**Not his finest hour: The dark side of Winston Churchill**

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[Winston Churchill](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/winston-churchill) is rightly remembered for leading Britain through her finest hour – but what if he also led the country through her most shameful hour? What if, in addition to rousing a nation to save the world from the Nazis, he fought for a raw white supremacism and a concentration camp network of his own? This question burns through Richard Toye’s new history, *Churchill’s Empire*, and is even seeping into the Oval Office.

George W. Bush left a bust of Churchill near his desk in the White House in an attempt to associate himself with the war leader’s heroic stand against fascism. Barack Obama had it returned to Britain. It’s not hard to guess why: his Kenyan grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama, was imprisoned without trial for two years and was tortured on Churchill’s watch, for resisting Churchill’s empire.

Can these clashing Churchills be reconciled? Do we live, at the same time, in the world he helped to save, and the world he helped to trash? Toye, one of Britain’s smartest young historians, has tried to pick through these questions dispassionately – and he should lead us, at last and at least, to a more mature conversation about our greatest national icon.

Churchill was born in 1874 into a Britain that was washing the map pink, at the cost of washing distant nations blood red. Victoria had just been crowned Empress of [India](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/India), and the scramble for [Africa](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/Africa) was only a few years away. At Harrow School and then Sandhurst, he was told a simple story: the superior white man was conquering the primitive, dark-skinned natives, and bringing them the benefits of civilization. As soon as he could, Churchill charged off to take his part in “a lot of jolly little wars against barbarous peoples”. In the Swat valley, now part of Pakistan, he experienced, fleetingly, a crack of doubt. He realized that the local population was fighting back because of “the presence of British troops in lands the local people considered their own,” just as Britain would if she were invaded. But Churchill soon suppressed this thought, deciding instead they were merely deranged jihadists whose violence was explained by a “strong aboriginal propensity to kill”.

He gladly took part in raids that laid waste to whole valleys, destroying houses and burning crops. He then sped off to help reconquer the Sudan, where he bragged that he personally shot at least three “savages”.

The young Churchill charged through imperial atrocities, defending each in turn. When concentration camps were built in [South Africa](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/SouthAfrica), for white Boers, he said they produced “the minimum of suffering”. The death toll was almost 28,000, and when at least 115,000 black Africans were likewise swept into British camps, where 14,000 died, he wrote only of his “irritation that Kaffirs should be allowed to fire on white men”. Later, he boasted of his experiences there: “That was before war degenerated. It was great fun galloping about.”

Then as an MP he demanded a rolling program of more conquests, based on his belief that “the Aryan stock is bound to triumph”. There seems to have been an odd cognitive dissonance in his view of the “natives”. In some of his private correspondence, he appears to really believe they are helpless children who will “willingly, naturally, gratefully include themselves within the golden circle of an ancient crown”.

But when they defied this script, Churchill demanded they be crushed with extreme force. As Colonial Secretary in the 1920s, he unleashed the notorious Black and Tan thugs on Ireland’s Catholic civilians, and when the Kurds rebelled against British rule, he said: “I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes...[It] would spread a lively terror.”

Of course, it’s easy to dismiss any criticism of these actions as anachronistic. Didn’t everybody think that way then? One of the most striking findings of Toye’s research is that they really didn’t: even at the time, Churchill was seen as at the most brutal and brutish end of the British imperialist spectrum. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin was warned by Cabinet colleagues not to appoint him because his views were so antedeluvian. Even his startled doctor, Lord Moran, said of other races: “Winston thinks only of the color of their skin.”

Many of his colleagues thought Churchill was driven by a deep loathing of democracy for anyone other than the British and a tiny clique of supposedly superior races. This was clearest in his attitude to India. When Mahatma Gandhi launched his campaign of peaceful resistance, Churchill raged that he “ought to be lain bound hand and foot at the gates of Delhi, and then trampled on by an enormous elephant with the new Viceroy seated on its back.” As the resistance swelled, he announced: “I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.” This hatred killed. To give just one, major, example, in 1943 a famine broke out in Bengal, caused – as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has proved – by the imperial policies of the British. Up to 3 million people starved to death while British officials begged Churchill to direct food supplies to the region. He bluntly refused. He raged that it was their own fault for “breeding like rabbits”. At other times, he said the plague was “merrily” culling the population.

