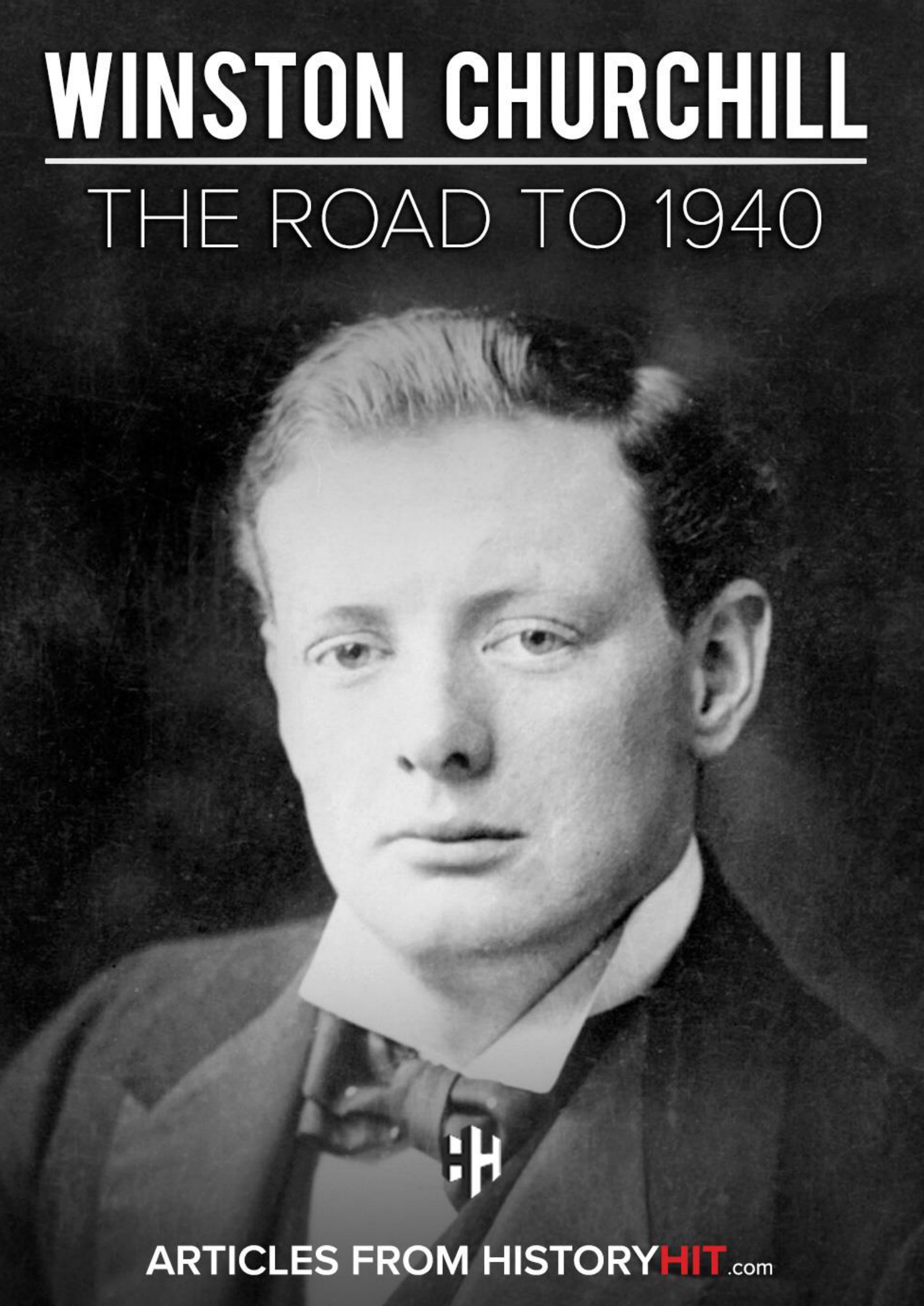
WINSTON CHURCHILL

THE ROAD TO 1940



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In 2002 Winston Churchill was publicly acclaimed top of the list of 100 Greatest Britons. He is best known for leading Britain through the darkest days of the Second World War to eventual Allied victory.

But, had he not been Prime Minister during the war years, he would still be remembered for his political exploits.

For several decades before Britain's darkest hour in 1940, this charismatic adventurer, journalist, painter, politician, statesman and writer had been at the forefront of the imperial stage.

In both domestic and foreign affairs his decisions helped shape the course of the 20th century: from crossing the floor to join the Liberals when only 29 years old to his role in orchestrating the disastrous Gallipoli Campaign in 1915.

Away from British shores he saw military action across the globe, showing remarkable daring on countless campaigns that turned him into a celebrity figure back home.

Nevertheless Churchill's career was subject to many low points, particularly in the immediate aftermath of World War One. He despaired at seeing the British Empire's influence seemingly decline across the globe.

From his birth at Blenheim to his zealous fight against Bolshevism in the aftermath of World War One this eBook provides an overview of Winston Churchill's colourful career before he became Prime Minister in 1940.

