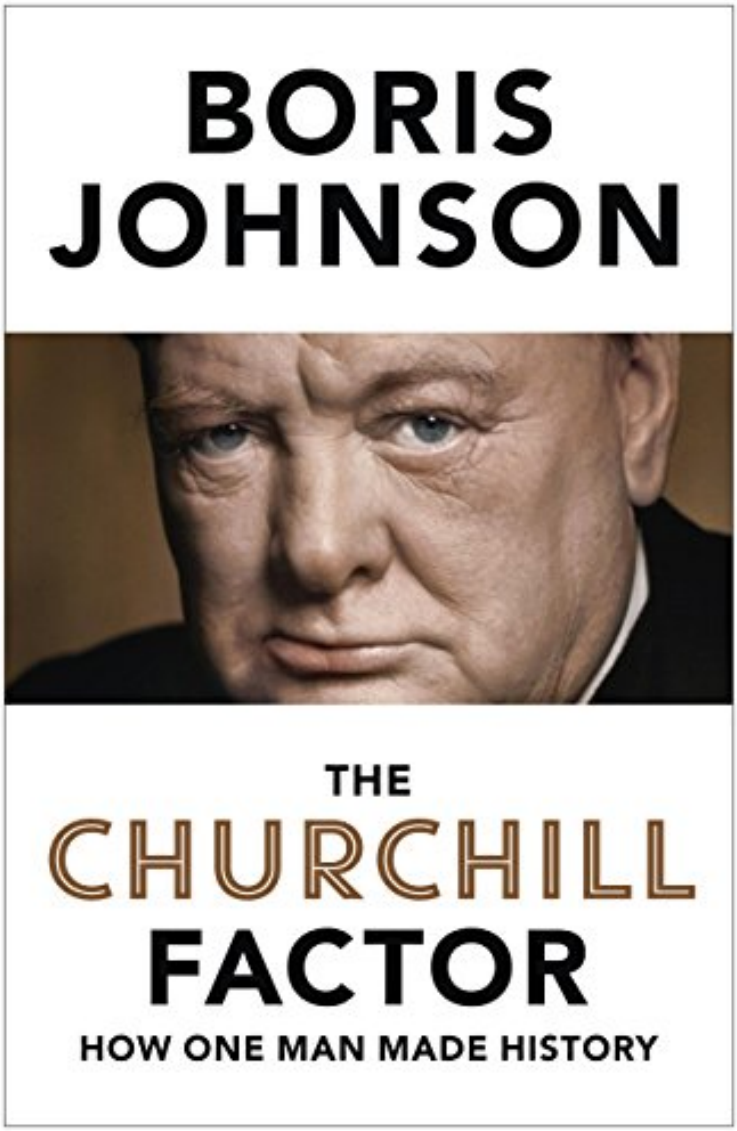
The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History (English Edition)



Par Boris Johnson
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Par Boris Johnson : The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'The must-read biography of the year.' Evening Standard'He writes with gusto... the result is a book that is never boring, genuinely clever ... this book sizzles.' The Times'The point of the Churchill Factor is that one man can make all the difference.'Written in conjunction with the Churchill Estate, Boris Johnson explores what makes up the 'Churchill Factor' - the singular brilliance of one of the most important leaders of the twentieth century. Taking on the myths and misconceptions along with the outsized reality, he portrays - with characteristic wit and passion - a man of multiple contradictions,

contagious bravery, breath-taking eloquence, matchless strategizing, and deep humanity.Fearless on the battlefield, Churchill had to be ordered by the King to stay out of action on D-Day; he embraced large-scale strategic bombing, yet hated the destruction of war and scorned politicians who had not experienced its horrors. He was a celebrated journalist, a great orator and won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was famous for his ability to combine wining and dining with many late nights of crucial wartime decision-making. His open-mindedness made him a pioneer in health care, education, and social welfare, though he remained incorrigibly politically incorrect. Most of all, as Boris Johnson says, 'Churchill is the resounding human rebuttal to all who think history is the story of vast and impersonal economic forces'. The Churchill Factor is a book to be enjoyed not only by anyone interested in history: it is essential reading for anyone who wants to know what makes a great leader.ExtraitINTRODUCTIONA DOG CALLED CHURCHILLWhen I was growing up, there was no doubt about it. Churchill was quite the greatest statesman that Britain had ever produced. From a very early age I had a pretty clear idea of what he had done: he had led my country to victory against all the odds and against one of the most disgusting tyrannies the world has seen.I knew the essentials of his story. My brother Leo and I used to pore over Martin Gilberts biographical Life in Pictures, to the point where we had memorised the captions.I knew that he had a mastery of the art of speech-making, and my father (like many of our fathers) would recite some of his most famous lines; and I knew, even then, that this art was dying out. I knew that he was funny, and irreverent, and that even by the standards of his time he was politically incorrect.At suppertime we were told the apocryphal stories: the one where Churchill is on the lavatory, and informed that the Lord Privy Seal wants to see him, and he says that he is sealed in the privy, etc. We knew the one where Socialist MP Bessie Braddock allegedly told him that he was drunk, and he replied, with astonishing rudeness, that she was ugly and he would be sober in the morning.I think we also dimly knew the one about the Tory minister and the guardsman . . . You probably know it, but never mind. I had the canonical version the other day from Sir Nicholas Soames, his grandson, over lunch at the Savoy.Even allowing for Soamess brilliance in storytelling, it has the ring of truthand tells us something about a key theme of this book: the greatness of Churchills heart.One of his Conservative ministers was a bugger, if you see what I mean . . . (said Soames, loudly enough for most of the Grill Room to hear) . . . though he was also a great friend of my grandfather. He was always getting caught, but of course in those days the press werent everywhere, and nobody said anything. One day he pushed his luck because he was caught rogering a Guardsman on a bench in Hyde Park at three in the morningand it was February, by the way.This was immediately reported to the Chief Whip, who rang Jock Colville, my grandfathers Private Secretary.Jock, said the Chief Whip, I am afraid I have some very bad news about so-and-so. Its the usual thing, but the press have got it and its bound to come out.Oh dear, said Colville.I really think I should come down and tell the Prime Minister in person.Yes, I suppose you should.So the Chief Whip came down to Chartwell [Churchills home in Kent], and he walked into my grandfathers study, where he was working at his upright desk. Yes, Chief Whip, he said, half turning round, how can I help you?The Chief Whip explained the unhappy situation. Hell have to go, he concluded.There was a long pause, while Churchill puffed his cigar. Then he said: Did I hear you correctly in saying that so-and-so has been caught with a Guardsman?Yes, Prime Minister.In Hyde Park?Yes, Prime Minister.On a park bench?Thats right, Prime Minister.At three oclock in the morning?Thats correct, Prime Minister.In this weather! Good God, man, it makes you proud to be British!I KNEW THAT he had been amazingly brave as a young man, and that he had killed men with his own hand, and been fired at on four continents, and that he was one of the first men to go up in an aeroplane. I knew that he had been a bit of a runt at Harrow, and that he was only about 5 feet 7 and with a 31-inch chest, and that he had overcome his stammer and his depression and his appalling father to become the greatest living Englishman.I gathered that there was something holy and magical about him, because my grandparents kept the front page of the Daily Express from the day he died, at the age of ninety. I was pleased to have been born a year before: the more I read about him, the more proud I was to have been alive when he was alive. So it seems all the more sad and strange that todaynearly fifty years after he diedhe is in danger of being forgotten, or at least imperfectly remembered.The other day I was buying a cigar at an airport in a Middle Eastern country that had probably been designed by Churchill. I noticed that the cigar was called a San Antonio Churchill, and I asked the vendor at the Duty-Free whether he knew who Churchill was. He read the name carefully and I pronounced it for him.Shursheel? he said, looking blank.In the war, I said, the Second World War.Then he looked as though the dimmest, faintest bell was clanking at the back of his memory.An old leader? he asked. Yes, maybe, I think. I dont know. He shrugged.Well, he is doing no worse than many kids today. Those who pay attention in class are under the impression that he was

the guy who fought Hitler to rescue the Jews. But most young peopleaccording to a recent surveythink that Churchill is the dog in a British insurance advertisement.That strikes me as a shame, because he is so obviously a character that should appeal to young people today. He was eccentric, over the top, camp, with his own special trademark clothesand a thoroughgoing genius.I want to try to convey some of that genius to those who might not be fully conscious of it, or who have forgotten itand I am of course aware that this is a bit of a cheek.I am not a professional historian, and as a politician I am not worthy to loose the latchet of his shoes, or even the shoes of Roy Jenkins, who did a superb one-volume biography; and as a student of Churchill I sit at the feet of Martin Gilbert, Andrew Roberts, Max Hastings, Richard Toye and many others.I am conscious that there are a hundred books a year on our heroand yet I am sure it is time for a new assessment, because we cannot take his reputation for granted. The soldiers of the Second World War are gradually fading away. We are losing those who can remember the sound of his voice, and I worry that we are in dangerthrough sheer vaguenessof forgetting the scale of what he did.These days we dimly believe that the Second World War was won with Russian blood and American money; and though that is in some ways true, it is also true that, without Churchill, Hitler would almost certainly have won.What I mean is that Nazi gains in Europe might well have been irreversible. We rightly moan today about the deficiencies of the European Unionand yet we have forgotten about the sheer horror of that all too possible of possible worlds.We need to remember it today, and we need to remember the ways in which this British Prime Minister helped to make the world we still live in. Across the globefrom Europe to Russia to Africa to the Middle Eastwe see traces of his shaping mind.Churchill matters today because he saved our civilisation. And the important point is that only he could have done it.He is the resounding human rebuttal to all Marxist historians who think history is the story of vast and impersonal economic forces. The point of the Churchill Factor is that one man can make all the difference.Time and again in his seven decades in public life we can see the impact of his personality on the world, and on eventsfar more of them than are now widely remembered.He was crucial to the beginning of the welfare state in the early 1900s. He