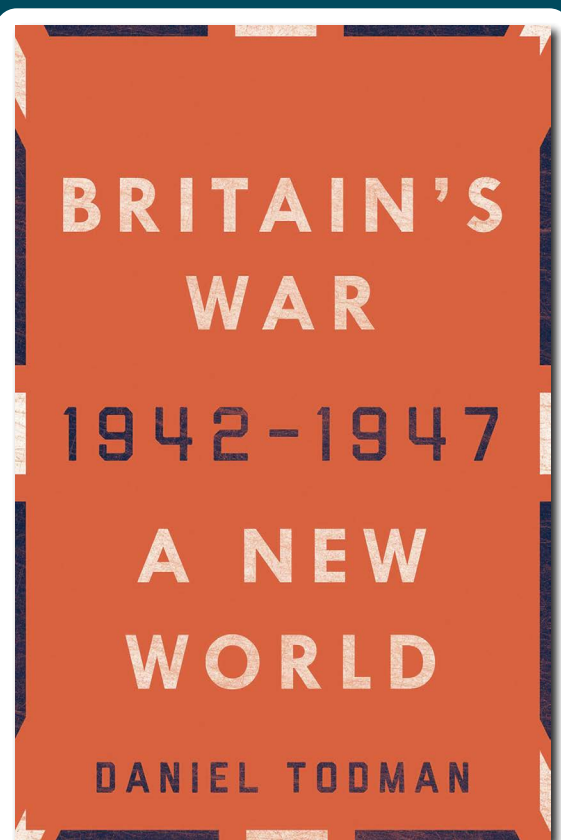


REVIEW ESSAY

Britain's War A New World, 1942-1947

Daniel Todman, Oxford University Press,
New York, 2020, 976 pages



Mark Montesclaros

Recent notable works of military history have taken a holistic approach, focusing on context and a number of factors within the environment, in addition to primarily military ones. British historian Richard Evans' three-volume series on the Third Reich in the Second World War, published between 2003 and 2009, exemplifies such an approach, as the author examines a number of dynamics, including social, economic, and informational to name a few, in order to help the reader make sense of a complex and complicated period in world history. In *Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947*, historian Daniel Todman applies a similar comprehensive framework in his thorough analysis of Great Britain and its role in World War II and its immediate aftermath. Advertising his work as a "total history," the author explicitly states that he considers political, economic, and social factors in his rendering of the British experience. Many readers of this publication will no doubt recognize these aspects of the joint doctrinal

construct PMESII (political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure), a model used to deconstruct a complex operational environment in a holistic manner.¹ In *Britain's War*, Todman makes a unique contribution to the literature by unveiling some new perspectives and insights derived from his total analysis of these seminal years in British history.

The book picks up where the author's first volume, *Britain's War: Into Battle, 1937-1941*, left off, and like its predecessor, it is comprehensive, meticulously detailed, and showcases Todman's considerable analytical skills. The author organizes his work chronologically with twenty-nine chapters divided into four major sections, each with a one-word title that aptly describes Britain's relative position on the global stage. The first part, "Nadir," shows a Britain nearly at death's door, shocked by the loss of Singapore to a numerically inferior Japanese army and by setbacks in North Africa that threatened British interests in the Middle East but buoyed by a powerful ally that