Detailed articles explain key topics, edited from various History Hit resources. Included in this eBook are articles written for History Hit by historians focusing on various aspects relevant to Churchill's life, as well as features provided by History Hit staff past and present.

You can access all these articles on historyhit.com.

Winston Churchill: The Road to 1940 was compiled by Tristan Hughes.

If you're going through hell, keep going – Winston Churchill

Contents

Blenheim Palace: Birthplace of Winston Churchill.

1874 - 1918

On 30 November 1874 Winston Spencer Churchill was born in his family's seat of Blenheim Palace. Widely regarded as one of the greatest statesmen in history, Churchill's career was long, varied and extraordinary. Few men in history can claim to have lead a cavalry charge against mail-clad warriors and held the codes for a nuclear-age power.

In between he had his finest hour as Prime Minister in 1940, when Britain stood up to the might of Nazi Germany alone and refused to surrender.

How Winston Churchill's Early Career Made Him a Celebrity

The young Winston was a stocky red-haired boy, who had a very distant relationship with his aristocratic parents and preferred playing with his toy soldiers to any sort of education. As a result, he never excelled at school and didn't even go to university, instead educating himself by spending much of his time as a soldier in India reading.

But that would come later, after a hated spell at Harrow, then a successful application to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst.

'At Blenheim I took two very important decisions: to be born and to marry. I am content with the decision I took on both occasions.' - Winston Churchill

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Churchill would later claim that his lifelong interest in warfare came from watching the soldiers march past when he had lived briefly in Dublin as a small child, and a romantic love of adventure and soldiering would never leave him. His academic performance was not good enough initially to guarantee a place at Sandhurst, but eventually he got in at the third attempt in 1893.

Travelling the Empire

After a few years he was initiated as a cavalry officer in the Queen's Hussars, but aware of the crippling expense of the officer's mess at this time and largely ignored by his family, he searched for other sources of income. Eventually an idea struck him, and he decided to travel to Cuba, where a war was being fought against local rebels by the Spanish, as a War Correspondent.

Later looking back on that time with fondness, he would remark that the first (but far from the last) time that he came under fire was on the day of his 21st birthday, and that he had developed a love for Cuban cigars on the island.

In 1897 a transfer to India, then a British possession, followed, and alongside his education the precocious officer took a deep interest in politics back home. Later that year, upon hearing of a campaign to fight a tribe on the north-western frontier, Churchill asked permission to join the expedition.

In the mountains he wrote up his adventures again as a correspondent and took part in vicious hand-to-hand fighting, despite his small stature and a shoulder injury sustained earlier in his career. His first book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force,* described this campaign. A year later, he was transferred to another of the British Empire's prized possessions – Egypt.

From there, ever eager to fight, he joined Lord Kitchener's force fighting Islamist rebels in the Sudan, and at the battle of Omdurman took part in the last successful and battle-winning cavalry charge in British history, killing several men from his horse.

With that his career in the army came to a satisfying end, as he returned to England and resigned his commission in 1899. Already a minor celebrity back home after his front-line dispatches, he was persuaded to stand as an MP in Oldham that year, though he was unsuccessful.

A career in politics could wait, for there was a new war brewing which presented an opportunity for the young man to earn yet more fame.

The Boer War

In October the South African Boers had declared war on the empire, and were now attacking British possessions in the region. Having secured another stint as a correspondent with *The Morning Post*, Churchill set sail on the same ship as the newly appointed commander Sir Redvers Buller.

Winston Churchill took 60 bottles of alcohol with him when he set out for the Boer War - essential luggage

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After weeks of reporting from the front line he accompanied an armoured train on a scouting expedition north, but it was waylaid and the supposed journalist had to take up arms again. It was to no avail, and after the incident he found himself behind the bars of a Boer Prisoner of War camp.

Incredibly, after enlisting the help of a local mine manager he escaped over the fences and walked 300 miles to neutral territory in Portuguese East Africa – an escapade that briefly made him a national hero. He was not done yet, however, and rejoined Buller's army as it marched to relieve Ladysmith and take the enemy capital of Pretoria.

Completely ditching the pretence of being a civilian journalist, he re-enlisted as an officer in the African Light Horse, and personally received the surrender of 52 prison camp guards in Pretoria. Having done everything he had set out to achieve and more, the young hero returned home in 1900 in a blaze of glory.

Ascending the political ladder

With his celebrity at its zenith, Churchill decided that 1900 would be his year, and stood again for Oldham as a Tory MP – this time successfully.

However, despite being just 26 and regarded as a bright new hope by the party, the young man's stance on free trade, and his friendship with the Liberal MP David Lloyd-George, meant that he took the almost unprecedented step of "crossing the floor" and joining the Liberals in 1904. Unsurprisingly, this made him a hated figure in Conservative circles.

That same year, incidentally, he met Clementine Hozier, who he would marry four years later, starting one of the happiest partnerships of equals in British history.

Winston Churchill proposed to his wife, Clementine Hozier, in the Temple of Diana at Blenheim Palace

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Despite it's controversy, the decision to join the Liberals appeared to be vindicated in 1905 when they swept into office, and new Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman granted the young Winston the position of Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies – an important position given the fragile nature of the Empire after the Boer War.

