

Winston Churchill – his views and influence on British and international world affairs from 1945 to 1956.

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Introduction

I have chosen to talk on this topic as it covers a period of just over ten years in the post war world, in which momentous events have obviously shaped today's world. It is also a period during which some of us here were born and almost certainly our mothers and fathers lived through it. So, I consider it to be a period worthy of consideration and reflection for all attending this conference.

Churchill's life in the years under review

Let me start with a brief outline of Sir Winston Churchill's political life during this period. In July 1945 he was 71 years old, leader of the Conservative Party and had just lost the General Election to the Labour Party. The Labour Party leader, Clement Attlee, became prime minister. Attlee had been deputy prime minister to Churchill in the wartime coalition government and was much respected by Churchill. The Labour Party's 1945 election manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, included promises of nationalisation, economic planning, full employment, a national health service, and a system of social security. These were all attractive promises to an electorate who only too well remembered the years of depression and unemployment before the war. People were looking for some recompense for the hardships and sacrifices they had endured during the war years.

Churchill continued to serve as Leader of the Opposition. And, of course, he visited Maderia in January 1950 for a short holiday in order to regain his health. Unfortunately for him, due to Attlee's calling of the general election, he had to cut short his holiday and return to England by flying boat. The Labour Party also won this 1950 general election, but with a much-reduced majority.

Another general election took place in 1951 and this time the Conservatives won with an overall majority of 17 seats. Churchill became prime minister again and remained in office until his resignation on health grounds on 5 April 1955. He was then 80 years old. His successor was Sir Anthony Eden. Eden had married in 1952, his second marriage, the much younger Clarissa Spencer Churchill, Churchill's niece. It may be of interest if I mention that their honeymoon was spent at the Urgeiriça Hotel in northern Portugal.

So having set the scene I propose to look briefly at some of Churchill's significant opinions and interventions in the years under review.

The Cold War

The Cold War was a period of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc. It started after the end of World War II in 1945 and lasted until 1991. The author, Stephen Rogers, of Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri writes: "Churchill knew that while the world looked forward to putting the horrors of war behind, events at the beginning of 1946 portended an even darker future ahead. In the wake of the Allied victory, the Soviet Union had begun shaping Eastern Europe in its image, bringing the governments of many nations into line with Moscow. On February 9, Premier Joseph Stalin gave a speech in which he declared that war between the East and West was inevitable".

On 22 February, the American Ambassador to Moscow, George F. Kennan, who incidentally had been in Lisbon during the war, sent the famous "Long Telegram" of 8000 words to the State Department. By comparison, my talk only comprises about 2500 words. This telegram warned of the Soviet Union's perpetual hostility towards the West. It led to the intellectual policy debate that formed the basis of American policy towards the Soviet Union for years to come, including the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NATO.

¹ Talk at the Winston Churchill Memorial Dinner, Madeira, Portugal, 26 January 2024. <https://iep.lisboa.ucp.pt/pt-pt/asset/15091/file>

On 5 March 1946, at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill delivered his famous words “From Stettin in the Baltic, to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent,” Thus the Cold War began and framed the geo-political landscape for the next 50 years. Churchill, with President Truman at his side, articulated the threat that the Soviet Union and communism posed to peace and stability in the post-war world.

Invoking the spirit of the Atlantic Charter, Churchill called for a strengthening of Anglo-American ties and for the United Nations to become a peace-promoting world organization that would succeed where its predecessor the League of Nations had failed.

Churchill called his address *The Sinews of Peace*, and it endures today as one of his most significant speeches. It made the term “Iron Curtain” a household phrase, and it coined the term “special relationship”, thus describing the enduring alliance between the United States and Great Britain. It was a speech that offered a blueprint for the west to wage, and win, the Cold War.

After Stalin’s death in March 1953, Churchill softened his views on the Cold War. He saw an opportunity for a détente with the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union reforms were being immediately implemented. The new leaders under Malenkov sought a less hostile relationship with the USA. For example, an end, at least an armistice, to the Korean War was negotiated. Churchill began to feel that talks might lead to a relaxation of the Cold War. In December 1953 there took place the Bermuda Conference, the participants being President Eisenhower, Prime Minister Mayer of France and Prime Minister Churchill. Churchill advocated a policy of strength towards Russia combined with gestures of friendship, personal contacts, and trade negotiations. Eisenhower, the State Department and the Foreign Office disagreed; the Russians began to take a more hostile attitude again and so the stalemate of the Cold War continued.

Churchill and Europe

Let’s move on to Churchill’s views on Europe. He was an early supporter of pan-Europeanism, a concept developed before WW2, which describes a sense of personal identification with Europe, especially in a cultural and political sense. He called for a “United States of Europe” in an article published in 1930. It did include the qualification that Britain must be “with Europe but not of it”.

Perhaps slightly less well known than his Fulton Missouri speech, but of equal importance, is the speech he made on 19 November 1946 at the University of Zurich. In a masterpiece of emotional oratory, Churchill spoke about the future of the maltreated and destroyed continent of Europe. To never let such a tragedy happen again, Churchill pleaded for “building a kind of United States of Europe” with the reconciliation of Germany and France as its core.

He supported the creations of the Council of Europe on 5 May 1949, which he himself attended, and the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. But his support was always with the firm proviso that Britain must not actually join any federal grouping. In November 1951, in a Cabinet paper, he called for a “United Europe” but under the proviso that, and I quote “(it is) only when plans for uniting Europe take a federal form that we cannot take part, because we cannot subordinate ourselves or the control of British policy to federal authorities”. His call to action can be seen as encouraging further integration as later agreed upon during the Messina Conference in 1955. This led to the Treaty of Rome two years later. It was also Churchill who would first suggest the idea of a ‘European army’ designed to protect the continent and provide European diplomacy with some muscle. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights was created in 1959, a decade after Churchill first championed the idea. So, Churchill can be seen as a driving force behind European integration and an active fighter for its cause.