Skeletal, half-dead people were streaming into the cities and dying on the streets, but Churchill – to the astonishment of his staff – had only jeers for them. This rather undermines the claims that Churchill’s imperialism was motivated only by an altruistic desire to elevate the putatively lower races.

Hussein Onyango Obama is unusual among Churchill’s victims only in one respect: his story has been rescued from the slipstream of history, because his grandson ended up as President of the US. Churchill believed that Kenya’s fertile highlands should be the preserve of the white settlers and approved the clearing out of the local “blackamoors”. He saw the local Kikuyu as “brutish children”. When they rebelled under Churchill’s post-war premiership, some 150,000 of them were forced at gunpoint into detention camps – later dubbed “Britain’s gulag” by Pulitzer-prize winning historian, Professor Caroline Elkins. She studied the detention camps for five years for her remarkable book Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya, explains the tactics adopted under Churchill to crush the local drive for independence. “Electric shock was widely used, as well as cigarettes and fire,” she writes. “The screening teams whipped, shot, burned, and mutilated Mau Mau suspects.” Hussein Onyango Obama never truly recovered from the torture he endured.

Many of the wounds Churchill inflicted have still not healed: you can find them on the front pages any day of the week. He is the man who invented Iraq, locking together three conflicting peoples behind arbitrary borders that have been bleeding ever since. He is the Colonial Secretary who offered the Over-Promised Land to both the Jews and the Arabs – although he seems to have privately felt racist contempt for both. He jeered at the Palestinians as “barbaric hoards who ate little but camel dung,” while he was appalled that the Israelis “take it for granted that the local population will be cleared out to suit their convenience”.

True, occasionally Churchill did become queasy about some of the most extreme acts of the Empire. He fretted at the slaughter of women and children, and cavilled at the Amritsar massacre of 1919. Toye tries to present these doubts as evidence of moderation – yet they almost never seem to have led Churchill to change his actions. If you are determined to rule people by force against their will, you can hardly be surprised when atrocities occur. Rule Britannia would inexorably produce a Cruel Britannia.

So how can the two be reconciled? Was Churchill’s moral opposition to Nazism a charade, masking the fact he was merely trying to defend the [British Empire](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/british-empire) from a rival?

The US civil rights leader Richard B. Moore, quoted by Toye, said it was “a rare and fortunate coincidence” that at that moment “the vital interests of the British Empire [coincided] with those of the great overwhelming majority of mankind”. But this might be too soft in its praise. If Churchill had only been interested in saving the Empire, he could probably have cut a deal with Hitler. No: he had a deeper repugnance for Nazism than that. He may have been a thug, but he knew a greater thug when he saw one – and we may owe our freedom today to this wrinkle in history.

This, in turn, led to the great irony of Churchill’s life. In resisting the Nazis, he produced some of the richest prose-poetry in defense of freedom and democracy ever written. It was a cheque he didn’t want black or Asian people to cash – but they refused to accept that the Bank of Justice was empty. As the Ghanaian nationalist Kwame Nkrumah wrote: “All the fair, brave words spoken about freedom that had been broadcast to the four corners of the earth took seed and grew where they had not been intended.” Churchill lived to see democrats across Britain’s dominions and colonies – from nationalist leader Aung San in Burma to Jawarlal Nehru in India – use his own intoxicating words against him.

Ultimately, the words of the great and glorious Churchill who resisted dictatorship overwhelmed the works of the cruel and cramped Churchill who tried to impose it on the darker-skinned peoples of the world. The fact that we now live in a world where a free and independent India is a superpower eclipsing Britain, and a grandson of the “savages” is the most powerful man in the world, is a repudiation of Churchill at his ugliest – and a sweet, ironic victory for Churchill at his best.