After impressing in this job Churchill joined the cabinet at the still tender age of 34, and as President of the Board of Trade introduced some remarkably Liberal policies for one often seen as a giant of Conservatism – including National Insurance and the first minimum wage in the UK.

Churchill's meteoric rise then continued, as he was made Home Secretary in 1910. His lifelong love of controversy, however, would haunt him here too. He made himself hated in Welsh and Socialist circles quickly with a gung-ho military approach to a miner's riot, and then invited the ridicule of more experienced politicians after what is known as the Siege of Sidney Street.

A pair of murderous Latvian anarchists were being besieged in a London house in 1911 when the Home Secretary arrived on the scene. Despite Churchill later denying this, the official history of the London Metropolitan Police states that the civilian politician gave operational orders, and even prevented the fire brigade from rescuing the anarchists from the burning building, telling them that no good British lives should be put at risk for the sake of violent foreign killers.

These actions were seen as hugely irresponsible and faintly ludicrous by senior political figures, and Churchill's prestige was badly damaged. Perhaps in response to the affair, he was moved to become First Lord of the Admiralty later that year.

Despite such failures, his early career had established him by the outbreak of World War One as one of the most dashing and famous politicians in the country, and given him valuable experience as well as a lifelong passion for warfare, foreign lands and high politics.

Lord Randolph Churchill's Astonishing Letter to His Son About Being a Failure

By James Carson

Winston Churchill did not enjoy a particularly close bond with his parents in his early life. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was a radical Tory politician, and served for a short period as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1886. His mother was a very active socialite. They led busy lives and spent very little time with their first son.

Indeed, Winston Churchill's nanny and boarding school upbringing verged on abandonment, and he wrote many pining letters to his parents begging them to visit him. He was also not a particularly high achiever at school. Many of his reports make it quite clear that he really was a very naughty boy.

Lord Randolph agreed to let Winston join the British Army after he completed his education at Harrow. In June 1893, Churchill took the exam for the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He only passed on his third attempt, and failed to get into the infantry. He would have to join the cavalry.

Churchill was regularly moved to tears in Parliament – something which was far from common at the time

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Lord Randolph already felt his son was not bright enough to become a barrister or follow himself into a political career. But his failure to reach the infantry was met with fiery vitriol in an astonishing letter:

"There are two ways of winning an examination, one creditable and the other the reverse. You have unfortunately chosen the latter method, and appear to be much pleased with your success.

The first extremely discreditable failure of your performance was missing the infantry, for in that failure is demonstrated beyond refutation your slovenly happy-go-lucky harum scarum style of work for which you have been distinguished at your different schools.

Never have I received a really good report of your conduct in your work from any master or tutor … Always behind hand, never advancing in your class, incessant complaints of total want of application …

With all the advantages you had, with all the abilities which you foolishly think yourself to possess … this is the grand result that you come up among the second rate and third rate who are only good for commissions in a cavalry regiment … You imposed on me an extra charge of some £200 a year.

Do not think that I am going to take the trouble of writing you long letters after every failure and folly you commit and undergo … because I no longer attach the slightest weight to anything you may say about your own accomplishments and exploits.

Make this position indelibly impressed on your mind, that if your conduct and action is similar to what it has been in the other establishments … then … my responsibility for you is over.

I shall leave you to depend on yourself giving you merely such assistance as may be necessary to permit of a respectable life.

Because I am certain that if you cannot prevent yourself from leading the idle useless unprofitable life that you have had during your schooldays and latter months, you will become a mere social wastrel, one of the hundreds of the public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby, unhappy and futile existence. If that is so you will have to bear all the blame for such misfortunes yourself."

You affectionate father, Randolph SC

Andrew Roberts notes in his 2018 biography *Churchill: Walking With Destiny* that “by then, Lord Randolph’s judgement was badly clouded by mental degeneration.” But the young Winston was evidently seared by the letter’s contempt. He was able to quote parts of it from memory thirty seven years later.

Winston Churchill was a prolific writer and orator – publishing millions of words and delivering thousands of public speeches

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Despite the clear contempt, and that he never really got to know his father on a personal level, Winston Churchill wrote a two volume biography of Lord Randolph – published in 1906.

Photograph (top right) of Winston Churchill and Sir Howard Vincent in South Africa during the Boer War (1900).

What Was Winston Churchill's Role in World War One?

By Peter Curry

Best known for his charismatic Second World War leadership and eloquent speeches, Winston Churchill's reputation up to that point was much more controversial.

Eccentric, bellicose and with limited regard for party lines, he divided opinion among his political colleagues and the public alike. By the mid 1930s he was essentially a political *persona non grata*.

His performance in the First World War had contributed to a tarnished reputation. Although his interest in newer technologies was to prove prescient, his aggressive mentality was to cost thousands of British lives, particularly in the Gallipoli campaign.