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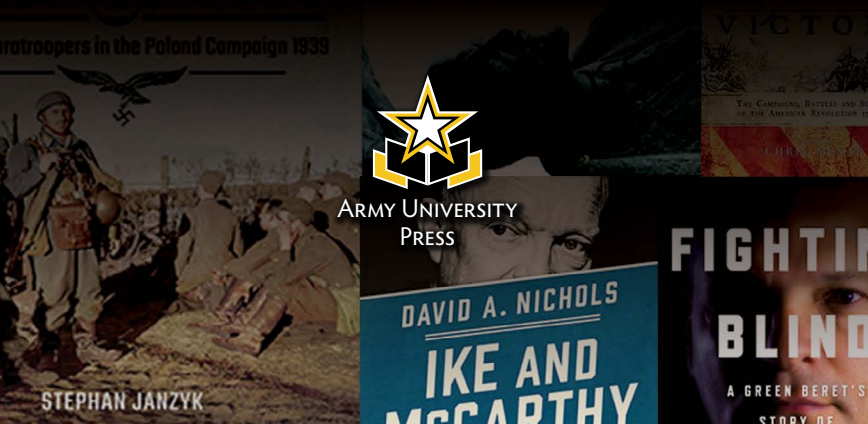
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had just entered the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Next, “Peak” describes an America ascendant—growing in strength and resolve but still an unequal partner with Great Britain and Joseph Stalin’s Russia in the coalition that eventually won World War II. During this period (September 1942 to September 1943), Britain, and its indefatigable leader Winston Churchill, reached its zenith of influence among the Allied powers, particularly after Gen. Bernard Montgomery’s decisive victory at El Alamein and following the dramatic encirclement of an entire German army by the Russians at Stalingrad. “Victory” picks up from there and takes the reader to April 1945, just short of the end of the war in Europe. In this section, Todman effectively charts the major campaigns and operations in Sicily, Italy, France, and Germany, along with their attendant Allied strategies. Clearly, the United States was in the fore of the alliance by this time; British power and influence was on the wane. Todman titles the final section of the book “Resolutions” (May 1945 to December 1947) and argues that Britain’s war did not end with either the German or Japanese surrender. His final chapter, “The Post-War Disorder,” underscores a central idea that Britain’s experience in the war must be seen as part of a continuum, and that events in the immediate postwar period were borne out of critical decisions stemming from the midwar years.

While doing justice to a book of this magnitude is difficult within the confines of this review, perhaps it is most useful to point out what the author offers in his new history that previous accounts may not. Among his unique contributions is “widening the aperture.” While Todman makes this recommendation while arguing that the significance of D-Day (6 June 1944) must be seen in the context of several larger campaigns across multiple domains, this



reviewer contends that *Britain's War* very effectively “widens the aperture” for the reader in a few ways. By juxtaposing multiple issues across the political, military, economic, and social spectrum, Todman provides a holistic understanding of the British conduct of the war and the reasons behind it. One cannot help but admire an administration grappling with some mighty weighty issues, not the least of which was survival of Great Britain and protection of its vast empire, defeat of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, the demands of working within a disparate coalition, and planning for life after the war. Todman is masterful at creating a holistic narrative that effectively incorporates these aspects and many more—the fate of India and other British colonies, development of nuclear weapons, revival of the British economy, and the political divisions of postwar Europe. And while many of Todman’s military aspects have been treated before, his focus on the broader air and maritime campaigns that accompanied oft-studied land battles is refreshing. His observation that the Battle of the Atlantic “was also the single most important victory won by forces under British command in the whole war” is a testament to the author’s commitment to broadening the context and perspective for the reader, not just in his coverage of military operations but across the range of PMESII considerations.²

Todman’s second contribution, also related to his holistic approach in this volume, is a seamless incorporation of domestic considerations into his wartime narrative. Quite remarkably, he notes that even in the fall of 1942, more than two years before the war in Europe was to end, many Brits were focused on their economic and social well-being *after* the war. The author argues that one of the reasons why Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his Conservative Party were so soundly defeated by Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in 1945 was Churchill’s obstinacy and foot-dragging when it came to taking legislative action on social reform. Chief in this regard was the so-called *Beveridge Report*, named for its author Sir William Beveridge, a Labour Ministry official and champion for the much-needed “reconstruction” of the antiquated British labor system. The report advocated for, among other things, the establishment of a social security system, nationalized health care, and governmental intervention to curb unemployment. Remarkably, national

discussion at the time of the report’s issuance superseded even normal conversations on the state of the war. As noted historian Ian Kershaw observes, “The Beveridge Report was widely discussed among troops overseas, an indication in itself that the war was seen as the gateway to a new society.”³ Todman notes that Churchill and his cabinet struggled with how to respond to the *Beveridge Report* and delayed action on funding any of its aspects until wartime commitments were better defined. This whole episode demonstrates that domestic considerations, with their significant political and economic effects, can have a significant influence on wartime decisions; this was certainly the case with Churchill and his cabinet. The author is masterful in his coverage of the importance of nonmilitary considerations, specifically social reform, and its impacts on an administration fully occupied by war.

