

## Churchill's War; Attlee's Peace

Philip Towle

The outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941 ensured that Britain would emerge amongst the victors in what had now become a world-wide war; it precipitated the end of colonialism in Asia and divided Britain from Australia and New Zealand thus eventually encouraging Britain to make one of its most momentous decisions since 1945, to join the European Community; together with Nazi aggression and war crimes, it reinforced the belief that this was a war for the defence of Western civilisation and it helped Winston Churchill shape the British view of their role as leaders in this struggle; it destroyed many of the British investments in Asia built up over the previous century and increased the debts burdening an economy already weakened by two European wars, growing international competition and the Great Depression. For the next three decades Britain's indebtedness encouraged governments to maintain an over-valued currency to the detriment of the country's industry and trade.

As important as what the Pacific War did is what it did not do. It did not substantially weaken Churchill's standing in Britain despite his underestimation of the likelihood and strength and of a Japanese attack. While it brought a series of ignominious British defeats up to 1943, the war paradoxically strengthened the British political elite's determination to play a major world role because it confirmed their view that this was the best way of keeping the US engaged. Thus, the British made a greater military contribution to the Western alliance during the Cold War years and later than any state except the United States. Thirdly, and despite the burdens which elite ambitions imposed, these did not stop Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government establishing the 'welfare state' after 1945 to improve living conditions amongst the poorer part of the population. Fourthly, despite the plethora of first hand accounts of the Pacific War and other fronts in the conflict against the Axis powers, the Second World War did not generally produce literature, and particularly, poetry on a level with that spawned by its predecessor. Finally, neither the belated victories in the Pacific War, nor in Europe, gave rise to the triumphalism so prevalent after the Napoleonic Wars a century before. There are no major city squares, airports or railway stations named after British victories from 1943 to 1945.

Had there not been a war in the Pacific, the outcome of the Second World War and the European war's effect on Britain could have been very different. Above all, Britain would not have been so obviously dependent on US power as it became after 1941. On the other hand, the United States just might not have entered the Second World War at all or might have entered later. The embryonic US polls initially showed strong majorities in favour of neutrality in the European conflict; 84 per cent supported neutrality in September 1939, but by October 1941 over 50 per cent appeared in some polls to favour helping Britain against Hitler and some 40 per cent against.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, before the attack on Pearl Harbor, a majority of Americans

---

<sup>1</sup> *Public Opinion Quarterly*, March 1940, pp. 108, 111, 360, 714; *Public Opinion Quarterly*, March to June 1941, p. 149.

said they were in favour of preventing Japan seizing the Dutch East Indies and Singapore.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is just possible that in the absence of a Japanese attack on the US, Washington might have hesitated to become a belligerent and Hitler, with his hands full with the war against the Soviet Union, might not have taken the initiative. Had the US remained neutral, the European war would have continued very much longer with even more damaging effects on Britain and the Soviet Union. If the two countries had managed to defeat the Nazis on their own, Soviet forces would have reached the Channel, dominating Western Europe and turning it into an economic wasteland just as the communist system ossified the East European, Russian and Chinese economies. Alternatively, Britain or Germany might eventually have brought their nuclear weapons projects to a successful conclusion with decisive effects on the outcome of the war.

Had Japan not weakened the colonial powers' hold on Asia, Indian independence might have been better prepared, avoiding the sudden partition in which hundreds of thousands were massacred. Of course, friction between the Muslim League and the Congress Party had been growing since 1937 and communal rioting had intensified.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the League's popularity also increased during the wartime years while both the British and the Congress party's position weakened. The worst outcome for Britain became, not as it had been pre-war the immediate independence of the sub-continent, but a loss of control, while they were still responsible for law and order in the sub-continent; the best outcome was now independence without partition but, when this seemed impossible, partition became the favoured option. Already in 1946 the 'Great Calcutta Killing' between the Muslim and Hindu communities showed that the government could no longer protect its citizens, the police was becoming infected with communal hatreds and the army was stretched to maintain order.<sup>4</sup> Clement Attlee and his colleagues in the new British government recognised that the politicisation of increasing numbers of colonial citizens of the European empires through education and the spread of the media made it impossible for foreigners to continue to rule over them.<sup>5</sup> Such empires had expanded because of the weakness of the opposition, now politicisation meant that the will to resist had become widespread and people's wars or, more rarely, passive resistance provided the means to do so. However these novel forces made it more difficult to ensure the establishment of stable successor governments, a difficulty compounded in East and South Asia by the impact of the Pacific War and the speed of subsequent events.