helped give British workers job centres and the tea break and unemployment insurance. He invented the RAF and the tank and he was absolutely critical to the actionand Britains eventual victoryin the First World War. He was indispensable to the foundation of Israel (and other countries), not to mention the campaign for a united Europe.At several moments he was the beaver who dammed the flow of events; and never did he affect the course of history more profoundly than in 1940.Character is destiny, said the Greeks, and I agree. If that is so, then the deeper and more fascinating question is what makes up the character.What were the elements that made him capable of filling that gigantic role? In what smithies did they forge that razor mind and iron will?What the hammer, what the chain, in what furnace was his brain? as William Blake almost puts it. Thats the question.But first lets try and agree on what he did.CHAPTER 1THE OFFER FROM HITLERIf you are looking for one of the decisive moments in the last world war, and a turning-point in the history of the world, then come with me. Let us go to a dingy room in the House of Commonsup some steps, through a creaky old door, down a dimly lit corridor; and here it is.You wont find it on the maps of the Palace of Westminster, for obvious security reasons; and you cant normally get the guides to show you. In fact the precise room I am talking about doesnt really exist any more, since it was blown up in the Blitz; but the replacement is faithful enough to the original.It is one of the rooms used by the Prime Minister when he or she wants to meet colleagues in the Commons, and you dont need to know much about the decor, because it is predictable.Think of loads of green leather, and brass studs, and heavy coarse-grained oak panelling and Pugin wallpaper and a few prints, slightly squiffily hung. And think smokebecause we are talking about the afternoon of 28 May 1940, and in those days many politiciansincluding our subjectwere indefatigable consumers of tobacco.It is safe to assume there wasnt much daylight getting through the mullioned windows, but most members of the public would easily have been able to recognise the main characters. There were seven of them in all, and they were the War Cabinet of Britain.It is a measure of the depth of their crisis that they had been meeting almost solidly for three days. This was their ninth meeting since 26 May, and they had yet to come up with an answer to the existential question that faced them and the world.In the chair was the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. On one side was Neville Chamberlain, the high-collared, stiff-necked and toothbrush-moustached exPrime Minister, and the man Churchill had unceremoniously replaced. Rightly or wrongly, Chamberlain was blamed for fatally underestimating the Hitler menace, and for the failure of appeasement. When the Nazis had bundled Britain out of Norway earlier that month, it was Chamberlain who took the rap.Then there was Lord Halifax, the tall, cadaverous Foreign Secretary who had been born with a withered left hand that he concealed in a black glove. There

was Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the Liberal Party that Churchill had dumped. There were Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwoodrepresentatives of the Labour Party against which he had directed some of his most hysterical invective. There was the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Edward Bridges, taking notes.The question before the meeting was very simple, and one they had been chewing over for the last few days, as the news got blacker and blacker. No one exactly spelled it out, but everyone could see what it was. Should Britain fight? Was it reasonable for young British troops to die in a war that showed every sign of being lost? Or should the British do some kind of deal that might well save hundreds of thousands of lives?And if a deal had been done then, and the war had effectively ended with the British exit, might it have been a deal to save the lives of millions around the world?I dont think many people of my generationlet alone my childrens generationare fully conscious of how close we came to it; how Britain could have discreetly, and rationally, called it quits in 1940. There were serious and influential voices who wanted to begin negotiations.It is not hard to see why they thought as they did. The news from France was not just bad: it was unbelievably bad, and there did not seem the slightest hope that it would improve. German forces were lunging towards Paris, buffeting aside the French defences with such contemptuous ease that it really looked as if they belonged to some new military master race, pumped with superior zeal and efficiency. Hitlers panzers had surged not just through the Low Countries but through the supposedly impenetrable ravines of the Ardennes; the ludicrous Maginot Line had been bypassed.The French generals cut pathetic figureswhite-haired dodderers in their Clouseau-like kepis. Every time they fell back to some new line of defence, they found that the Germans were somehow already there; and then the Stuka dive-bombers would come down like banshees and the tanks would drive on again.The British Expeditionary Force had been cut off in a pocket around the Channel ports. They had tried briefly to counter-attack; they had been repulsed, and now they were waiting to be evacuated at Dunkirk. If Hitler had listened to his generals, he could have smashed us then: sent the ace general Guderian and his tanks into the shrinking and virtually defenceless patch of ground. He could have killed or captured the bulk of Britains fighting forces, and deprived this country of the physical ability to resist.As it was, his Luftwaffe was strafing the beaches; British troops were floating in the water face down; they were firing their Lee Enfields hopelessly at the sky; they were being chopped to bits by the dive-bombers. At that moment, on 28 May, it seemed very possibleto generals and politicians, if not to the wider publicthat the bulk of the troops could be lost.The War Cabinet was staring at the biggest humiliation for British armed forces since the loss of the American colonies, and there seemed no way back. It chills the marrow to look at the map of Europe as it must have appeared to that War Cabinet.Austria had been engulfed two years earlier; Czechoslovakia was no more; Poland had been crushed; and in the last few weeks Hitler had added a shudder-making list to his portfolio of conquest. He had taken Norwayeffortlessly outwitting the British, Churchill included, who had spent months elaborating a doomed plan to pre-empt him. He had captured Denmark in little more than four hours.Holland had surrendered; the Belgian King had pusillanimously run up the white flag at midnight the previous evening; and with every hour that went by more French forces surrenderedsometimes after resistance of insane bravery; sometimes with a despairing and fatalistic ease.The most important geostrategic consideration of May 1940 was that Britainthe British Empirewas alone. There was no realistic prospect of help, or certainly no imminent prospect. The Italians were against us. The fascist leader Mussolini had entered into a Pact of Steel with Hitler, andwhen it looked as though Hitler couldnt losewould shortly join the war on his side.The Russians had signed the nauseating MolotovRibbentrop pact, by which they had agreed to carve up Poland with the Nazis. The Americans were allergic to any more European wars, understandably: they had lost more than 56,000 men in the First World War, and more than 100,000 if you include the toll from influenza. They were offering nothing much more than murmurs of distant sympathy, and for all Churchills wishful rhetoric there was no sign of the US cavalry coming tootling over the brow of the hill.Everyone in that room could imagine the consequences of fighting on. They knew all about war; some of them had fought in the Great War, and the hideous memory of that slaughter was only twenty-two years oldless distant in time from them than the first Gulf War is from us today.There was scarcely a family in Britain that had not been touched by sorrow. Was it rightwas it fairto ask the people to go through all that again? And to what end?It seems from the cabinet minutes that the meeting more or less kicked off with Halifax. He went straight to the point: the argument he had been making for the last few days.He was an impressive figure. He was tall, very tall; at 6 foot 5 he loomed about ten inches above Churchillthough I suppose that advantage matters less around a table. He was an Etonian and an academic star, with the domed forehead that seemed fitting in a prize fellow of All Souls. (Churchill, dont forget, had not even been to university, and got into Sandhurst only on the third attempt.) To judge by

