unpopular with his masters. Churchill asked in a mocking telegram why, if food was so scarce, had Gandhi not died yet?

'Wavell's star rose high at an early stage of the war', his friend

7 Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, pp. 121, 129.

Basil Liddell Hart later wrote. 'The glow was the more brilliant because of the darkness of the sky.' Churchill regarded him as too cautious, while Wavell thought Churchill's understanding of military tactics hadn't developed much since the Boer War. Churchill wanted his warlords to be more like himself, bullying, insensitive and adventurous. Wavell was a bookish introvert. If there had ever been a proper Commission of Enquiry into the famine, he would have provided valuable evidence to counteract the inhumanity displayed by Churchill and Attlee in the war cabinet.

As the skies of Bengal darkened with the smoke of burnt bodies, Wavell did his best to convince London of the necessity for large-scale imports of food grains, enlisting the support of the commander-in-chief of the Indian Army, Claude Auchinleck, and of the chiefs of staff in London. Wavell continued to request food through February and March 1944, going so far as to threaten his resignation. He exhausted every avenue, including the newly founded United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Authority (UNRRA), without success. To Churchill's outrage, Wavell approached Roosevelt directly, asking for US ships to bring grain to a battered subcontinent beset by famine and hunger. Roosevelt, together with Congress and the US media, remained indifferent. They did not wish to offend Churchill. Australia and Canada both offered aid, but there was no available shipping.

In March 1944 the British government offered 400,000 tons of wheat in exchange for 150,000 tons of rice. In June, Wavell managed to extract 200,000 tons from the war cabinet, but this was still too little in his eyes. Churchill then requested US aid himself in mid 1944, but shipping had been committed to the European conflict.

The war cabinet was unmoved, with Churchill observing that the starvation of the 'anyhow under-fed Bengalis' was less serious than that of the 'sturdy Greeks'. According to Amery, writing in his journal, 'Winston so dislikes India and all to do with it that he can see nothing but waste of shipping space.'

Wavell's intervention appeared to have stabilised the situation in Calcutta by the end of the year, but mass starvation continued in the countryside. As winter drew on, the predicament of the rural poor was worsened by chronic cloth shortages, so that many died not only homeless and starving but literally naked. For

propaganda purposes, however, the famine was supposedly now under control. The war cabinet still resisted Wavell's requests for food imports. The first half of 1944 saw an increase in the death rates, as epidemics took hold on a weakened population; deaths from malaria would peak that November. Another 2 million people died of hunger, disease and exposure during 1944.

In Calcutta, 'the urban poor lived on the absolute margins of life and death', in stark contrast with the increased profits that Indian industrialists were making. In December 1944 the new governor of Bengal, the Australian politician Richard Casey, recorded his horror at the living conditions he encountered on a tour of Calcutta's slums: 'Human beings cannot let other human beings exist under these conditions.'⁸

The situation remained serious in 1945, when the failure of the monsoon rains brought fears of another famine. In January 1946, Wavell warned Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, the Attlee government's Secretary of State for India, that the food situation was once again critical. Pethick-Lawrence acknowledged that 'India's need is unquestionable', but made it clear that there would be no increase of food imports. Instead, he recommended that the food ration in the cities be cut to make existing supplies go further. In these conditions, with independence now on the horizon, the attempts by rival Indian politicians to blame the catastrophe on their opponents – especially the unelected Muslim League government, which had presided over the worst of the famine – fell on fertile ground.⁹

Communal divisions, however, were still not all-encompassing. There were unified mass protests in November 1945 and February 1946 against the trials of Indian National Army soldiers taken prisoner in Burma by the returning British troops: Muslim League, Congress and Communist flags were tied together in a gesture of political unity – 'testimony to a sense of solidarity with which the population of Calcutta understood their highly uncertain collective fate'.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

⁹ Ibid. See also John Newsinger's review of Mukherjee's book in *New Left Review*, 96, November–December 2015.

¹⁰ Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, p. 202.

In that same fateful year, 1946, the naval ratings in Bombay and Karachi went on strike and seized battleships of the Royal Indian Navy. In its entire history, the British Empire had never faced a mutiny on this scale in its armed forces. A huge general strike erupted in Bombay in solidarity with the sailors. The strike committee was completely non-communal, its leaders – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – making it clear they would only ‘surrender to a Free India, not the British’. The radical poet and songwriter Sahir Ludhianvi expressed the anger of many in his poem dedicated to the sailors who rebelled:

O, Leaders of our Nation
Lift your heads,
Look into our eyes,
Whose blood is this,
Who died?