Not only did the Japanese attacks hasten the demise of imperialism, they also exposed the dependence of Australia, New Zealand and Canada on the United States for their defence.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Public Opinion Quarterly*, March to June 1941, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> B. N. Pandey, *The Break-up of British India*, Macmillan, London, 1969; B. N. Pandey, Editor, *The Indian Nationalist Movement 1885-1947*, Macmillan, London, 1979; C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainwright, Editors, *The Partition of India*, George Allen and Unwin, 1970; Yuvraj Krishnan, *Understanding Partition*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2002, chapter three. For the general imperial position see D. A. Low, *Britain and Indian Nationalism: the Imprint of Ambiguity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, introduction.

<sup>4</sup> D. G. Dalton, 'Gandhi during partition: A case study in the nature of Satyagraha' in Philips and Wainwright, *Partition*, p. 222ff.

<sup>5</sup> The most perceptive observers of the Indian scene had been aware of this for half a century, see Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest*, Macmillan, London, 1910.

Japan and Germany found it almost impossible to attack the US mainland, Britain, by contrast, was fighting for its survival. Churchill and his wartime government thus gave priority to Britain's defences, the battle of the Atlantic, followed by defence of the Middle East and, after June 1941, to assisting the Soviet Union. Symbolically, new Hurricane fighters, which might have been sent to Singapore before the Japanese attack, were instead supplied to the Soviets while elderly versions from the Middle East were passed to Malaya. The Australians were, quite reasonably, not impressed with the defences provided for South East Asia and wanted to concentrate their own efforts on defending their homeland and the islands to the north rather than the Middle East. Their government was only too well aware that the attention of their British counterparts and the British people was focused on the war in the west. Thus the Japanese conquests drove a wedge between Britain and the white dominions, emphasised their dependence on the United States and pushed them towards developing their own foreign policies more rapidly than they would otherwise have done.

At the end of the Second World War Britain's leaders saw themselves at the centre of three circles, one of them pulling the country towards the United States which was vital for their security, one towards the emerging Commonwealth and one towards Europe. The eventual decision to join the European Community was driven in very large part by the erroneous belief that it might strengthen the ailing British economy, however it would have been very much harder to make the decision but for the weakening of the links with Australia and New Zealand between 1941 and 1945. Thus the Pacific War played an important part in shaping the country's destiny.

During the wartime years Churchill's greatest contribution was to maintain British morale until the Soviet Union and the United States became fully involved. He was undoubtedly the finest orator to lead Britain in any of its wars and towered above other leaders in the Second World War in this respect. But he was a poor chairman of the cabinet and he interfered in military operations often to ill effect.<sup>6</sup> During the First World War he had played a major role in the development of the first tank and in pushing the use of aircraft in naval warfare but 20 years later his views were often out of date and ill-informed. Before Pearl Harbor he persisted in believing that the Japanese were unlikely to attack and he gave the defence of Singapore and Malaya little priority until it was too late.<sup>7</sup> He would have made a much better non-executive president than prime minister had Britain had a presidential constitution of that type.

As far as the European conflict is concerned, the way in which Churchill interpreted the Battles of Britain and the Atlantic continues to prevail in Britain. In other words, Britain is seen as the last bastion of democracy in Europe in 1940 and 1941 struggling, together with its empire but otherwise single-handedly against the Nazi hordes. As Churchill put it in one of his epic speeches just after the fall of France:

<sup>6</sup> S. W. Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals*, Collins, London, 1977; Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, (Editors), *Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, War Diaries 1939-1945*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2001; Graham Rhys-Jones, *Churchill and the Norway Campaign*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2008;

<sup>7</sup> For the last minute debates in Britain about Japan see Martin S. Gilbert, *Finest Hour: Wilson Churchill 1939-1941*, Minerva, London, 1991, chapter 65.

The battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and care for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age.<sup>8</sup>

The British developed a reinforced dogmatism in their attitude towards the war; if their forces achieved victories well and good but if they were defeated that reflected the heroic nature of their struggle and their own unmilitary character, hence the explanation for the expulsion of Britain's forces from France, and the loss of Singapore, Malaya and Burma. But the British assessment of their war effort was not universally accepted then or later. After the Americans became belligerents, and pollsters asked them which of the anti-Axis powers was making the greatest war effort, they generally ranked their own contribution highest followed by the Soviet Union, China and then Britain. The British, on their side, had a very different order, ranking the Soviet war effort highest followed by their own, the Chinese and only then the United States.<sup>9</sup>

It was hardly abnormal for British arms to lose the first battles of war, the struggle with France at the end of the 18th Century was almost uniformly disastrous until Wellington's Spanish campaign and the outcome of the first war with Germany was in the balance until the Spring of 1918. Consequently, the British had, and have, a singular and comfortable view of the importance and justice of their role in the Second World War. The element which jars with this is the way in which so much of their military effort was focused on the gruesome business of destroying German cities, a policy which Churchill rightly saw as almost the only way for Britain to strike at its enemies during the early stages of the war but which went on for longer and consumed more resources than was wise. Decades after the end of the war the bitter argument which rose over plans to place a statue in London of 'Bomber' Harris, the head of Bomber Command in the Second World War, shows the continued uneasiness over the issue.<sup>10</sup> It was not that the courage of the bomber crews was unappreciated, as was shown in 2012 when the Queen unveiled a memorial to them in London without any controversy, but that Harris's anti-city strategy jarred with the image of a righteous war effort.

As far as British literature on the Pacific War is concerned, the autobiographical writings by those involved reinforce and epitomise the image of heroic victims. There have been some excellent studies of the disastrous defeats in Malaya and Burma at the start of

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill Speaks 1897-1963*, Windward, London, 1981, p. 720, speech of 18 June 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Towle, 'British strategy in the Second World War and reconciliation with its former enemies,' in Hugo Dobson and Kosuge Nobuko, *Japan and Britain in War and Peace*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Letters to *The Times*, 5 October 1991; 2 May 1992; 27 May 1992; 18 February 1995. See also John Terraine, *A Time for Courage: The Royal Air Force in the European War 1939-1945*, Macmillan, New York, 1985.

the Pacific War,<sup>11</sup> however most first hand accounts of the war have been written by prisoners captured by the Japanese in 1942. Many of the prisoners were highly educated and after their release at the end of the conflict they became academics, surgeons, judges and civil servants but, even those who did not achieve distinction, have contributed to the dozens of accounts of the hardships of the 'Burma Railway' and elsewhere. What neither the camps nor the rest of the Second World War produced was a literature on a level with the one spawned by the trenches of the First World War. It is Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and others a generation before who still dominate the anthologies.<sup>12</sup> A.D. Harvey has speculated persuasively that this was in part the result of the achievements of the earlier poets which made it difficult for the next generation to find its own voice but also of the way in which radio had replaced the written page as the main means of communication. As explained above, it was Churchill's speeches which shaped Britain's view of the war, not the novels, poetry or autobiographies.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the memoirs of the prisoner of wars camps and of the rest of the war are a minority interest and do not figure in the schools' curricula in the way that those about trench warfare have done.

The beneficial side of the war in general and the experience of the prisoner of war camps in particular was that they made the wider public British more sensitive to the sufferings of other nations. For 150 years Britain had been the global superpower and such power and status is not conducive to empathy and balance. But this changed as defeats mounted, already in 1942 perceptive observers were pointing out that they were suffering from the results of their previous insensitivity. As the diplomat Simon Harcourt-Smith put it:

We must no longer fight in the East as strangers amongst sullen populations, who either regard the war as a trial of strength between rival bands of interlopers or welcome the Japanese as symbolising the end of an odious British rule... We must show the world that, in the bad old sense, we are no longer imperialists.<sup>14</sup>

Many of those who were later to fall into Japanese hands were shocked by the poverty they saw in India and the discrimination between the races in South Africa when they landed there on their way to the East. One of them, John McEwan admitted that in his childhood home:

We certainly knew and suffered real poverty. Luxuries were virtually unknown but as I saw how the poorest Indians lived, in tiny makeshift dwellings, often constructed of

<sup>11</sup> Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest war 1941-1945*, Dent, London, 1984; Ivan Simson, *Singapore Too Little Too Late*, Leo Cooper, London, 1970; S. Woodburn Kirby, *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, Cassell, London, 1971; For a recent study of the nature of fighting in Burma see Fergal Keane, *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944, The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire*, Harper/Collins, London, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the selections made in Michael Roberts and Robert Hall, Editors, *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, Faber, London, 1965; Helen Gardner, Editor, *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962.

<sup>13</sup> A. D. Harvey, *A Muse of Fire: Literature, Art and War*, Hambledon Press, London, 1998, chapters ten and eleven. See also Jon Stallworthy, *Survivors' Songs: From Maldon to the Somme*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008. I am grateful to Dr Charles Jones for directing my attention to these works.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Harcourt-Smith, *Japanese Frenzy*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1942, pp. 212-213.

cardboard caked with mud, perhaps if they were lucky rusty corrugated iron for a roof, I soon came to realise that, compared to these people, I had had a very comfortable childhood indeed.<sup>15</sup>

A symbol of the more sensitive state of mind prevalent in Britain was the foundation of Oxfam. It was during the Second World War that this organisation was started to reduce the suffering of the Greeks who were dying of starvation because of the looting carried out by the Nazis as well as the absence of imports caused by the British naval blockade. There is an historical parallel here between the anti-slavery campaign, which blossomed during the Napoleonic Wars a century and a half before, and the likes of Oxfam which emerged from the Second World War. It is also striking how many of the former prisoners of various nationalities dedicated their lives after release to such causes. Freddy Bloom worked with the National Deaf Children's Society; Elizabeth Choy founded a school for the blind in Singapore; Richard Hare became a philosopher at Oxford known for his theory of the universality of morals; Vivian Bullwinkel became Director of Nursing at Fairfield hospital in Australia; Ernest Gordon became a priest and Jacob DeShazer a Christian missionary in Japan for 30 years.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the general attitude towards war itself had changed after the experience of the trenches. It is notable that, it is not the victories of El Alamein or Kohima, nor the successful landing on D Day which are popularly commemorated in Britain so much as the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. It was the civilian boats used to rescue troops from the beaches of Dunkirk which took part in the Queen Elizabeth's diamond jubilee celebrations on the Thames in June 2012.

If the suffering caused by the war evoked sympathy for other peoples, when linked with the previous depression it also made British people more determined to rectify the social problems at home. Their aspirations were epitomised by the 'Beveridge' report published at the end of 1942 which proposed that the state should become responsible for providing pensions, unemployment pay and maternity and child benefits. The Attlee government made the scheme, in modified form, the basis of the post-war welfare system which revolutionised the role of the British state in social affairs.<sup>17</sup> These efforts have come under sustained attack on the grounds that the resources would have been better spent on investment in industry. But the soldiers and sailors who had served in the war wanted to see some immediate benefits, benefits which had not appeared after the First World War despite promises at the time.<sup>18</sup> It was hardly surprising that many supported a Labour government committed to social betterment despite the extra burdens which the wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill feared it would impose on the

---

<sup>15</sup> John McEwan, *Out of the Depths of Hell*, Leo Cooper, Barnsley, 1999, pp. 9-10. There is a stark contrast with the reaction of a British visitor to India a century before reviewed in *The Edinburgh Review or Critical Journal*, October 1824- January 1825, pp. 31-41.

<sup>16</sup> 'Freddy Bloom', *The Times*, 19 June 2000; 'Elizabeth Choy,' *The Times*, 5 October 2006; 'Professor R. M. Hare,' *The Times*, 1 February 2002; 'Vivian Bullwinkel,' *The Times*, 18 July 2000; 'Ernest Gordon,' *The Times*, 4 February 2002; 'Jacob DeShazer,' *The Times*, 24 April 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For Beveridge's general ideas see Sir William Beveridge, *The Pillars of Security and Other Wartime Essays and Addresses*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1943.