the evidence of contemporary footage, Halifax spoke in a low and melodious sort of voice, though with the clipped enunciation of his time and class. He looked through thickish round glasses, and he perhaps raised his right hand, lightly clenched, to make his case.The Italian embassy had sent a message, he said: that this was Britains moment to seek mediation via Italy. The information came via Sir Robert Vansittartand that was a clever name to invoke, since Sir Robert Vansittart was a diplomat who was known to be ferociously anti-German and against the appeasement of Hitler. The message was therefore as delicately and appetisingly wrapped as possible, but the meaning was naked.This was not just a simple overture from Mussolini: it was surely a signal from his senior partner. Coiling itself round Whitehall and penetrating the heart of the House of Commons, it was a feeler from Hitler. Churchill knew exactly what was going on. He was aware that the despairing French Prime Minister was in townand indeed had just had lunch with Halifax.M. Paul Reynaud knew that France was beaten; he knew in his heart what his British interlocutors could scarcely believethat the French were possessed of an origami army: they just kept folding with almost magical speed. Reynaud knew that he was going to be remembered as one of the most abject figures in the history of France; and he believed that if he could persuade the British also to enter negotiations, that humiliation would be shared and palliatedand above all he might win better terms for France.So that was the message: conveyed by the Italians, supported by the French, and originating from the German dictator: that Britain should see sense and come to an arrangement with reality. We dont know exactly the words with which Churchill replied; all we have is the laconic and possibly sanitised summary of Sir Edward Bridges. We dont know precisely how the Prime Minister appeared to his colleagues that afternoon, but we can have a pretty good guess.Contemporary accounts say Churchill was by now showing signs of fatigue. He was sixty-five, and he was driving his staff and his generals to distraction by his habit of working on into the small hoursfuelled by brandy and liqueursringing round Whitehall for papers and information, and actually convening meetings when most sane men were tucked up with their wives.He was dressed in his strange Victorian/Edwardian garb, with his black waistcoat and gold watch chain and his spongebag trouserslike some burly and hungover butler from the set of Downton Abbey. They say he was pale, and pasty, and that seems believable. Let us add a cigar, and some ash on his lap, and a clenched jaw with a spot of drool.He told Halifax to forget it. As the minutes put it: The Prime Minister said that it was clear that the French purpose was to see Signor Mussolini acting as intermediary between ourselves and Herr Hitler. He was determined not to get into this position.He understood exactly what the offer implied. Britain was at war with Germany, and had been since 1 September the previous year. It was a war for freedom and for principleto protect Britain and the empire from an odious tyranny, and if possible to repel the German armies from the subjugated states. To enter talks with Hitler or his emissaries, to enter negotiations, to get round the table for any kind of discussionit all meant the same.The minute Britain accepted some Italian offer of mediation, Churchill knew that the sinews of resistance would relax. A white flag would be invisibly raised over Britain, and the will to fight on would be gone.So he said no to Halifax, and some may feel that ought to have been enough: the Prime Minister had spoken in a matter of national life or death; in another country, the debate might therefore have been at an end. But that is not how the British constitution works: the Prime Minister is primus inter paresfirst among equals; he must to some extent carry his colleagues with him; and to understand the dynamics of that conversation we must remember the fragility of Churchills position.He had been Prime Minister for less than three weeks, and it was far from clear who were his real allies round the table. Attlee and Greenwood, the Labour contingent, were broadly supportiveGreenwood perhaps more than Attlee; and the same can be said for Sinclair the Liberal. But their voices could not be decisive. The Tories were by some way the largest party in Parliament. It was the Tories on whom he depended for his mandateand the Tories were far from sure about Winston Churchill.From his very emergence as a young Tory MP he had bashed and satirised his own party; he had then deserted them for the Liberals, and though he had eventually returned to the fold, there were too many Tories who thought of him as an unprincipled opportunist. Only a few days earlier the Tory benches had conspicuously cheered for Chamberlain, when he entered the Chamber, and were muted in their welcome for Churchill. Now he was sitting with two powerful ToriesChamberlain himself, Lord President of the Council, and Edward Wood, First Earl of Halifax and Foreign Secretary.Both men had clashed with Churchill in the past. Both had reason to regard him as not just volcanic in his energies, but (to their way of thinking) irrational and positively dangerous.As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Churchill had deeply irritated Chamberlain with his plan to cut business rateswhich Chamberlain thought would unfairly curb the revenues of Tory local governmentto say nothing of the systematic monstering Churchill had given Chamberlain, for months and years, over the failure to stand up

to Hitler. As for Halifax, he had been viceroy of India in the 1930s, and borne the brunt of what he saw as Churchills bombastic and blimpish opposition to anything that smacked of Indian independence.Then there was a further aspect to Halifaxs political position that gave himin those grim May daysan unspoken authority, even over Churchill. Chamberlain had sustained his fatal wound on 8 May, when large numbers of Tories refused to back him in the Norway debate; and in that key meeting of 9 May, it was Halifax who had been the departing Prime Ministers choice. Chamberlain had wanted Halifax. King George VI wanted Halifax. Many in the Labour Party, in the House of Lords, and above all on the Tory benches would have preferred to see Halifax as Prime Minister.In fact the only reason Churchill had finally got the nod was because Halifaxfollowing a ghastly two-minute silence after Chamberlain offered him the jobhad ruled himself out of contention; not just because it would be hard to command the government from the unelected House of Lords, but as he explicitly said, because he didnt see how he would be able to cope with Winston Churchill rolling around untethered on the quarterdeck.Still, it must give a man a certain confidence to think he had momentarily been the Kings preferred choice as Prime Minister. In spite of Churchills clear opposition, Halifax now returned to the fray. What he offered was, with hindsight, shameful.The gist of it was that we should enter a negotiation with the Italians, with the blessing of Hitler, at which our opening gambit would be the surrender of various British assetsand though he did not spell these out in the meeting, they are thought to have been Malta, Gibraltar and a share of the running of the Suez Canal.It says something for Halifaxs nerve that he felt able to offer this to Churchill as a course of action. Reward aggression by entering talks? Hand over British possessions to a ludicrous jut-jawed and jackbooted tyrant like Mussolini?Churchill repeated his objections. The French were trying to get us on a slippery slope towards talks with Hitler and capitulation. We would be in a much stronger position, he argued, once the Germans had tried and failed to invade.But Halifax came back again: we would get better terms now, before France had gone out of the warbefore the Luftwaffe had come over and destroyed our aircraft factories.It makes one cringe, now, to read poor Halifaxs defeatism; and we need to understand and to forgive his wrong-headedness. He has been the object of character assassination ever since the July 1940 publication of the book Guilty Men, Michael Foots philippic against appeasement.Halifax had been over to see Hitler in 1937and though he at one stage (rather splendidly) mistook the Fhrer for a footman, we must concede that he had an embarrassing familiarity with Goering. Both men loved fox-hunting, and Goering nicknamed him Halalifaxwith emetic chumminessbecause halali is a German hunting cry. But it is nonsense to think of him as some kind of apologist for Nazi Germany, or a fifth columnist within the British government. In his own way, Halifax was a patriot as much as Churchill.He thought he could see a way to protect Britain and to safeguard the empire, and to save lives; and it is not as if he was alone. The British ruling class was riddledor at least conspicuously weevilledwith appeasers and pro-Nazis. It wasnt just the Mitfords, or the followers of Britains home-grown would-beduce, fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley.In 1936 