You showed us the direction
You painted our destiny
You blew on the embers
Now you shrink from the flames;
You appealed for waves
And now seek shelter from the storm.

We understand all;
Hope now lies in compromise
Colonial pledges always wise
Oppression was just a fairy tale!
The foreign promises let us hail!
Yes, accept their protestations of love
The people rise from below, you take fright above.
The old legacy will not die.
O leaders of the nation,
Whose blood is this?
Who died?¹¹

11 My translation.

Nevertheless, political leaders continued to channel the anxieties and frustrations of the masses into a more sectarian mould. Congress and Muslim League leaders pleaded with the sailors to give up, promising protection. The naval ratings believed them. Free India made sure that not a single ‘mutineer’ was taken back into the navy. Pakistan, surprisingly, was far more generous in taking them back after Independence.¹²

On 16 May 1946, the Attlee government’s Cabinet Mission to India published its proposal for a united, independent India with wide-ranging regional autonomy, intended to preclude the formation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. The Congress leadership at first agreed to the proposal, but soon began to back away on the grounds that the Muslim League would be over-represented. On 10 July, Nehru rejected the plan unequivocally. The Muslim League called a ‘direct-action day’ four weeks later to agitate for the creation of Pakistan.

In *Hungry Bengal*, Janam Mukherjee insists that starvation provided an essential underpinning for the horrific outbreak of communal/ethnic violence in Calcutta in August 1946. The *hartal*, or general strike, called by the Muslim League on 16 August, divided the city along lines already hardened by the dehumanising effects of the famine. Groups of Muslims on their way to a rally at the Maidan, Calcutta’s central park, attacked shops that had not closed, while armed Hindus tried to block their route. The upshot was ‘five days of largely unrestrained murder, looting, arson, mutilation, torture and dislocation’ that left much of the city in ruins. At least 5,000 were killed, although the real figure is almost certainly higher. On 28 August it was reported that there were 189,015 people displaced by the violence being sheltered in relief camps, but as Mukherjee points out, the total figure of the displaced was much higher: many fled the city altogether – 110,000 by train and unknown numbers on foot – while thousands more took shelter with friends and relatives. Mukherjee

12 B. C. Dutt, *The Mutiny of the Innocents*, Bombay, 1971. Dutt, one of the naval ratings involved, had written one of the first pamphlets inciting the revolt, calling on the sailors to ‘recognise the enemy’ and ‘love India’.

estimates that some 10 per cent of the city's population were displaced by the violence. At least the new governor of Bengal, Sir Frederick Burrows, was able to take comfort in the fact that the riots were 'communal and not – repeat not – in any way anti-British'.¹³ What could be more perfect?

The Bengali social reformer Ram Mohan Roy had said many decades earlier that 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow'. He was referring to the rich culture and radical political consciousness of the Bengali people. The 1946 riots prefigured the partition of the subcontinent. They took place at a time of renewed starvation, as a society already brutalised by years of hunger finally began to unravel. While the occasion was the Muslim League *hartal*, the cause was 'very specific and identifiable tensions' in the city. It was a 'localized battle for the control of city blocks, alleyways, and neighbourhoods'.¹⁴

Wavell's introduction of rationing in 1944 had meant that who 'belonged' in the city and who did not became a life-and-death question: not belonging meant repatriation to the un-rationed countryside. In August 1946, as Mukherjee puts it, 'that decision was taken into unofficial hands'. Sporadic violence continued even after the city had been occupied by 45,000 troops and the rioting had officially come to an end, with people still being driven from their homes and sometimes murdered.

Mukherjee's account makes absolutely clear that, in order to protect the Raj from a Japanese threat that never materialised, the British state sacrificed the lives of some 5 million people. The war cabinet maintained an attitude of callous indifference. In Churchill's case, the indifference was strongly tinged with racism. The Bengal famine was no natural disaster but 'the direct product of colonial and wartime ideologies and calculations that knowingly exposed the poor of Bengal to annihilation through deprivation'; 'a grievous crime was committed in broad daylight', one that is still unacknowledged.¹⁵

13 Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, pp. 220, 235.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 252, 260.