During the build up to World War One Winston Churchill advocated that the United Kingdom adopt a strong stance against German aggression, and authorized the mobilization of the Royal Navy

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First Lord of the Admiralty

In 1914 Churchill was a Liberal MP and First Lord of the Admiralty. He had held this position since 1911. His main positive impact was his backing for technological innovations such as aircraft and tanks.

His first major contribution was to encourage the Belgians to hold out for longer at Antwerp.

This decision has been praised as a sensible attempt to buy time for improving the defences of Calais and Dunkirk, but it has also been criticised, especially by contemporaries, as a risky squandering of men and resources.

In 1915 he helped orchestrate the disastrous Dardanelles naval campaign and was also involved in the planning of the military landings on Gallipoli, both of which saw large losses.

The Gallipoli peninsula was critical for securing a sea route to Russia, which would let Britain and France support their ally, who was isolated from them geographically. The main plan involved a naval assault, followed by a landing which would aim to secure the Ottoman capital, Constantinople.

The campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, and is considered the only major Ottoman victory of the war. After sustaining over 250,000 casualties, the invasion force had to be withdrawn to Egypt.

Churchill was not alone in supporting the Gallipoli plan. Nor was he responsible for its outcome. But given his reputation as a loose cannon he was the obvious scapegoat.

It didn't help Churchill that the government was facing a crisis of its own. Public confidence in the ability of Asquith's cabinet to wage a world war and keep the armies supplied with adequate munitions had hit rock bottom.

A new coalition was needed to bolster confidence. But the Conservatives were deeply hostile to Churchill. In fact, Churchill's removal was one of Conservative leader Andrew Bonar-Law's conditions for agreeing to enter into a coalition with Liberal Prime Minister Asquith.

Backed into a corner, Asquith had no choice but to agree, and on the 15 November the resignation was confirmed.

On the western front

Demoted to the ceremonial position of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hurt and demoralised Winston resigned from the government altogether and left for the Western Front. He was made a lieutenant-colonel, having already served as an army officer in Africa prior to commencing his political career.

Though undoubtedly a low point of Churchill's career he made a fine officer.

He was stationed at Ploegsteert on of the front's quiet sectors. He was not involved in any large battles, but would periodically make visits to the trenches and to No Man's Land, placing himself in greater danger than was typical of an officer of his rank.

When the battalion was stationed on the frontline, Churchill and other officers would visit even the most forward positions in the heart of no man's land to get a better assessment of the enemy.

He came under machine gun fire at least once, and a shell once landed near his HQ, with a piece of shrapnel hitting a lamp's battery holder he was playing with.

He returned after only 4 months, concerned that he did not want to be away from the political sphere for too long.

Churchill returns to Britain

In March 1916 Churchill arrived back in England and once again spoke in the House of Commons.

His role in the remainder of the war was somewhat limited but in 1917 he was made Minister of Munitions, a role he fulfilled competently.

The first known use of the term "OMG" was in a letter to Churchill. A letter published by the US Library of Congress from Admiral John Arbuthnot "Jacky" Fisher to Churchill sent in 1917 contains the phrase

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The position had become less prominent following Lloyd George's resolution of the 1915 shell-shortage crisis, but it was a step back on to the political ladder nonetheless.

His relations with David Lloyd-George, who had succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, were strained at times with Lloyd-George remarking that,

'the state of mind revealed in [your] letter is the reason why you do not win trust even where you command admiration. In every line of it, national interests are completely overshadowed by your personal concern'.

David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill at the Paris Peace Conference.

The Interwar Period

Immediately following the First World War Winston Churchill was appointed Secretary of State for War, in which capacity he ruthlessly and often violently pursued British imperial interests in several global theatres: from the Baltic to the Middle East.

How the Royal Navy Fought to Save Estonia and Latvia

By Stephen Dunn

The thriving modern republics of Estonia and Latvia emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But the fact that they exist at all is due to the Royal Navy and its battle against German revanche and Bolshevik aggression immediately after the First World War.

For many men in the Royal Navy, the war did not end on 11 November 1918. No sooner had the German fleet been interned at Scapa Flow than the navy was ordered into the Baltic Sea to hold the ring and protect the fragile nascent states of independent Latvia and Estonia.

Describing his drinking habits Churchill once remarked "I drink champagne at all meals, and buckets of claret and soda in between." He also noted that "Hot baths, cold champagne, new peas and old brandy" were the four essentials of life

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In the aftermath of war

Along the Baltic littoral, a plethora of factions staged a bloody and vicious conflict for control of the region.

The Bolshevik Red Army and Navy fought to bring it under Communist rule; German-Baltic *Landwehr* were intent on making a new German client state; White Russians were bent on reinstalling a tsarist monarchy (and taking back the Baltic States).

Then there were local freedom fighters, at war with all and with each other. Even the German army was there, forced by the Allies under Article XII of the Armistice to remain in place as a reluctant barrier to communist expansion.

Into this maelstrom was thrown the Royal Navy. Small ships only, light cruisers, destroyers, minesweepers, submarines, motor launches, eventually even an aircraft carrier, they were tasked with containing the Red Baltic Fleet battleships and cruisers based at Kronstadt, near St Petersburg.