Lady Nelly Cecil noted that nearly all of her relatives were tender to the Nazis, and the reason was simple. In the 1930s your average toff was much more fearful of Bolshevism, and communists alarming ideology of redistribution, than they were fearful of Hitler. Indeed, they saw fascism as a bulwark against the reds, and they had high-level political backing.David Lloyd George had been to Germany, and been so dazzled by the Fhrer that he compared him to George Washington. Hitler was a born leader, declared the befuddled former British Prime Minister. He wished that Britain had a man of his supreme quality at the head of affairs in our country today. This from the hero of the First World War! The man who had led Britain to victory over the Kaiser!Now the snowy-haired Welsh wizard had been himself bewitched, and Churchills former mentor had become an out-and-out defeatist. It wasnt so very long ago that the media had been singing the same tune. The Daily Mail had long been campaigning for Hitler to be given a free hand in eastern Europe, the better to beat up the bolshies. If Hitler did not exist, said the Mail, all western Europe might now be clamouring for such a champion.The Times had been so pro-appeasement that the editor, Geoffrey Dawson, described how he used to go through the proofs taking out anything that might offend the Germans. The press baron Beaverbrook himself had actually sacked Churchill from his Evening Standard column, on the grounds that he was too hard on the Nazis. Respectable liberal opiniontheatre types like John Gielgud, Sybil Thorndike, G. B. Shawwere lobbying for the government to give consideration to talks.Of course, the mood had changed in the last year; feelings against Germany had unsurprisingly hardened and grown much more widespread. All we are sayingin mitigation of Halifaxis that in seeking peace, he had the support of many British people, at all levels of society. And so the argument went on, between Halifax and the Prime Minister, for that crucial hour.Outside it was a warm and gorgeous May day; the chestnut candles were out

in St Jamess Park. Inside it was a game of ping-pong.Churchill told Halifax that any negotiation with Hitler was a trap that would put Britain at his mercy; Halifax said he couldnt understand what was so wrong with the French suggestion.Chamberlain and Greenwood both chipped in with the (useless) observation that both optionsfighting on and entering negotiationswere risky.As it got to five oclock, Halifax said that nothing in his suggestion could be remotely described as ultimate capitulation.Churchill said that the chances of Britain being offered decent terms were a thousand to one against.It was a stalemate; and it was nowaccording to most historiansthat Churchill played his masterstroke. He announced that the meeting would be adjourned, and would begin again at 7 p.m. He then convened the full cabinet of twenty-five, ministers from every departmentmany of whom were to hear him as Prime Minister for the first time. Consider his position.He could not persuade Halifax, and nor could he simply crush or ignore him. Only the previous day the Foreign Secretary had been so bold as to accuse him of talking frightful rot. If Halifax resigned, Churchills position would be weak: it was hardly as if his first efforts as war leader had been crowned with triumphthe Norway campaign, for which he was overwhelmingly responsible, had been a considerable fiasco.The appeal to reason had failed. But the bigger the audience, the more fervid the atmosphere; and now he made an appeal to the emotions. Before the full cabinet he made a quite astonishing speechwithout any hint of the intellectual restraint he had been obliged to display in the smaller meeting. It was time for frightful rot on steroids.The best account we have is from the diary of Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, and there seems to be no reason not to trust it. Churchill began calmly enough.I have thought carefully in these last days whether it was part of my duty to consider entering into negotiations with That Man [Hitler].But it [is] idle to think that, if we tried to make peace now, we should get better terms than if we fought it out. The Germans would demand our fleetthat would be called disarmamentour naval bases, and much else.We should become a slave state, though a British Government which would be Hitlers puppet would be set upunder Mosley or some such person. And where should we be at the end of all that? On the other side we have immense reserves and advantages.He ended with this almost Shakespearean climax:And I am convinced that every one of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender. If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.At this the men in that room were so movedaccording both to Dalton and to Leo Amerythat they cheered and shouted, and some of them ran round and clapped him on the back. Churchill had ruthlessly dramatised and personalised the debate.It was not some diplomatic minuet. It was a choice between protecting their country or dying, choking in their own blood. It was an eve-of-battle speech, and it appealed to them in some primeval and tribal way. By the time the War Cabinet resumed at 7 p.m., the debate was over; Halifax abandoned his cause. Churchill had the clear and noisy backing of the cabinet.Within a year of that decisionto fight and not to negotiate30,000 British men, women and children had been killed, almost all of them at German hands. Weighing up those alternativesa humiliating peace, or a slaughter of the innocentsit is hard to imagine any modern British politician having the guts to take Churchills line.Even in 1940, there was no one else who could conceivably have given that kind of leadershipnot Attlee, not Chamberlain, not Lloyd George, and certainly not the most serious alternative, the 3rd Viscount Halifax.Churchill punningly nicknamed Halifax the Holy Fox, partly because he was churchy, and partly because he loved riding to hounds, but mainly because he had a mind of foxy subtlety. But if the fox knew many things, Churchill knew one big thing.He was willing to pay that butchers bill, because he actually saw more clearly than Halifax. He had the vast and almost reckless moral courage to see that fighting on would be appalling, but that surrender would be even worse. He was right. To understand why, let us imagine May 1940 without him.CHAPTER 2THE NON-CHURCHILL UNIVERSELets go back to that moment on 24 May 1940, when Heinz Guderian, one of the most audacious tank commanders in history, is on the verge of an extraordinary triumph. After vicious fighting, his panzers have crossed the Aa canal in northern France. They pause in their exertions, their engines pinking gently in the sun, and Guderian prepares for a final assault on the British.His prey is now less than twenty miles awaythe 400,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force: flinching, fearful, bracing themselves for the ignominy of surrender. All Guderian needs to do is rev up those mighty Maybach engines, plunge onwards towards Dunkirk, and the British army will be shattered. Back home, the islanders ability to resist will be gone. And then he gets a message from Berlina decision that he will later denounce as a disaster.For reasons that are not entirely clear, Hitler wants him to stop; to wait; and in an ecstasy of frustration, Guderian obeys. For the next few daysbecause the evacuation is agonisingly slowthe British jugular is pitifully exposed, pulsing beneath the Nazi knife.In this horrific context, the British War Cabinet ponders what to do: to deal,

or to fight. Now let us take Churchill out of the equation.Lets send down one of those giant Monty Python hands and pluck him from the smoke-filled room. Let us suppose that hed copped it as a young man, on one of those many occasions when he had set out so boisterously to cheat death. Lets imagine that his preposterous luck had run out years earlier, and that he had been skewered by a Dervish spear or plugged by a ten-rupee jezail or that he had crashed one of his rope-and-canvas flying machines or died in the trenches.We leave the fate of Britain and the world in the hands of Halifax, Chamberlain and the representatives of the Labour and Liberal parties. Would they have treated with Hitler, as the Foreign Secretary was proposing? It seems overwhelmingly likely.Chamberlain was already physically feeble, and was to die of cancer only a few months later: and the whole purpose of his removal from the Premiership was that it was impossible to see him as a war leader. Halifaxs position we know: he wanted to negotiate. The others had neither the parliamentary clout nor the bellicose flair to lead the country, in defiance of Hitler, at a moment of terrifying danger.It was Churchilland only Churchillwho had made resistance to the Nazis his political mission. There was a sense in which his objections to Halifax were selfish.He was fighting for his political life and credibility, and if he gave in to Halifax he was finished. His