

# Heroes Entwined: Gandhi and Churchill

SUMIT GANGULY

Few Churchill aficionados and only a handful of Churchill scholars seem aware that his professional life, especially in the mid-twentieth century, sharply intersected with that of the great Indian nationalist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Both these individuals had been born to some privilege, Winston Churchill arguably to considerably more. Churchill, though concerned about the plight of his less fortunate countrymen, remained until the end of his life a defender of a bygone age and its privileges. Gandhi, while seeking to return his country to an imagined, harmonious past, was nevertheless committed to ushering in a more egalitarian and just social order.

But as Arthur Herman shows in his extraordinary new book, *Churchill and Gandhi*—despite their profound national, cultural, and ideological differences and despite their sharply divergent political visions—did share some intriguing characteristics. Both men passionately believed in the transformative power of personal will and commitment. Both entertained distinctly antimodern visions (Gandhi's vision was pastoral and anti-industrial, while Churchill's was imperial and rooted in the values of the Victorian era).

When it comes to either carefully crafted or hagiographic accounts of the lives of these two larger-than-life individuals, there is no shortage. In the Anglo-Saxon world, effusive biographies of Churchill abound—often written by or appealing to those of a conservative ideological persuasion. Carefully overlooked in these works are his rank racism, his early interest in eugenics, and his anachronistic imperial attitudes. Instead, much is made of his florid prose and his justly famed stewardship of the United Kingdom during the Second World War. Herman's depiction of Churchill, fortunately, is a far cry from such sanitized and politically usable portraits.

**Gandhi and Churchill:  
The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed  
an Empire and Forged Our Age**  
by Arthur Herman. Bantam, 2008.

Herman does not shy away from showing that Gandhi too held his share of idiosyncratic beliefs. The impact on Gandhi of the ideas of a host of British nineteenth-century intellectuals, some of whom, most notably Henry Salt, held quirky notions about vegetarianism, was profound and long-lasting. The religious philosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a thinker from Ukraine of German and Russian descent, first kindled Gandhi's fascination with ancient Hindu texts. This belated discovery of his own cultural and religious ethos led him to construct an imaginary Indian civilizational ethos that he saw as a viable alternative to the harsh, mechanistic, and materialistic industrial world.

What sets Herman's work apart from most studies of Churchill and Gandhi is its explicit focus on how the lives of these two men collided and became intertwined as Britain struggled to hold on to the colony that Benjamin Disraeli had called "the jewel in the Crown." Much of the historical ground that Herman covers will be familiar to students of British imperial history and the Indian nationalist struggle. However, the author's ability to weave seamlessly the narrative of Churchill's rise (from a young, brash, and supremely ambitious subaltern officer in India to a member of the British cabinet and then prime minister) into the evolution of Gandhi's career (from a loyal British-educated barrister to the exemplar of Indian nationalism) makes this book a unique contribution to the existing corpus of scholarship.

Herman narrates the confluence of Churchill and Gandhi's professional lives with authority, knowledge, and verve. He demonstrates a supple command of historical detail, whether discussing Churchill's significant role in the military disaster at Gallipoli or Gandhi's extraordinary role during the horrific communal riots that accompanied the partition of India. In this effort Herman pays particular attention to questions of historical, political, and social context. This is no mean feat, since

---

SUMIT GANGULY, a *Current History* contributing editor, is a professor of political science at Indiana University.

the book's subject matter ranges from Gandhi's days as a young, inexperienced lawyer in South Africa to Churchill's vainglorious involvement in the Boer War to their tortured negotiations in the 1930s regarding India's future.

The sheer sweep of events in this panoramic account of Churchill and Gandhi's entangled lives renders adequate comment difficult. However, two general themes that emerge from Herman's volume deserve mention.

## MANLY MEN

First, it is both ironic and fascinating that these individuals of vastly different mien and belief shared a similar conception of manhood. For both of them, it was vitally important to affirm one's masculinity. For Churchill this meant a willingness to throw oneself, regardless of physical danger, into battle. Though undoubtedly obsessed with personal glory, he nonetheless evinced astonishing courage on many occasions, whether in the Boer War or in the trenches of the First World War. Gandhi likewise believed in the vital importance of physical courage, cultivating a stoic willingness to suffer oppressive violence without responding in kind. This willing self-sacrifice lay at the core of Gandhi's philosophy. That is, his followers' task was to show their oppressors the error of their ways, while eschewing their tactics. So although both men valued physical courage, Gandhi positively abhorred the infliction of violence whereas Churchill embraced war almost gleefully.

A second striking feature common to both men's careers was their meteoric political rise in their re-

spective countries and their ability to rouse their countrymen for a particular cause. In Churchill's case the cause was facing the Nazi horror; for Gandhi it was ending British rule in India. Herman correctly argues, however, that despite the swift rise and powerful impact of the two men, their political legacies are limited. The Labor Party's return to power in postwar Britain all but wiped away the influence of Churchill's conservative and imperial outlook. India, under Gandhi's chosen lieutenant Jawaharlal Nehru, chose to embrace socialist notions of planning and rapid industrialization, and Gandhi's pastoral vision was never given serious thought in post-independence India.

Indeed, after Herman's grand discussion of these two men's titanic rivalry, his work begins to lose its enthusiasm. He could have resuscitated it by, for example, commenting on the very selective use of Churchill's ideas and biography that is rampant in the United States. He also could have shown how Gandhi's ideas of nonviolent civil disobedience, drawn in part from the life and work of Henry David Thoreau, played a critical role in the American civil rights movement and continue to animate key social activists in India.

These limitations notwithstanding, the book's historical scope is vast and its judgment of these two towering yet distinctive figures is judicious. The book's discussion of the intersection of Churchill and Gandhi's professional lives represents a novel contribution to existing scholarship. This is a work that, with felicity and aplomb, transcends the genres of history, biography, and international affairs.

---

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

William W. Finan Jr.

**How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan** by Roy Gutman. *US Institute of Peace Press, 2008.*

When the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, the United States did too. The withdrawal was not abrupt; Washington continued to provide aid through Pakistan to some of the mujahideen groups that had forced Moscow to quit the country after losing 13,000 troops in a struggle that also left tens of thousands of Afghans dead

and millions homeless. But by 1991 the US aid had all but ended. Throughout the presidential tenure of Bill Clinton, Afghanistan remained—in the words of a State Department official—about as important to American foreign policy as the Maldives or Comoros.

It was not just the US government that left Afghanistan; the American and much of the other Western media left too. They did so even before the Taliban took power in the mid-nineties and made a Western media presence in the country nearly impossible. This information vacuum, together with an official US policy that Roy Gut-

---

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR. is the *Current History* books editor.