<sup>18</sup> W Basil Worfold, *The War and Social Reform*, John Murray, London, 1919. For one of the most sustained attacks on the welfare state see Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation*, Macmillan, London, 1986.



British economy.<sup>19</sup>

However it is significant that neither Churchill nor his Conservative successors undid the welfare reforms when they returned to office in the 1950s. Instead a tacit pact evolved under which the elite were able to pursue their international aspirations while the welfare state worked to the benefit of the rest of the population. The war actually strengthened governments' determination to shape the international system, as far as possible, in the direction they desired and to maintain Britain's international status. They knew, of course, that their reputation and underlying strength had been diminished by the war. Opinion polls showed in 1945 and 1946 that people across the developed world had already decided that the United States and Soviet Union would dominate international affairs in the post-war era.<sup>20</sup> The United States had defeated Japan almost single-handedly in the Pacific and the Soviet Union had torn the heart out of the Wehrmacht in a desperate battle for survival across Eastern Europe. Concentrating on bombing German cities and keeping open the supply lines across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, Britain was apparently relegated in many eyes to a secondary role even in the European war.

That the British elite ignored such views and considered their country one of the 'Big Three' in 1945 now seems pretentious and almost comic after its wartime defeats and the crumbling of its empire but at the time Britain had few competitors or, indeed, supporters in its efforts to maintain international stability; German, Japanese and Italian power was demolished; France had been incorporated in the Nazi empire for four years and was given an occupation zone in Germany only at British prompting; similarly, it was the US alone which had seen China's potential and insisted on giving it a permanent seat on the Security Council. Churchill and later Attlee had participated fully in the key wartime conferences at Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam. Finally, British leaders were afraid that the US would withdraw again into isolation as it had in the 1920s and they felt they had to play as full a role as possible in maintaining stability and encouraging the Americans to remain engaged. Thus they quickly adapted to a situation where they were 'consuming' US security while 'producing' or providing security for other states. In 1962 the former US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson claimed that Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role but the British elite did have a strategy after the Second World War, it was, in General Ismay's words 'to keep the Americans in [Western Europe and elsewhere], the Russians out and the Germans down.'

The official history of the country's nuclear deterrent makes clear that Attlee's government saw nuclear weapons as a way of maintaining international status when India became independent in 1948, as well as an insurance against the Soviet threat and a possible retreat into isolation by the United States.<sup>21</sup> It was said at the time that the nuclear force was Britain's passport to negotiations at the 'top table,' in fact this was not so, when the

<sup>19</sup> Winston S Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate*, Reprint Society, London, 1953, p. 769.

<sup>20</sup> Hadley Cantril with Mildred Strunk, *Public Opinion 1935-1946*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1951, pp. 1057, 1139.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy, 1945-1952*, Macmillan, London, 1974. See also the same author's 'Britain, America and the bomb' in David Dilks Editor, *Retreat from Power: Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy*, Volume two, Macmillan, London, 1981.

Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) began in the 1960s, they were limited to the US and Soviet Union because their nuclear forces were by far the largest. Britain's reliance over the next decades on nuclear deterrence to protect itself and stabilise the Cold War might seem to sit uneasily with the claim that it had become more sensitive nation to other nations. But, paradoxical as this was, it was not contradictory. Deterrence is based on the hope that war can be avoided altogether. It had failed in the 1930s when the threat of conventional bombing had not deterred Hitler from taking over one country after another,<sup>22</sup> but there is evidence that it contributed to the avoidance of war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact over the Cold War years. No doubt it was not the only factor, and it certainly risked unimaginable destruction but, added to the revulsion against major conflict caused by the two world wars and recognition of the vulnerability of technically advanced states to all types of disruption in their way of life, it caused statesmen to pause before asserting their military power when crises arose in Berlin, Cuba and elsewhere.