prestige, his reputation, his prospects, his egoall those things that matter to politicianswere engaged in the cause of fighting on; and this has led some historians to make the mistake of thinking that it was all about him, and not about the British interest.In the last few years there has erupted an unsightly rash of revisionist accounts, suggesting that Britain should indeed have done what so many peoplein all walks of societywere hoping and praying for: struck a bargain with Nazi Germany. The argument goes that the British Empire and the Nazi Reich were capable of peaceful coexistenceand there is no doubt that Hitler had said plenty of things to encourage that idea.In the 1930s he had sent Ribbentrop over to schmooze the Establishment, and with considerable success. In 1938 Halifax was allegedly so incautious as to declare to Hitlers adjutant that he would like to see as the culmination of my work the Fhrer entering London at the side of the English king amid the acclamation of the English people.As we have seen, there were members of the upper and middle classes who had exhibited an unfortunate feeling for Hitlerismincluding the former monarch, Edward VIII. And even now, in these evil days of 1940, Hitler would sometimes proclaim his admiration for the British Empire, and his view that it was not in Germanys interest to crush Britainsince that would only benefit rival powers, such as America, Japan and Russia.We English were also members of the Aryan race, we gatheredthough perhaps not as genetically special as the Teutonic variant. Britain and her empire could survive as a sort of junior partnerfull of historical interest but fundamentally effete: the Greeks to the Nazi Rome.Many thought that indignity a price worth paying for the preservation of the empire, and to avert slaughter. It was not just that people wanted a deal with Hitler: many thought it was inevitable.The French did: Admiral Darlan of the French fleet was convinced that Britain would lose, and in 1940 he prepared to join forces with Germany.So did many Americans: the ambassador of the day was the egregious Irish-American Joe Kennedy: bootlegger, crook and father of JFK. He was endlessly requesting meetings with Hitler and sending lip-smackingly gloomy messages to Washington. Democracy is finished in England, he proclaimed towards the end of 1940, shortly before he was recalled.He was wrong, of course, just as Halifax was wrong, and the appeasers were wrong, and all the revisionists are wrong today. But to do battle with their nonsense, we have to try to understand what might have happened if their wishes had come true.I am always nervous of counterfactual history, since it strikes me that the so-called chain of causation is never really clear. Events arent like billiard balls, with one obviously propelling the nextand even billiards can be deceptive.Take out one spillikin from the heap of factors, and you can never tell how the rest will fall. But of all the what ifs of history, this is about the most popular. Some of our best modern historians have conducted this thought experimentand they overwhelmingly reach the same conclusion: that if you end British resistance in 1940, you create the conditions for an irredeemable disaster in Europe.Hitler would almost certainly have won. That is, he would have been able to launch Operation Barbarossathe attack on Russiamuch earlier than June 1941. He would not have had those pesky Brits causing trouble for him in the Mediterranean and in the North African desert, and tying up men and weapons.He would have been able to direct his full fury at Russiaas he had always intended when, fingers crossed behind his back, he agreed to the NaziSoviet pactand he would almost certainly have pulled it off, before the campaign was reduced to a frozen hell. As it was, the achievements of the Wehrmacht were astonishing: they captured millions of square miles and millions of men. They captured Stalingrad and reached the outer stations of the Moscow metro. Imagine if they had captured Moscow, decapitated the communist regime, and sent Stalin into a funk from which he did not recover (he had already had a nervous collapse when the German tanks rolled across

his frontier).Historians have envisaged the swift implosion of the communist tyrannyassisted, perhaps, by middle-class victims of collectivisationand the installation of some pro-Nazi puppet regime. And then what?Hitler and Himmler and the rest of the satanic crew would have been able to use this vast canvasfrom the Atlantic to the Uralsto paint their hideous fantasies of government. With Britain out, there was no one to stop them, no one to interrupt them, no one with even the moral standing to denounce them.In America, the isolationists would have won: if Britain wasnt going to risk the lives of its people, why should they? In Berlin, Albert Speer would have got on with his deranged plans for a new world capital, to be called Germania.At its heart was to be the Hall of the Peoplea demented granite version of the Pantheon of Agrippa; a building so vast that you could fit the dome of Londons St Pauls through the oculusthe circular hole at the top of the dome. It was intended to seat 100,000 people, and the chanting and the shouting were expected to be so prodigious that they were planning for rainfall in the building itself, as the warm exhalations rose, condensed, and precipitated on the heads of the fervent crowds of fascists.This nightmarish structure was surmounted by a mammoth eagle, so that the whole thing looked a bit like some cosmic Prussian helmet 290 metres highalmost as tall as the Shard skyscraper in Southwark; and around it radiated other vast symbols of dominance: an arch twice the size of the Arc de Triomphe; colossal railway stations from which double-decker trains would zoom at 190 kmh, conveying German settlers to the Caspian and the Urals and the other tracts of eastern Europe from which the Slavic Untermenschen had been expelled.The whole European landmass, with the exception of Switzerland (though there was a secret plan to invade that, too), was to consist either of the Reich or of client fascist states. As many counterfactual novelists have spotted, there were all sorts of plans to convert the territory into a sinister edition of the European Union.In 1942, the Reich economics minister and president of the Reichsbank, Dr Walter Funk, wrote a paper calling for a Europische Wirtschaftsgesellschafta European Common Market. He proposed a single currency, a central bank, a common agricultural policy, and other familiar ideas. Ribbentrop proposed a similar-sounding scheme, though, to be fair, Hitler opposed this on the ground that it wasnt sufficiently beastly to the rest of the Nazi European Union.In this Gestapo-controlled Nazi EU, the authorities would have been free to pursue their hateful racist ideology. The Nazis had begun their persecutions in the 1930s, and long before Churchill came to powerbefore the decision to fight onthey were moving populations of Jews and Poles.They were creating ghettos near railway hubs as a prelude to deportationand as Eichmann later admitted at his trial, deportation meant liquidation. Unchecked and for the main part uncriticised, the Nazis would have got on with the job of massacring those of whom they disapprovedJews, gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally unsound and the disabled.They would have let their imaginations roam as they performed their experiments on human flesh: horrible, detached, inhuman and arrogant beyond belief. When Winston Churchill spoke later that summer of 1940 about Europe sinking into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science, he was exactly right.That is the most likely alternative world, then; but even if Hitler had not succeeded in Russiaeven if Stalin had beaten back his assaultwould life have been much better?We would have been looking at a division of Europe between two forms of totalitarianism: on one side a world terrorised by the KGB or the Stasi; on the other side the subjects of the Gestapoeverywhere a population that lived in fear of the knock in the night, arbitrary arrest, the camps, and no way to protest.Of the roughly two hundred countries in the world today, about 120 can claim to be democracies of some kind or otherto uphold the right of voters to determine their own fate. Most of the world pays at least lip-service to the idea that democracy is, as Churchill once put it, the worst system of government in the world, except for all the others. But if Hitler and Stalin had prevailedor if one or the other had prevaileddoes anyone seriously believe that democracy would be on her throne today?With their superstitious habit of imputing justice and rightness to the course of history, human beings would have absorbed a dismal lesson: that the gods had smiled on the tyrannies, and that tyranny was therefore what our incompetent species required.We in Britain would have acquiesced in this moral bankruptcyand it is all too easy to imagine how Halifax (or Lloyd George, or whoever) could have persuaded the electorate that this was the peace they were yearning forand yet there, surely, they would have been kidding themselves.Do you think that by this cowardice Britain could have bought peace from the Nazis? As Churchill pointed out to the War Cabinet, any deal struck with Hitler must mean disarmament of the fleet, and a fatal weakening of Britains long-term ability to defend herself or to fight back.And the crucial point was surely this: that there was no deal with Hitler that could conceivably be relied upon. Churchill had been proved crushingly right in his warnings about Nazismmade since the early 1930s, when he had been out to Germany to see the parades of gleaming-eyed youths. In countless newspaper articles and speeches he had identified a spiritual evil that