The cheaper political option

The navy had been given this difficult task because neither Britain or France wised to commit troops to a new conflict; indeed, governments might have fallen if they had tried.

It was a cheaper and lower political risk decision to use ships, a plan supported to the hilt only by Secretary of War Winston Churchill. Prime Minister Lloyd George was less than lukewarm, as were the rest of the British cabinet.

However, through the navy, Britain could provide sea-based artillery support, prevent a breakout or raids by the Bolshevik fleet and supply arms and ammunition to the armies of the Baltic States.

In 1919, Rear Admiral Sir Walter Cowan was placed in charge of this difficult mission.

In one way he was the right man for the job, for he was aggressive by temperament and always looking for a fight to get into.

On the other hand, he drove his men hard and without thought for their well-being. This would eventually have consequences.

On the sea battlefield

The Communist army and navy, headed by Leon Trotsky, were unleashed by Lenin who declared:

the Baltic must become a Soviet sea.

And so from late November 1918 and for the next 13 months, the Royal Navy was in action against Soviet ships and ground forces, inspired by Trotsky who ordered that they should be “destroyed at any cost”.

Sea battles raged between the Red Navy and the RN with losses on both sides.

Eventually, in two daring actions, Cowan was able to neutralise the Bolshevik fleet; tiny coastal motor boats sank the cruiser Oleg, two Soviet battleships and a depot ship in attacks which resulted in the award of three Victoria Crosses.

Royal Navy ships were also involved in providing a constant artillery barrage in support of the forces of the Baltic States, protecting their flanks and helping drive back their enemies.

Aircraft from an early form of aircraft carrier also played a role. As one Latvian observer recorded:

the Allied fleet rendered irreplaceable help to the fighters for freedom.

The navy even rescued British spies from the Russian mainland.

With the RN’s gunnery support, the armies of Estonia and Latvia were gradually successful in beating back their multiple foes. But it was a close-run thing.

Only the intervention of the Royal Navy’s fire power saved Reval (now Tallinn) and the massive 15-inch guns of the monitor Erebus and her consorts drove the invaders out of Riga when it seemed certain to fall into enemy hands.

The cost of battle

There was a price to pay for these achievements; 128 British servicemen were killed in the campaign and 60 seriously wounded.

Over the period of the naval effort, 238 British vessels were deployed to the Baltic and a staging base set up in Denmark; 19 vessels were lost and 61 damaged.

There was a cost in morale as well. The sailors and many officers did not understand why they were fighting there. Politicians cavilled about the navy's orders and role, and decisions and recognition were not always forthcoming.

The living conditions for the navy were poor and the food was terrible. And the tasking was relentless and perceived as uncaring.

In 2002, Winston Churchill was publicly voted top of the list of 100 Greatest Britons

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Mutiny broke out on several vessels, including Admiral Cowan's flagship, and sailors preparing to sail to the Baltic from Scotland deserted.

In February 1920 the combatants signed a treaty ending hostilities and an uneasy peace prevailed until 1939.

A war-weary Royal Navy had held the ring, fighting against Russian and German opponents alike. It had helped the Baltic States gain their freedom from Bolshevik terror and German revanche.

Winston Churchill on Budget Day with his wife Clementine and children Sarah and Randolph, 15 April 1929.

Churchill's Siberian Strategy: British Intervention in the Russian Civil War

By Rupert Wieloch

One hundred years ago, Britain was entangled in a messy military intervention on four fronts in Russia. This controversial campaign was orchestrated by the new Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill, who was buttressed by many gallant members of parliament.

Their aim was to support the White Russians, who had fought against the Central Powers and now sought to overthrow Lenin's Bolshevik regime in Moscow.

A disunited government

The War Secretary, who had taken over from Viscount Milner in January, was in deep disagreement with the Prime Minister about what he described as a "nebulous" government policy.

David Lloyd George wished to repair relations with Lenin's government in Moscow and reopen trade with Russia. However Churchill supported the only viable alternative, Admiral Alexander Kolchak's White Government in Omsk.

Churchill's greatest military commitment to Russia lay in the Arctic where 10,000 British and American soldiers fought an ultimately futile campaign in the ice and snow.

However, this was a mere distraction to Lenin and Trotsky, who was forging the Red Army into the most feared force in the world against Kolchak in the Urals and General Anton Denikin in the Ukraine.

The British contribution

There were more than 100,000 allied troops in Siberia in March 1919; the British contribution was founded on two infantry battalions.

The 25th Middlesex, reinforced by 150 soldiers of the Manchester Regiment, had deployed from Hong Kong in the summer of 1918. They were joined by 1st/9th Hampshire, which had sailed from Bombay in October and arrived in Omsk in January 1919.

There was also a Royal Marine detachment that fought from two tugs on the River Kama, 4,000 miles from their mother ship, HMS Kent. Additionally, Churchill sent a vast quantity of war materiel and a technical team to help run the Trans-Siberian Railway.