A final noteworthy aspect of the book deals with the British Empire, a topic of great controversy amongst the Allied powers. The subject permeates Todman’s narrative; he deftly argues that many of Britain’s campaigns and military operations were designed to preserve it. Because World War II was truly a global affair, virtually none of Britain’s vast network of colonies and possessions were left unaffected by its myriad military operations—whether in the Mediterranean, North African, or Pacific theaters of war. Given his analysis, Todman reaffirms biographer William Manchester’s observation that “Churchill remained an unrepentant champion of the British Empire to the end.”⁴ Unfortunately for the coalition, the idea of fighting to preserve an empire was anathema to President Franklin Roosevelt as well as to American military leaders. Hence, Todman deftly portrays

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the internal conflicts over the issue. While Churchill sought to maintain the status quo and strongly opposed nationalist movements (particularly in India), Roosevelt was championing the Atlantic Charter and its vision of self-determination for all peoples. Similarly, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff constantly questioned their British counterparts' motives, especially with their emphasis on operations in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Seen by the Americans as superfluous actions designed primarily to ensure British interests, they instead advocated for a cross-channel attack into Europe as early as 1942. The fact that Operation Overlord did not occur until 1944 shows that during the early years of the alliance, Churchill and the British held sway over American military desires. Other authors have also argued that preservation of the empire figured into Britain's global wartime strategy, particularly in its desire to pursue "an essentially imperial objective: the preservation of British maritime and political power."⁵ Actions preceding Overlord in North Africa, Sicily, and then Italy seem to bear this out. Throughout the book, Todman effectively shows how these imperial considerations—with their attendant political, economic, and social effects—permeated British decision-making both during the war and in planning for its aftermath. Once again, he demonstrates the efficacy of a holistic approach in his consideration of the theme of empire.

Despite these strengths, *Britain's War* is not for everyone. At over nine hundred pages and weighing in at over three pounds, the book's tremendous scope, depth, and methodical pacing may pose a challenge to some readers. Those expecting a focus on purely

military action may be dismayed at the book's frequent forays into the war's multiple other aspects, as has been previously discussed. Additionally, some of the sections of the book could use smoother transitions, as disparate topics may seem disconnected to the reader. The book is at its best when Todman includes transitions and links a particular topic to its broader context. A final comment here is that *Britain's War* might benefit from an epilogue or conclusion that revisits some of the themes in the author's introduction. While the final chapter, "The Post-War Disorder," is aptly named and very well constructed, there is no overarching conclusion to the entire volume, which might help the reader make a sense of it all. The book's final sentence thus serves as its conclusion: "For good or ill, its [Britain's] entry into the new world created by the Second World War would be defined by the legacies of the past."⁶ Todman more than justifies that brief but eloquent statement in the many pages that precede it.

The book is for the serious student and requires a commitment from the reader. Those who complete it will be rewarded with a much deeper understanding of the British perspective of its participation in World War II and how that experience has invariably shaped the strategic and operational environment today. I highly recommend this book for today's military professionals as well as for those in undergraduate or graduate studies in military history, World War II, and the Cold War. A comprehensive and valuable achievement, Todman's new perspective in *Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947*, will no doubt make an indelible impression on all who read it. ■

Notes

1. Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 1 December 2020), IV-6–IV-10. In addition to political, military, economic, and social factors, the PMESII construct for examining the operational environment holistically includes "infrastructure" and "information."

2. Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 345.

3. Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Viking, 2015), 383.

4. William Manchester and Paul Reid, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Defender of the Realm, 1940-1965* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 1047.

5. Lawrence James, *Churchill and Empire: A Portrait of an Imperialist* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2014), 239.

6. *Ibid.*, 831.