so many others chose not to see: the fundamental revanchism and aggression of the Nazi regime. Now he had been massively vindicated, about the Rhineland, and about Czechoslovakia, about Poland and about the desperate need for Britain to rearm.Many counterfactual historians have pointed out that the Nazis were a long way ahead of their rivals in developing some of the most lethal weapons of the twentieth century: they had the first jet fighters; they had the first rocket-propelled missiles. Imagine if those German scientists had been so desperate to defeat the Soviets that they had been the first to produce an atomic weapon.Think of that fate for Britain, all you who are tempted by the revisionist argument, you who secretly wonder whether the country might have done better to do a deal. Britain would have been alone, facing a hostile continent united under a bestial totalitarianism, and with nuclear-armed rockets bristling on the V2 launching pads at Peenemnde. It would have been a new slavery, or worse.Hitler didnt tell Guderian to stop his tanks on the Aa canal because he was some closet Anglophile. He didnt stay his hand because of some fellow-feeling for those of the Aryan race. Most serious historians agree with Guderian: that the Fhrer simply made a mistakethat he was himself taken aback by the speed of his conquest, and feared a counter-attack.The truth is that he saw Britain not as a potential partner, but as the enemy, and though he sometimes burbled approvingly of the British Empire, he also called for the complete annihilation of British forces. He didnt call off his extensive plans to invade Britain (Operation Sea Lion) because he wanted in some way to spare the British.He did so because it had become too risky, and because one man was telling the rest of the country to fight on the beaches and the hills and the landing grounds, and was even telling his own cabinet that rather than surrender he would die choking in his own blood upon the ground.Hitlers Operation Sea Lion was a project not just of invasion but of subjugation. He was going to carry off Nelsons column from Trafalgar Square, and install it in Berlin. Goering had plans to pillage the entire collection from the National Gallery. They were even goinginfamy of infamiesto send the Elgin Marbles back to Nazi-controlled Athens. The Nazis had already drawn up a blacklist of British figures who were known to be particularly anti-Nazi, who would presumably have been either imprisoned or shot; and at one stage Himmler proposed killing or enslaving 80 per cent of the British population.Such were the potential fruits of the deal that Halifax offered. Not only would the British have been complicit in the totalitarian tyranny that was to engulf Europe; it seems at least possible, if not likely, that they would eventually have been overrun themselves.If Britain had done a deal in 1940and this is the final and most important pointthen there would have been no liberation of the continent. The country would not have been a haven of resistance, but a gloomy client state of an infernal Nazi EU.There would have been no Polish soldiers training with the British army, there would have been no Czech airmen with the RAF, there would have been no Free French waiting and hoping for an end to their national shame.Above all there would have been no Lend-Lease, no liberty ships, no Churchillian effort to woo America away from isolationism; and of course there would have been no prospect of D-Day, no heroism and sacrifice at Omaha Beach, no hope that the new world would come with all its power and might to rescue and liberate the old.The Americans would never have entered that European conflict, if Britain had been so mad and so wrong as to do a deal in 1940. It is incredible to look back and see how close we came, and how well supported the idea was.I dont know whether it is right to think of history as running on train tracks, but let us think of Hitlers story as one of those huge and unstoppable double-decker expresses that he had commissioned, howling through the night with its cargo of German settlers.Think of that locomotive, whizzing towards final victory. Then think of some kid climbing the parapet of the railway bridge and dropping the crowbar that jams the points and sends the whole enterprise for a gigantic burtona mangled, hissing heap of metal. Winston Churchill was the crowbar of destiny. If he hadnt been where he was, and put up resistance, that Nazi train would have carried right on. It was something of a miraclegiven his previous careerthat he was there at all.CHAPTER 3ROGUE ELEPHANTThese days it is probably fair to say that thrusting young Toriesand especially maleswill regard Winston Churchill as a sort of divinity. These honest fellows may sport posters on their teenage bedroom walls: Churchill in a pinstripe suit and toting a tommy gun, or just giving two fingers to the Hun.On entering university they may join Churchill Societies or Churchill Dining Clubs that meet in Churchill Rooms where his portrait grimly endures their port-fuelled yacketing. They may even wear spotty bow ties.When they make it to Parliament they piously trail their fingers on the left toecap of the bronze effigy that stands in the Members Lobbyhoping to receive some psychic charge before they are called on to speak. When they in due course become Tory Prime Minister, and they find themselves in a bit of a corner (as inevitably happens), they will discover that they can make a defiant speech in St Stephens Club, where the cameras will capture them in the same frame as the image of the old war leaderpink, prognathous and pouting down at his successor with what we can only assume is

pride.The Tories are jealous of their relation with Churchill. It is a question of badging, of political ownership. They think of him as the people of Parma think of the formaggio parmigiano.He is their biggest cheese, their prize possession, the World-Cup-winning hat-trick-scorer and greatest ever captain of the Tory team. So I wonder sometimes whether people are fully aware of the suspicion and doubt with which he was greeted by Tories when he became Prime Minister in 1940or the venom with which they spat his name.To lead his country in war, Churchill had to command not just the long-faced men of MunichHalifax and Chamberlainbut hundreds of Tories who had been conditioned to think of him as an opportunist, a turncoat, a blowhard, an egotist, a rotter, a bounder, a cad, and on several well-attested occasions a downright drunk.We have seen how they cheered for Chamberlain, and only murmured for Churchill, when he entered the Commons for the first time as PM on 13 May 1940 (an event that rattled Churchill: I shant last long, he said as he left the Chamber). They sustained their hostility. From his seat in the parliamentary press gallery, Paul Einzig, the correspondent of the Financial News, was able to study the Toriesand he could see the ill-will that formed above them like a vapour.For at least two months after he took office Einzig recorded that Tory MPs would sit in sullen silence when he rose to speak, even after he had completed one of his historic speeches. When the Labour benches cheered, the Tories were still plotting to get rid of him. On about 13 May, William Spens, the chairman of the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers, said that three-quarters of his members were willing to give Churchill the heave-ho and put Chamberlain back.From about the same time we have a letter from Nancy Dugdale, the wife of a Chamberlainite MP, that sums up the mood of fastidious horror. She wrote to her husband, Tommy Dugdale, who was already serving in the armed forces:WC they regard with complete distrust, as you know, and they hate his boasting broadcasts. WC really is the counterpart of Goering in England, full of the desire for blood, Blitzkrieg, and bloated with ego and over-feeding, the same treachery running through his veins, punctuated by heroics and hot air. I cant tell you how depressed I feel about it.In the view of these respectable folk the Churchillians were nothing but gangsters. They were men like Bob Boothby, MP, bisexual bounder and later a friend of the Kray twins; Brendan Bracken, the