After being told that he could not drink in front of Saudi King due to the King's religious beliefs, Churchill said "my religion prescribed an absolute sacred rite smoking cigars and drinking alcohol before, after, and if need be during all meals and the intervals between them"

Mixed success

Reports reaching London in March were mixed. At the beginning of the month, the first British officer to die in Vladivostok, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Carter MC of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, was buried with full military honours.

On 14 March Kolchak's army captured Ufa on the western side of the Urals; in the Arctic, the allies were beaten at Bolshie Ozerki, but in the south Denikin's White Army captured much of the region along the Don.

In London, Churchill had to tread carefully. His former ally Lord Beaverbrook, who had built the Daily Express into the most successful mass-newspaper in the world, strongly opposed the intervention in Russia. Britain was weary of war and restless for social change.

More importantly, the economy was in a dire situation; unemployment was high and in London simple produce such as butter and eggs were prohibitively expensive. To many people, including the prime minister, trade with Russia offered a much-needed stimulus.

Churchill capitalises on Communist chaos

Churchill's sense of frustration is clearly evident in his letter to Lloyd George, written at the end of the week when the communist party in Germany declared a general strike throughout the country. The War Secretary confirmed:

"You have also decided that Colonel John Ward and the two British battalions at Omsk are to be withdrawn (less any who volunteer to stay) as soon as they can be replaced by a military mission, similar to that to Denikin, composed of men who volunteer specifically for service in Russia."

Fears of the spread of communism were inflamed with news that a Soviet Republic was established in Hungary by Béla Kun. In the chaos, Churchill devised a three-pronged strategy for the summer.

The first strand was to support Kolchak in his appointment as the Supreme Leader of the All White Government in Omsk.

The second was to lead a campaign in London against the Prime Minister's appeasement.

The third, and this was the big prize, was to persuade President Woodrow Wilson in Washington to recognise the Omsk administration as the official government of Russia and to authorise the 8,600 American troops in Vladivostok to fight alongside the White Army.

"We hope to march to Moscow"

Churchill delayed the order to repatriate the British battalions, hoping that Kolchak would defeat the Bolsheviks decisively. He authorised the creation of an Anglo-Russian Brigade in Ekaterinburg where the Hampshire's commanding officer exclaimed:

"we hope to march to Moscow, Hants and Russian Hants together".

He also sent hundreds of volunteers to bolster the force; among these was the future corps commander, Brian Horrocks, who gained fame at El Alamein and at Arnhem.

Horrocks, together with fourteen other soldiers were ordered to remain behind when the Red Army routed Kolchak's forces later in the year. After an incredible attempt at escape by train sleigh and on foot, they were captured near Krasnoyarsk on 7 January 1920.

Incarcerated

Abandoned by their army commanders, Horrocks and his comrades believed they were being released at Irkutsk, along with some civilians, in an exchange known as the O'Grady-Litvinov Agreement. However, they were deceived by the authorities and sent 4,000 miles to Moscow, where they were incarcerated in infamous jails.

They were placed on starvation rations in lice infested cells, where political prisoners were shot in the back of the neck on a nightly basis. British delegations visiting Moscow ignored them and Horrocks, who nearly lost his life from typhus in Krasnoyarsk, now contracted jaundice.

Meanwhile in London, Parliament was dismayed that the Government had lost track of the prisoners whilst negotiating with Soviet trade missions. Huge pressure was put on the Prime Minister by angry MPs to secure their release, but all attempts failed until late October 1920.

Horrocks would later go on to command in North Africa during World War Two. He also oversaw the ground assault during Operation Market-Garden

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Not Our Finest Hour: Churchill and Britain's Forgotten Wars of 1920

By David Charlwood

Winston Churchill was upset. For months, the British government had been not so secretly providing military aid and advisers to one side in the Russian Civil War.

Now, at the start of 1920, it seemed the writing was on the wall. The Bolshevists were winning.

Three months before, the pro-Tsarist White Army had been 200 miles from Moscow. Now, half the typhus-infected force was retreating pell-mell back over the Estonian border, while in southern Russia the White Army was barely clinging on to a foothold near Rostov.

On 1 January 1920, Churchill confided in his private secretary:

It looks to me as if [General] Denikin will come to an end before his supply of stores.

The Polish-born, devoutly Russian Orthodox and rabidly anti-Semitic General Anton Ivanovich Denikin was less convinced.

He appealed again to the British for more aid, but he had already received £35 million in material assistance and the majority in Cabinet refused to send any more.

Winston Churchill pressed very strongly in the cabinet for British recognition of Kolchak's government but ultimately failed to convince the Prime Minister David Lloyd-George

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"We hope to march to Moscow"

British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, remarked to his golfing partner that Churchill had been

most insistent, and prepared to sacrifice men and money.

But there was little appetite among any of the Cabinet members, other than the 45-year-old Minister for War, for foreign military entanglements.

In the weeks that followed, the White Army retreat became a rout. With the aid of British soldiers, the Royal Navy evacuated thousands of pro-Tsarist fighters and their families to the Crimea, leaving southern Russia to the victorious Bolshevists.

On 31 March 1920, at an evening meeting at Downing Street, the Cabinet decided to end all support for Denikin and his White Army. Winston Churchill was absent, on holiday in France.