The British were far from alone in perpetrating this crime, as we have seen. Indian elites and political leaders, largely unmoved by the suffering in the countryside, were both accessories and beneficiaries. Here, Mukherjee highlights a crucial silence in Indian historiography. These classes still rule India – and Pakistan – today. Mukherjee describes travelling the Bengali countryside while doing his research: 'Hunger seemed still everywhere – haunting the shadows, moaning in dingy corners, written on the faces of young children on street corners, gnawing at the spines of middle-aged sweepers, and silently ravaging the collective consciousness of society at large.'¹⁶ As he observes more generally:

The profound and pervasive links between war, famine and riot are tortured and complex, but they are also manifest. They are, moreover, far from uncommon. Wherever there is civil war, ethnic violence, communal riots, or any other type of horizontal violence – particularly in the global South – look for the hunger that preceded it, and it is more often than not very easily found.

During his first trip to India in 1898, Churchill had read Macaulay's essays and admired them greatly – till he came across the historian's strictures on the founder of the Churchill dynasty. Macaulay then became a 'rogue'. Churchill did not record his views on Macaulay's essay targeting Warren Hastings, the second Governor-General appointed by the East India Company. Stationed in India, Churchill must have read it. Did he underline the concluding paragraph and recall it in later years? Probably not. He should have. Macaulay concluded his essay thus: 'Those who look on his character without favour or malevolence will pronounce that, in the two great elements of all social virtue, in respect for the rights of others, and in sympathy for the sufferings of others, he was deficient. His principles were somewhat lax.'

16 *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Macaulay's essay had been provoked by Edmund Burke's savage impeachment address in the House of Lords in 1788, indicting Hastings for 'high crimes and misdemeanours' on behalf of the House of Commons. That Hastings was a rogue is beyond doubt. He wanted to make money, and in those early days of British rule in Bengal and neighbouring regions he looted at will. The fact that he stole from the rich to make himself richer shocked polite society.

The following extract from Burke's speech indicates what he might have thought of Churchill presiding over a famine that cost 5 million lives.¹⁷

My lords, I do not mean now to go farther than just to remind your lordships of this – that Mr. Hastings' government was one whole system of oppression, of robbery of individuals, of spoliation of the public, and of supersession of the whole system of the English government, in order to vest in the worst of the natives all the power that could possibly exist in any government; in order to defeat the ends which all governments ought, in common, to have in view. In the name of the Commons of England, I charge all this villainy upon Warren Hastings, in this last moment of my application to you.

My lords, what is it that we want here, to a great act of national justice? Do we want a cause, my lords? You have the cause of oppressed princes, of undone women of the first rank, of desolated provinces and of wasted kingdoms.

Do you want a criminal, my lords? When was there so much iniquity ever laid to the charge of any one? No, my lords, you must not look to punish any other such delinquent from India. Warren Hastings has not left substance enough in India to nourish such another delinquent.

My lords, is it a prosecutor you want? You have before you the Commons of Great Britain as prosecutors; and I believe, my lords,

¹⁷ Burke was adopted as a counter-revolutionary conservative after the French Revolution, which he attacked. His texts were used for similar purposes against the Russian Revolution. But as this impeachment speech reveals, there were other sides to him. For a stimulating essay, see Francis Mulhern, 'Burke's Way', *New Left Review*, 102, November–December 2016.

that the sun, in his beneficent progress round the world, does not behold a more glorious sight than that of men, separated from a remote people by the material bounds and barriers of nature, united by the bond of a social and moral community – all the Commons of England resenting, as their own, the indignities and cruelties that we offered to all the people of India.

Do we want a tribunal? My lords, no example of antiquity, nothing in the modern world, nothing in the range of human imagination, can supply us with a tribunal like this. We commit safely the interests of India and humanity into your hands. Therefore, it is with confidence that, ordered by the Commons,

I impeach Warren Hastings, Esquire, of high crimes and misdemeanours.

I impeach him in the name of the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament assembled, whose parliamentary trust he has betrayed.

I impeach him in the name of all the Commons of Great Britain, whose national character he has dishonoured.