The difficulties encountered in Britain's struggle to recover economically reflected, in part, the fact that it was the first industrial nation and thus the first to encounter the problems which all developed states face with competition.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the two world wars undermined the pivotal position which the City of London had occupied in the 19th Century.<sup>24</sup> The British had paid for the armies raised by the allies in the struggle against Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th Century and for those fighting against the Central Powers from 1914 to 1917, but by 1917 Britain could no longer subsidise the French and Italian military efforts and London had to borrow from the US.<sup>25</sup> Repayment of the debts incurred to the US was originally supposed to continue until December 1984 and the interest on debts in general accounted for much more government expenditure in the 1920s and early 1930s than the British military budget. In 1928 the country spent £125 millions on military preparations and £305 millions on debt repayments.<sup>26</sup> It was not until the late 1930s that these proportions were reversed, but the debts built up in the Second World War and afterwards to the United States and Canada would continue to be repaid to the millennium and beyond. The last instalments of \$83.25 million and \$22.7 million respectively were handed over in December 2006.<sup>27</sup> There were also war debts to India, Argentina and elsewhere. The cost of repaying these debts would have increased had the pound been devalued, on the other hand we can now see that the over-valuation of the currency stifled British industry from the 1920s until the 1970s, and caused a series of debilitating 'Sterling crises.'

---

<sup>22</sup> George H. Quester, *Deterrence before Hiroshima*, Wiley, New York, 1966.

<sup>23</sup> For a classic overview of the British economy, see Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation*, Methuen, London, 1983.

<sup>24</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression 1929-1939*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> John M. Sherwig, *Guineas and Gunpowder: British Foreign Aid in the Wars with France, 1795-1815*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1969; Philip Exeter and John Hunter, *The War Debts: An American View*, New York, Macmillan, 1928; Edward R Seligman, 'The Cost of War and it was met,' *American Economic Review*, December 1919.

<sup>26</sup> A. T. Peacock and J. Wiseman, *The Growth of Public Expenditure in the United Kingdom*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1955, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> 'Sixty years on, we finally pay for the war,' *The Times*, 27 December 2006.



Such crises and Britain's world role affected the public directly. British food rations were reduced from their wartime levels in the late 1940s to save people living in the British occupation zone in Germany from starvation and British conscripts were soon in action again in Greece, Palestine, Malaya and Kenya. Between 1945 and 1960 over two million men saw service in the armed forces.<sup>28</sup> Within five years Britain had once more to turn to the United States for assistance, on this occasion to prevent Greece being taken over by the communists and to encourage Washington to help establish what became the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation with its commitment that each member treat an attack on any other as an attack on itself. On its side, Britain sent troops, ships and aircraft to assist the US and other UN forces repel North Korean and Chinese attacks on South Korea from 1950 to 1953 despite fighting insurgencies in Malaya and Kenya.<sup>29</sup>

All this was burdensome enough and some British commentators blamed military spending, which rose from £836 million in 1950 to £1641 million in 1952 because of the Korean War, for the poor performance of the country's economy. To give some idea of the effort involved; in 1956 Britain had four aircraft carriers deployed, together with numerous cruisers and frigates. Another 3 carriers were engaged in trials and training, one was being built, while seven carriers and five battleships were in reserve or refit, making a total of 20 capital ships.<sup>30</sup> Year after year, defence white papers emphasised the extent of the economic burden which such forces represented and the efforts which the government was making to reduce the problem. As the 1954 estimates put it:

Defence will continue to impose a heavy burden on our economy in terms of both the budget and the balance of payments. In particular, the task of expanding our exports still further will not be eased by the continuing need to devote to defence production a substantial part of the output of our engineering industry.<sup>31</sup>

Heavy defence spending, low economic growth, yet another Sterling crisis, frequent strikes and the failure of the first attempt to join the Common Market conspired to produce what commentators in Britain and the rest of Europe described as the 'English disease' or a collective nervous breakdown in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>32</sup> In April 1975, the leading article in the *Wall Street Journal* was entitled 'Goodbye Great Britain.' Even the rare British successes, such as the exceptional number of Nobel prizes earned by British scientists, came to be regarded as

<sup>28</sup> David Kynaston, *Smoke in the Valley*, Bloomsbury, London, 2007, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British part in the Korean War, Volume 1 A Distant Obligation*, HMSO, London, 1990; Michael Hickey, *The Korean War: The West Confronts Communism 1950-1953*, John Murray, London, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> *Statement on Defence 1956*, Cmd 9691, HMSO, London, 1956, pp. 378-380.