Denikin was sent a telegram encouraging him to “give up the struggle” and the remnant of the White Army – around 10,000 men – was left stranded on the Crimea as the Royal Navy sailed away.

The whole debacle appalled the British soldiers who had been acting as military advisers. One colonel recorded in his diary that once the British withdrawal became known he was ashamed to face his Russian colleagues, noting it was:

a cowardly treachery. Winston [Churchill] is the only one who is playing honestly.

The conflict in Russia was just one of Britain’s forgotten wars of 1920. And Churchill was strongly supportive of military action in all of them.

Trouble closer to home

Instead of ushering in a new era of peace and goodwill among men, the Armistice that ended the First World War marked the start of a new wave of localised violence around the world, some of it very close to home.

1920 was the height of the Irish War of Independence, which saw Irish Volunteers – who would later become the Irish Republican Army – step up a campaign of violent resistance to British rule.

The killings of policemen and the attacks on police barracks were responded to with reprisals. Innocent bystanders and whole communities increasingly bore the brunt of the anger and frustration of state security forces.

As the year wore on, the apparent policy of reprisals even began to be criticised in the English press, with 'The Times' reporting:

Day by the day the tidings from Ireland grow worse. Accounts of arson and destruction by the military … must fill English readers with a sense of shame.

It was clear where Churchill's sympathies lay. In a memo marked "SECRET", he brashly asserted to his Cabinet colleagues:

I cannot feel it right to punish the troops when goaded in the most brutal manner and finding no redress, they take action on their own account.

He even went as far as to support the idea that:

reprisals within strictly defined limits should be [officially] authorised by the Government.

The police in Ireland – The Royal Irish Constabulary – were already being supported by additional recruits in the form of the Black and Tans, who became notorious for their brutal methods and deliberate targeting of communities. Technically, however, they remained police officers, not soldiers.

Deploying mercenaries to Ireland was Churchill's idea. In May 1920, he put together a proposal to recruit "men between the ages of 25 and 35 who have served in the war".

Unlike the Black and Tans, the Auxiliaries were not attached to Irish police units, they were paid for by Churchill's War Office.

His proposal was accepted. Churchill's Auxiliaries took part in some of the worst violence of war in Ireland, including the Burning of Cork, in which soldiers prevented firefighters from putting out the fire that engulfed the famous City Hall.

Winston Churchill would go from warmonger to peacemaker during the Irish War of Independence. He struck up an unexpected friendship with the Irish revolutionary Michael Collins during peace

negotiations. Some argue that it was Collins who greatly influenced Churchill's unbending resolve never to give in to a tyrant

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"Recalcitrant natives"

As the violence in Ireland escalated, the British faced an uprising in one of their farther flung territories.

Iraq had been conquered near the end of the First World War and while the British were at first welcomed as liberators, by 1920 they were increasingly viewed as occupiers. An uprising began in August and quickly spread.

While soldiers were rushed from India, the forces already in Iraq relied on air power to put down the insurgency.

Churchill was a strong advocate of the use of aircraft and even encouraged the head of the Air Ministry to speed up

experimental work on gas bombs, especially mustard gas, which would inflict punishment upon recalcitrant natives without inflicting grave injury upon them.

Historians have since leapt upon Churchill's remark and typically quoted his suggestion in truncated form, without admitting the complicating fact that Churchill's vile proposal for using chemical weapons was intended to maim, rather than kill. He was clearly seeking a quick end to conflict.

In the post-war world, which in the minds of many should have been yearning for peace, Churchill was a belligerent Minister of War.

He stubbornly clung to a 19th century view of Britain's place in the world that shaped his attitude to events.

In a note penned to his Cabinet colleagues on the Iraq uprising, he laid bare his feelings:

The local trouble is only part of a general agitation against the British Empire and all it stands for.

From *Persona non Grata* to Prime Minister: How Churchill Returned to Prominence in the 1930s

By Laura McMillen

Political isolation characterised Winston Churchill's 'wilderness years' of the 1930s; he was denied cabinet position and governmental power by the Conservative Party, and stubbornly quarrelled with both sides of Parliament's aisle.

Outspoken opposition to self-government for India and support for King Edward VIII in the 1936 Abdication Crisis distanced Churchill from Parliament's majority.

His sharp and unrelenting focus on the growing Nazi German threat was considered militaristic 'scaremongering' and dangerous throughout much of the decade. But that preoccupation with the unpopular policy of rearmament would eventually bring Churchill back to power in 1940 and helped secure his place at history's top table.

Political estrangement of the 1930s

By the time of the Conservative election defeat of 1929, Churchill had served in Parliament for nearly 30 years. He had switched party allegiances twice, had been Chancellor of the Exchequer and First Lord of the Admiralty, and had held ministerial posts in both parties ranging from Home Secretary to Colonial Secretary.

But Churchill became estranged with Conservative leadership over issues of protective tariffs and Indian Home Rule, which he bitterly opposed. Ramsay McDonald did not invite Churchill to join the Cabinet of his National Government formed in 1931.