carrot-topped Irish fantasist and later proprietor of the Financial Times; Max Beaverbrook, the deeply unreliable proprietor of the Express group: all together a rabble of disloyal and self-seeking glamour boys led by a rogue elephant. They tut-tutted about Churchills drinking (I wish he didnt give the impression of having done himself too well, said Maurice Hankey, a senior civil servant, his nose almost visibly twitching) but not out of some zeal for temperancemore because they enjoyed the feeling of moral disapproval.Some of the most virulent anti-Churchillians went on to have great careers: had he not been knifed by Harold Macmillan in the 1960s, Rab Butler might have been Prime Minister. In 1940 he was a junior minister, and a strong supporter of appeasement. Here is what he had to say about the ascent of Churchill:The good clean tradition of English politics has been sold to the greatest adventurer of modern political history, he was heard to say. Surrendering to Winston and his rabble was a disaster and an unnecessary one, mortgaging the future of the country to a half-breed American whose main support was that of inefficient but talkative people of a similar type.That is strong stuff. You can understand why people might have felt loyalty to Chamberlain, widely seen as an honourable man, who was actually polling ahead of Churchill among the public in early 1940; you can see that they felt disconcerted by the arrival of the Churchill gangin what was effectively a palace coup; Churchill wasnt actually elected Prime Minister, by the public at large, until 1951. But there is a fascinating malevolence about some of the language.Lord Halifax deplored the experience of listening to Churchills voice, which oozes with port, brandy and the chewed cigar. One observer stated that he looked like a fat baby as he swung his legs on the government front bench, and tried not to laugh at Chamberlains struggle.So that was what the Respectable Tories thought of Winston S. Churchill: a Goering, an adventurer, a half-breed, a traitor, a fat baby and a disaster for the country. It is like the shrieking from the ballroom when a pirate comes on the tannoy from the bridge.How to explain this hysterical rejection of our greatest twentieth-century hero?From the strictly Tory point of view I am afraid it is all too understandable. In the course of his forty-year parliamentary career Churchill had shown a complete contempt for any notion of political fidelity, let alone loyalty to the Tory Party.From the very moment when the bumptious and ginger-haired twenty-five-year-old entered Parliament in 1900when Queen Victoria was still on the thronehe made disloyalty his watchword and his strategy for self-promotion. He bashed the Tory front bench for spending too much on defence (Is there no poverty at home? he asked). He bashed them over protectionthen a left-wing cause, because it meant cheaper food for the working man. He peeved his elders so badly that at one stage the front bench all got up, as he began to speak, and stalked huffily from the Chamber.By January 1904 he was facing the first Tory attempts to remove him as the

official Conservative candidate for his Oldham constituency. By April he had already decided to switch partiesand he was pretty honest about his motives. He thought the Tories were heading for disaster. My prognostication, he said in October 1904, is that [the Tory leadership] will cut their own throats and bring their party to utter destruction . . . and that the Liberals will gain a gigantic victory at the Election.In other words he wasnt what people thought of as a man of principle; he was a glory-chasing goal-mouth-hanging opportunist. He crossed the floor of the House, sat down next to Lloyd George, and was deservedly called the Blenheim rat.He seemed to reciprocate the feeling. I am an English Liberal, he now wrote. I hate the Tory party, their men and their methods. A couple of decades later he of course switched back againwhen his Liberal mount had more or less expired beneath himin the niftiest piece of circus-style saddle-swapping ever seen in Parliament; and for much of the 1930s he lived up to his reputation by continuing to bash his own Tory Party leadership with whatever stick or knobkerry he could find, in a blatant attempt to advance his own cause.No wonder there was scepticism on the Tory benchesand around the whole political world. If you were an anti-Churchillian in 1940, you had a long charge-sheet before you.EVEN WHEN he was at Sandhurst, he was accused of nefarious deeds. First he and his fellow subalterns were charged with fixing their pony races. Then there was the rum business of poor Allan Bruce, a subaltern whom Churchill and his colleagues allegedly tried to freeze out of the regiment. There was even some suggestion (from Bruce) that Churchill had been engaged in practices of the Oscar Wilde varietybaseless allegations that were dismissed in an expensive libel suit brought by his mother; but mud has a way of sticking.Then there was that dodgy affair in Pretoria, when he had escaped the Boers by breaking his parole and leaving his chums behind. As for his political careermy word, what a feast of bungling! If you were an anti-Churchillian you might start your prosecution by citing his handling, as Home Secretary, of the violent strikes of 191012. Actually, you could attack him from almost any perspective, since the Tories thought on the whole that he had been too wishy-washy with the strikers, while he entered Labours demonology as the man who had fired on unarmed miners in the Welsh town of Tonypandywhen in fact the police had used nothing more lethal than rolled-up mackintoshes.Then in 1911 there was the farce of the Sidney Street siege, when he had gone down to take personal charge of an East End gun battle between the police and a mysterious gangster called Peter the Painter, who was never found and in fact may never have existed.Churchill can be seen in the photographs of the event, peering round a corner in the direction of the supposed anarchist terrorists, and looking thoroughly conspicuous in a top hat.I understand what the photographer was doing, a languid Balfour told the House of Commons, but what was the honourable gentleman doing? Cue roars of laughter. The answer, as everyone knew, was that he was trying to get himself into the photograph.This was nothing, though, to what an anti-Churchillian would see as his epic misjudgements during the First World War. First there was the Antwerp blunder or fiasco of October 1914, when Churchill had taken it into his head that Antwerp must be saved from the Germans and that he alone could save it.For four or five days he masterminded the defences of the port, and even had nominal control of the whole of Belgium. One journalist captured the Napoleonic demeanour of this man enveloped in a cloak and wearing a yachting cap. He was tranquilly smoking a large cigar and looked at the progress of the battle under a rain of shrapnel . . . He smiled and looked satisfied.Antwerp surrendered shortly thereafter, and it became an accepted view that Churchills intervention was a pointless ego-trip that rendered himin the words of the Morning Postunfit for the office he now holds. Unfit or not, he persisted in that office, First Lord of the Admiralty, long enough to engineer what an anti-Churchillian would say was an epic and unparalleled military disastera feat of incompetent generalship that made the Charge of the Light Brigade look positively slick. It was an attempt to outflank the stalemate on the Western Front that not only ended in humiliation for the British armed forces; it cost the lives of so many Australians and New Zealanders that to this day their 1915 expedition to Turkey is the number-one source of pom-bashing and general anti-British feeling among Antipodeans.Gallipoli, or the Dardanelles, was perhaps the most pungent of all the charges against Churchill; and the memory would certainly have been strong enough in 1940 to infect peoples feelings about him and whether or not he was the right man to lead the country in war. Even those who thought he was brilliantand most people could see thatwere often dismayed by his seeming lack of judgement, his tendency to hyperbole, to overexcitement, even to hysteria. In 1931 he became so worked up about the prospect of Indian independence that he called Mahatma Gandhi a half-naked fakirin words that have certainly not been forgotten in India.He had misread public feeling in his attitudes towards the Abdication in 1936, seemingly taking the view that the King of England could marry whatever filly he damn well pleased, American divorcee or not, or else what was the point of being King? At one stage he was making a speech in defence of Edward VIIIwho was,