Imperialism and Colonialism

I’ll now move on to examine Churchill’s views and record on Imperialism and Colonialism, two further concepts which dominated the post-war western world.

By modern standards, and indeed going back to the 1950s, Churchill is generally perceived as an imperialist. Perhaps he can be seen as a supporter of “liberal imperialism”, holding a romanticised view of the British Empire. Maybe he saw British imperialism as a form of altruism that benefited its subject peoples because “by conquering and dominating other peoples, the British were also elevating and protecting them”. Churchill certainly did not advocate

the dismantling of the Empire by transferring power to its subject peoples. This is shown by his earlier opposition to the Government of India Act 1935 which in fact granted a large measure of autonomy to the provinces of India.

With the end of the war, the new Labour government moved quickly to grant independence to India. Churchill continued to oppose the release of India from British control. In a speech to the House of Commons in early 1947, he warned against handing power to an Indian government too soon. He believed the political parties in India did not truly represent the people, and that in a few years' time no trace of the new government would remain.

The **Indian Independence Act**, passed in July 1947, partitioned British India into the two new independent dominions of a predominantly Hindu India and Moslem Pakistan. **Burma** and **Ceylon** were also granted independence in 1948.

Churchill's imperialistic views on Empire were never welcome in the USA. Back in office in 1951, Churchill wanted US military support of British interests in Egypt and the Middle East, but that was refused. While President Truman expected British military involvement in Korea as part of the United Nations forces, he viewed any United States commitment to the Middle East as maintaining British imperialism. The Americans recognised that the British Empire was in terminal decline and had previously welcomed the Attlee government's policy of granting independence to India and Pakistan.

Suez and thereafter

Churchill, in failing health, resigned from office in 1955, to be succeeded by Sir Anthony Eden. I think it's worthwhile to move on a year or two, and consider the Suez Canal affair and further decolonisation.

The Egyptian authorities increasingly objected to this British presence. In October 1951 Egypt broke the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which had allowed Britain to station troops in the Canal Zone until 1956. The Egyptian authorities began to actively encourage attacks on British installations and personnel. In 1954 the Churchill government agreed to begin to withdraw UK troops, the withdrawal being completed in June 1956.

However, one month later, in July 1956, Colonel Nasser, President of Egypt, nationalised the Suez Canal Company which was owned jointly by Britain and France. This was after the United States and Britain refused to provide Egypt with economic aid. The resulting crisis culminated with a short war in Egypt as British and French forces invaded the canal zone and Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. These acts briefly threatened hostilities on a global scale. Britain and France soon gave in to international pressure from the United States and the United Nations. They withdrew their troops. The Suez Crisis had a profound impact on the balance of power in the Middle East and on the responsibilities that the United States assumed there. It tarnished British and French prestige and authority among Arab states. It also hastened the pace of European decolonisation in Africa and Asia.

Winston Churchill, in retirement, was critical of the handling of the Suez Crisis. He was concerned about the adverse impact on British prestige and influence in the Middle East. He was critical of the military intervention and favoured a diplomatic solution to the crisis. He believed that the use of force could have long-term negative consequences for Britain and its relationships with other countries.

May I mention Eden's wife, Clarissa Churchill, once again? She died quite recently, in 2021, aged 101. I rather like her comment during the 1956 Suez crisis, clearly referring to all the activity at 10 Downing Street. She said "I felt sometimes that the Suez Canal was flowing through my drawing room".

Sir Anthony Eden, resigned, to be succeeded by Harold Macmillan as prime minister. Macmillan's nickname in the British press was *Supermac*. Like Eden he was a protégé of Churchill. He was a major supporter and architect of decolonisation. In 1957 the Gold Coast was granted independence and renamed Ghana, and the Federation of Malaya achieved independence within the Commonwealth of Nations in 1957.

And then, on 3 February 1960, the remains of the idea of British imperialism were demolished by Harold Macmillan's "**Wind of Change**" speech. This was an address he made to the Parliament of South Africa on 3 February 1960 in Cape Town. He had spent a month in Africa, visiting several British colonies.

The speech acquired its name from a quotation embedded in it:

*"The **wind of change** is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact."*

Conclusion

A few words in conclusion, with a couple of Churchill quotations:

"It is always wise to look ahead, but difficult to look farther than you can see."

This quotation can be seen as reflecting Churchill's concerns over the end of imperialism. He realized that the British Empire could not continue in the form it existed in 1945 but he was unsure as to which direction Britain should take to replace it. Perhaps in his later years he was thankful that the 1945 Labour government had taken the decisions to grant independence to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma.

And, second:

"I do not believe that the immense problem of reconciling the security of Russia with the freedom and safety of Western Europe is insoluble..."

It is remarkable how Winston Churchill's vision, as expressed in these two quotations, became a reality, at least for some years. The quotations reflect how far-seeing Churchill was and why he continues to be studied and referred to.

Finally, may I make four final yet fairly obvious points?

1. There exists a pan-European Union with France and Germany at the core;
2. The UK is "with Europe but not of it";
3. The special relationship between the UK and the US continues today;
4. Ultimately, America's more aggressive Cold War policy warmed, coming to embrace positions Churchill had advocated years before. The Cold War ended with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. So, Churchill's suggested "policy of strength towards Russia combined with gestures of friendship, personal contacts, and trade negotiations" was largely implemented.

However, that was thirty years ago. Where are we now?

Thank you very much for listening.