During the Prohibition era in the USA (1920-1933), Churchill referred publicly the Constitutional amendment banning alcohol as "an affront to the whole history of mankind"

Churchill's major political focus throughout the first half of the 1930s became his outspoken opposition against any concessions which might weaken Britain's hold on

India. He forecast widespread British unemployment and civil strife in India and frequently made scathing comments about Gandhi the “fakhir”.

Churchill’s intemperate outbursts, at a time when public opinion was coming round to the idea of Dominion status for India, made him seem an out of touch ‘Colonial Blimp’ figure.

He was further distanced from fellow MPs by his outlying support of Edward VIII throughout the Abdication Crisis. His address to the House of Commons on 7 December 1936 to plead for delay and prevent pressuring the King into a hasty decision was shouted down.

Churchill’s companions earnt him little respect; one of his most devoted followers, Irish MP Brendan Bracken was widely disliked and regarded as a phoney. Churchill’s reputation in Parliament and with the wider public could have hardly sunk lower.

A stand against appeasement

During this low point in his career Churchill concentrated on writing; in his exile years at Chartwell he produced 11 volumes of history and memoir and more than 400 articles for the world’s newspapers. History mattered deeply to Churchill; it provided him with his own identity and justification as well as an invaluable perspective on the present.

His biography of the First Duke of Marlborough was concerned not only with the past but with Churchill’s own time and himself. It was both ancestral veneration and a comment on contemporary politics with close parallels to his own stand against appeasement.

Churchill repeatedly urged that it was folly for the victors of World War One to either disarm or to allow Germany to rearm while German grievances had not been resolved. As early as 1930 Churchill, attending a dinner party at the German Embassy in London, expressed concerned about the latent dangers of a rabble-rouser named Adolf Hitler.

In 1934, with Nazis in power in a resurgent Germany, Churchill told Parliament “there is not an hour to lose” in preparing to build up British armaments. He passionately lamented in 1935 that whilst

“Germany [was] arming at breakneck speed, England [was] lost in a pacifist dream, France corrupt and torn by dissension, America remote and indifferent.”

Only a few allies stood with Churchill as he duelled in the House of Commons with the successive governments of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain.

In 1935 he was one of the founding members of ‘Focus’, a group which brought together people of differing political backgrounds, such as Sir Archibald Sinclair and Lady Violet Bonham Carter, to unite in seeking ‘the defence of freedom and peace’. A much wider Arms and Covenant Movement was formed in 1936.

By 1938, Hitler had fortified his army, built the Luftwaffe, militarised the Rhineland and threatened Czechoslovakia. Churchill made an urgent appeal to the House:

“Now is the time at last to rouse the nation.”

He would later admit in The Gathering Storm to occasionally exaggerating statistics, such as his prediction in September 1935 that Germany might have 3,000 first-line aircraft by October 1937, to create alarm and provoke action:

‘In these endeavours no doubt I painted the picture even darker than it was.’

His ultimate conviction remained that appeasement and negotiation was doomed to fail and that postponing war rather than exhibiting strength would lead to greater bloodshed.

A voice on the periphery

The political and public majority considered Churchill’s position irresponsible and extreme and his warnings wildly paranoid.

After the horrors of the Great War very few could imagine embarking on another. It was widely believed that negotiation would be effective in controlling Hitler and that

Germany's restlessness was understandable in the context of the harsh penalties imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.

Members of the Conservative establishment such as John Reith, first director-general of the BBC, and Geoffrey Dawson, editor of The Times throughout 1930s, supported Chamberlain's appeasement policy.

The Daily Express referred to Churchill's speech in October 1938 against the Munich agreement as

"an alarmist oration by a man whose mind is soaked in the conquests of Marlborough".

John Maynard Keynes, writing in the New Statesman, was urging the Czechs to negotiate with Hitler in 1938. Many newspapers omitted Churchill's foreboding speech and favoured coverage of Chamberlain's remark that the situation in Europe had greatly relaxed.

Onset of war vindicates Churchill's foreboding

Churchill had contested the Munich Agreement 1938, in which Prime Minister Chamberlain ceded a part of Czechoslovakia in exchange for peace, on the grounds that it amounted to 'throwing a small state to the wolves'.

A year later Hitler had broken his promise and invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war and Churchill's lurid warnings about Hitler's intentions were starkly vindicated by unfolding events.

His years of whistle-blowing about the pace of German air rearmament had helped galvanise the government into belated action over air defence.

Churchill was finally readmitted to the Cabinet in 1939 as First Lord of the Admiralty. In May 1940, he became Prime Minister of a National Government with Britain already at war and facing its darkest hours.

When Winston Churchill travelled by ship during World War Two, he had a lifeboat mounted with a machine gun so that he could "resist capture at all costs."

His challenge thereafter was not to instil fear but to keep it under control. On 18 June 1940, Churchill said that if England could defeat Hitler:

"all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands; but if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age."

Churchill's independent stance against appeasement, his unwavering attention and later, his wartime leadership, granted him stature and longevity far beyond that which could have been imagined in the earlier 1930s.