paradoxically, a pro-Nazi, and who would have presented all kinds of problems to Churchill had he remained on the thronewhen he was howled down by his audience and lost control of the House.His enemies detected in him a titanic egotism, a desire to find whatever wave or wavelet he could, and surf it long after it had dissolved into spume on the beach. When the anti-Churchillians heard him rail portentously about Hitler, and the dangers of German rearmament, they heard a man who had railed before and would rail again, and whose railings had just become part of the landscapelike the railings of Hyde Park.We have to acknowledge that this reputation didnt just come from nowhere. There was a reason he was thought to be arrogant and unsound, and that was because to a certain extent it was true: he did behave with a death-defying self-belief, and go farther out on a limb than anyone else might have thought wise. And why did he behave in this way?Throughout his early career he was not just held to be untrustworthyhe was thought to be congenitally untrustworthy. He had been born under a wonky star.The other day I found myself in the very room, and looking at the very bed, where this momentous event had taken place. Down the corridorseveral corridors, in facta huge party was getting under way to honour the sixtieth birthday of a twenty-first-century hedge fund king.Wait, I said, as we were ushered towards the first phalanx of waitresses bearing champagne. Can you show us the room where Churchill was born? A nice housekeeper led us down a side corridor, into a little square ground-floor room.As the door closed, the noise fadedand it was possible to imagine that we had gone back 140 years, to the climax of another great party. You could screw up your eyes and see gaslights instead of electricity, but the same chintzy wallpaper, the same cheery little fire, the same bowls and ewers with the Marlborough crest.I could see it perfectly in my minds eye: the coats of the revellers hastily pushed off the bed, the ewers filled with hot waterand on the bed the sinuous shape of Jennie Churchill, too far gone in labour to try to make it upstairs. She was only twenty years old, but already famous as one of the most beautiful young women on the London scene.Everyone had been out shooting all day, and by some accounts she had slipped and fallen earlier; others say that she had whirled too enthusiastically at the dancing. At 1.30 a.m. on 30 November 1874 she was delivered of a baby her husband described as wonderfully pretty and very healthy.To understand the psychological make-up of Winston Leonard Spencer-Churchill, we should be attentive to both the place and the time. The room was in the heart of Blenheim Palacethe superfluously colossal home of the Duke of Marlborough. This house has 186 rooms and the structure alone spreads over 7 acres (to say nothing of the lakes, mazes, columns, parkland, triumphal arches, etc.). It is the only non-royal or non-episcopal building in Britain that is called a palace.Though it has its detractors it is for my money by far the greatest masterpiece of English baroque architecturewith its vast wings rising and falling in minutely symmetrical and wonderfully pointless parapets and finials of honey-coloured stone. Blenheim is an architectural statement, and that statement is: I am big; bigger and grander than anything you have ever seen.It was given to one of Churchills dynastic forebears, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, for what was seen as his excellent work in thrashing the French and helping to make eighteenth-century England top nation in Europe. Churchill was born there for the very good reason that it was his home: he was the grandson of the seventh Duke, nephew of the eighth Duke and the first cousin of the ninth Dukeand if that beloved cousin had not himself produced an heir, as seemed likely for quite some time, then Churchill would himself have been the Duke of Marlborough.That is important: he was not just posh; he was ducaland always at the forefront of his sense of self was the knowledge that he stood in dynastic succession to one of this countrys greatest military heroes.As for the time of his birthwell, that is also revealing; because it looks as though he appeared two months ahead of schedule, only seven months after the wedding. This has always raised eyebrows. Although it is possible that he was born prematurely, the simplest explanation is that he was in fact born at full term, but was conceived out of wedlock.If that is so, it would not be surprisingbecause his parents, in their own way, were about as self-willed and unconventional as their son. Their most important contribution to civilisation is that they were both neglectful of the child.His mother was the daughter of a successful American businessman called Leonard Jerome, a man who at one stage had a majority share in the New York Times, owned racehorses and an opera house and made love to female opera stars. Jennie had (allegedly) a small dragon tattooed on her wrist and (indubitably) a voluptuous hourglass figure. She is credited with the invention of the Manhattan cocktail, and was so admired for her wit and her dark and pantherine good looks that she attracted scores of lovers, including the Prince of Wales. She eventually had three husbands, some of whom were younger than her son.She shone for me like the Evening star, Churchill later wrote. I loved her dearlybut at a distance. His letters from his schools are full of plaintive entreaties for love, money and visits. But it was his father who really moulded himfirst by treating him abominably and then by dying prematurely.When you

read Randolphs letters to his son, you wonder what the poor kid had done to deserve it. He is told to drop the affectionate Papa. Father is better, says Randolph. He cant seem to remember whether his son is at Eton or Harrow, and prophesies that he will become a mere social wastrel, one of the hundreds of public school failures, and you will degenerate into a shabby unhappy and futile existence.Perhaps the most tragic example of Winston trying to please his father is the story of the watch. Randolph had given his son a new watch when he was a cadet at Sandhurst, and one day he lost it in a deep river pool. Churchill dived in repeatedly to get it, but was frustrated by the icy water. He then tried to dredge the river, and when that failed he hired twenty-three fellow cadetsat a cost of 3to dam the stream, divert it into a new path, and actually drain the river bed. The watch was found.None of this Herculean exertion impressed the crazed Randolph, who said that his son was a young stupid and definitely not to be trusted. There was perhaps a medical reason for this extreme behaviour: Lord Randolph Churchill was dying of syphilis.Recent scholarship has attempted to remove the venereal stigma and to suggest that it was actually a brain tumourbut even so, he believed it to be syphilis, his wife thought it was syphilis, and so did his doctor. So did Churchill, who spent his adolescence watching the awful political implosion of his fatherfrom supernova to black holeand then his death, by inches, in public, from a shameful disease.So he grew up with two powerful and simultaneous feelings about his father: that he was a disappointment to Randolph, and that Randolph himself had been cheated of the greatness that should have been his. He wanted therefore to do two things: to prove himself to his father, and to vindicate him.Revue de presseGenuinely clever... this book sizzles. (The Times)Churchill's own energy - his indefatigable pursuit of excitement, glory, place and power - demands a writer of fizz and passion to do history justice. Johnson is that writer. (Mail on Sunday)A bravura performance...Johnson has not only celebrated Churchill in this book: he has emulated him with comparable panache. (Financial Times)Splendidly enjoyable... It is rare to find a serious study of a politician that's this entertaining. (Daily Express)Readable, engaging and often funny. (Evening Standard)Johnson's history of Churchill is well crafted, amply researched, and a pleasure to read. It can serve as a change of pace from more plodding accounts. (Library Journal)An engagingly written romp through the elder statesman's greatest achievements. (Observer)A characteristically breathless romp through the life and times of our greatest wartime leader...high on entertainment as it is on providing an appraisal of the great man's achievements. (Telegraph)Johnson is a superb writer... Despite the heavy subject matter, The Churchill Factor is a light and quick read. (The Globe and Mail)Reading about Churchill is always a delight, and Johnson is an accomplished, accessible writer. (Kirkus s)This is a rollicking tale of a political maverick. (Radio Times)A full-throated celebration of human greatness and perhaps the best (and certainly the funniest)...introduction to Churchill yet written. (Daily Beast)Filled with vivid observations. (Washington Post)The must-read biography of the year. (Evening Standard)A stunning tour de force... A riveting journalistic portrait of the countless different aspects of the great man's career and personality, to show more vividly than ever how Churchill was one of the most extraordinary human being who has ever lived. (Sunday Telegraph)