I impeach him in the name of the people of India, whose laws, rights and liberties he has subverted; whose properties he has destroyed; whose country he has laid waste and desolate.

I impeach him in the name and by virtue of those eternal laws of justice which he has violated.

I impeach him in the name of human nature itself, which he has cruelly outraged, injured and oppressed, in both sexes, in every age, rank, situation, and condition of life.

My lords, at this awful close, in the name of the Commons and surrounded by them, I attest the retiring, I attest the advancing generations, between which, as a link in the great chain of eternal order, we stand. We call this nation, we call the world to witness, that the Commons have shrunk from no labour; that we have been guilty of no prevarication; that we have made no compromise with crime; that we have not feared any odium whatsoever, in the long warfare which we have carried on with the crimes, with the vices, with the exorbitant wealth, with the enormous and overpowering influence of Eastern corruption.

My lords, it has pleased Providence to place us in such a state that we appear every moment to be upon the verge of some great

mutations. There is one thing, and one thing only, which defies all mutation: that which existed before the world, and will survive the fabric of the world itself – I mean justice; that justice which, emanating from the Divinity, has a place in the breast of every one of us, given us for our guide with regard to ourselves and with regard to others, and which will stand, after this globe is burned to ashes, our advocate or our accuser, before the great Judge, when He comes to call upon us for the tenor of a well-spent life.

My lords, the Commons will share in every fate with your lordships; there is nothing sinister which can happen to you, in which we shall not all be involved; and, if it should so happen that we shall be subjected to some of those frightful changes which we have seen – if it should happen that your lordships, stripped of all the decorous distinctions of human society, should, by hands at once base and cruel, be led to those scaffolds and machines of murder upon which great kings and glorious queens have shed their blood, amidst the prelates, amidst the nobles, amidst the magistrates, who supported their thrones – may you in those moments feel that consolation which I am persuaded they felt in the critical moments of their dreadful agony!

My lords, if you must fall, may you so fall! but, if you stand – and stand I trust you will – together with the fortune of this ancient monarchy, together with the ancient laws and liberties of this great and illustrious kingdom, may you stand as unimpeached in honour as in power; may you stand, not as a substitute for virtue, but as an ornament of virtue, as a security for virtue; may you stand long, and long stand the terror of tyrants; may you stand the refuge of afflicted nations; may you stand a sacred temple, for the perpetual residence of an inviolable justice!

Considering the House of Lords ‘a sacred temple’ to combat tyranny was a far-fetched notion even then, and Burke’s shameless flattery did not work. Hastings was acquitted. The process had lasted almost two years and had bankrupted him. His reputation never fully recovered. Nobody ever suggested impeaching Churchill, or Attlee, his co-partner in colonial war crimes.

11

Resistance and Repression

The partisan

Knows she'll be killed.

In the red glare of her rage

She sees no difference

Between dying and being killed.

She's too young and healthy to fear death

Or feel regret . . .

Nazim Hikmet, *Human Landscapes* (1941–5)

What of occupied Europe? The resistance movements against fascism were uneven. Churchill kept a close watch, for they would play an important role in shaping the post-war order. A distinction must be made between the actually existing Resistance – a minority in most cases, but one that fought politically and militarily against the fascists, mainly under communist leadership – and conservative patriots that included, especially in France, a handful of monarchists.

This courageous minority was in sharp contrast to the silent or imagined Resistance, in a broader sense of the word, that was adopted by many towards the tail end of the war, in most cases after the defeat of fascism. It encompassed a sizeable segment of the population that had never participated in any oppositional activity, that had ridiculed its existence, that attempted in later years to obscure its memory and history, but that also used the myth of the Resistance shamelessly in the aftermath of the war to

EPILOGUE



Epilogue

*This is our lot if we live so long and labour unto the end –
That we outlive the impatient years and the much too patient friend:
And because we know we have breath in our mouth and think we have
thoughts in our head,
We shall assume that we are alive, whereas we are really dead.*

Rudyard Kipling, 'The Old Men' (1902)

This cartoon ('Churchill's Last Day in Parliament') by Gerald Scarfe was commissioned by the (pre-Murdoch) *Sunday Times*. They refused to publish it. Scarfe sent it to Richard Ingrams at *Private Eye*, who made it their cover. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the artist.