<sup>31</sup> *Statement on Defence 1954*, HMSO, London, 1953, Cmd 9075, paragraph 7.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Shanks, 'The English sickness: Forward from Stagnation,' *Encounter*, January 1972; Henry Fairlie and Peregrine Worsthorne, 'Suicide of a Nation? Two Views of the English sickness,' *Encounter*, January 1976; John Rae, 'Our obsolete attitudes' and Peregrine Worsthorne, 'In a class of one's own,' *Encounter*, November 1977. Kathleen Burk and Alec Cairncross, *Goodbye Great Britain: The 1976 IMF Crisis*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, p. 14.

a reflection of British mistakes, a focus on pure science instead of commercial technology.<sup>33</sup>

However, despite the prevailing gloom, the underlying difficulties began to abate. Although it continued to be very high compared with some of its economic competitors, such as the Federal Republic of Germany or Japan, defence expenditure fell from some seven per cent of GDP in the mid-1950s to about five per cent in the 1970s and 1980s, and halved again after the end of the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> The change to a flexible exchange rate in June 1972 helped to end the Sterling crises which had plagued the country since 1930.<sup>35</sup> Mrs Thatcher's government in the 1980s weakened the trades unions, encouraged inward investment from Japan and elsewhere, privatised inefficient nationalised industries and allowed the City of London much greater freedom. In 1979, when she took office, Britain's GNP was estimated at \$381.3 billion against \$566 billion for France; the GDP figures for 1997, when the Conservative government left office, were \$1.3 trillion for Britain and \$1.4 trillion for France.<sup>36</sup> Britain is no longer a leading exporter of goods but on some estimates is now the largest exporter of services after the United States.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, Churchill largely shaped the British image of their country's wartime role as one of the two leading defenders of the Western way of life, a role which his successors struggled to follow and a burden which the economy, with a weak industrial base, an over-valued currency and a hobbled financial sector, found it hard to sustain. The elite maintained this vision despite the crushing defeats from 1939 to 1943, the end of the Empire, the entry into the European Union and the nervous breakdown, which the country suffered in the 1960s. The Attlee government was willing enough to accept that decolonisation must come but was determined to increase social expenditure and to keep the Sterling area. British industry and taxpayers were sacrificed in the common Western interest and to maintain the country's status but a consensus developed between the two main political parties and between the electorate and the elite that this should not undermine the welfare state. Moreover, it is questionable whether NATO would have emerged and survived without Britain's efforts to link the United States and Europe. Thus Churchill, Attlee and their successors felt their way towards a compromise between national and international demands which satisfied the majority of the electorate and which Thatcher's economic measures made less burdensome.

As far as the general effects of the Pacific War are concerned, assessment is made more difficult because these effects were much greater when the war compounded other influences. Moreover any assessment implies that history might have taken a different course and leads on to counter-factual interpretations. Had there been no Pacific War, would the US and Germany have gone to war with each other and, if so, when? Would India and Pakistan have been divided? Would China have fallen to the communists? Would Britain have drifted away from Australia

---

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Sampson, *The Changing Anatomy of Britain*, Coronet/Hodder and Stoughton, 1983, pp. 151-152. Sampson provided an excellent overview of British society since the Second World War.

<sup>34</sup> *The Military Balance 1977-1978*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1977-78, London, 1978, p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> '23 June 1972: Chancellor orders pound flotation,' <http://news.bbc.co.uk> downloaded 11 May 2012.

<sup>36</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1980-1981*, London, 1980, pp. 21 and 25 and *The Military Balance 1988-9*, Oxford University Press, London, 1998, pp. 49 and 69.

<sup>37</sup> *The Economist*, 21-27 July 2012, 'Trade in commercial services,' p. 89. Adam Davidson, 'Just like Wall Street... only richer,' *New York Times Magazine*, 4 March 2012.

and New Zealand and joined the European Community? Would Japan have been one of the permanent members of the Security Council from the UN's inception? If nuclear weapons had not been used in 1945 would we have nine nuclear weapon states today? The impact of the war was undoubtedly dramatic but historians can only speculate on the alternative courses which events might otherwise have taken.

(I am grateful to Dr. Arthur Williamson for reading the text and for his extensive comments.)