

Ruane, Kevin (Hrsg.): *Churchill and the Bomb in War and Cold War*. London: Bloomsbury Publisher 2016. ISBN: 978-1-47252-338-9; 400 S.

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Winston Churchill chose the hydrogen bomb as the main subject for his last major speech in the House of Commons, opening the annual defence debate on 1 March 1955. The Prime Minister was in sombre mood:

„Which way shall we turn to save our lives and the future of the world? It does not matter too much to old people; they are going soon anyway; but I find it poignant to look at youth in all its activity and ardour and, most of all, to watch little children playing their merry games, and wonder what would lie before them if God wearied of mankind.“

Kevin Ruane justifies this, yet another addition to the literature on Churchill, by stressing the exceptional gravity of the issues surrounding nuclear weapons and their importance to Churchill himself and thus to his management of Cold War Anglo-American and Anglo-Soviet relations. He also wishes to offer a counter to recent scholarship on the „lameness“ of Churchill's second administration between 1951 and 1955.

Whereas Graham Farmelo, in another recent account of Churchill's Bomb, told a story of Churchill and atomic science and scientists, Ruane focuses on international politics and the evolution of Churchill's own thinking. He provides a welcome three-part structure to the book, dealing in turn with Churchill the bomb-maker during the second world war, Churchill the „atomic diplomatist“ roughly between 1945 and 1954, and Churchill the peacemaker thereafter.

Readers may be confused initially by Ruane's idiosyncratic definition of „diplomatist“, for the diplomacy he has in mind is not the sort we associate with Presidents Truman or Eisenhower, seeking internationalisation of the atom or offering „atoms for peace“. Rather, it is atomic sabre-rattling, complete with „ultimatums“ and „showdowns“ with the Soviet Union. Interestingly, the turning-points in Churchill's thinking came, Ruane argues, when an especially vivid personal

account made him stop and consider the bomb's power. First, at the Potsdam conference in July 1945, he was impressed by Brigadier Thomas Farrell's eye-witness report of the first atom bomb test in the New Mexico desert: „finally he understood the awesomeness of atomic power“ (p. 134). Then, in February 1954, like many others around the world, he was forcibly struck by Congressman Sterling Cole's public statement on US thermonuclear weapons, constituting an „epiphany“ for the Prime Minister (p. 246).

The wartime story of Churchill and the Bomb will be well known to anyone working in the field; it has been told many times before, originally by Margaret Gowing in 1964 in her official history of Britain and Atomic Energy.¹ We see the familiar figures of President Roosevelt, always friendly but avoiding firm commitments; Lord Cherwell, monopolising scientific advice to the Prime Minister; and Churchill himself, seeing the atom as another aspect of the mystical coming-together of the „English-speaking peoples“ on which he founded his strategy for war and peace. This is not to say Ruane's account is of no interest. His research has been meticulous, and there are new and picturesque details for example on the involvement of King George VI, berating Secretary of State James Byrnes for loose talk (p. 137); on the British industrial giant ICI, thinking at one stage – as the Americans suspected – to take postwar commercial advantage of wartime atomic secrets (p. 30); and of cabinet minister and atomic insider Sir John Anderson, captured in a beautiful pen-picture (pp. 31–32).

It is Ruane's postwar account, however, especially of the later years of Churchill's second ministry, which contains the newest and most interesting material. He touches, for example, on the background to the creation of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, championed by Cherwell; on Churchill's fractious meeting with Eisenhower in Bermuda in December 1953, described as „a sod of a conference“ by Lord Ismay; and gives due weight to the very difficult cabinet politics around the July 1954 decision to develop a British H-bomb. Future Prime Minister Harold Macmil-

¹Margaret Gowing, *Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939–1945*, New York 1964.

lan complained that Churchill was by now „quite incapable – mentally, as well as physically – of remaining Prime Minister“, and Ruane does not try to hide Churchill’s physical decline, maddening lack of focus, unwillingness to read any brief and obsession with summit meetings with foreign leaders. He does, however, emphasise the quality and maturity of Churchill’s late thinking on nuclear weapons, leading up to his March 1955 speech. In a most sensitive conclusion, he relates this thinking to religion and morality. The „H-bomb fever“ of 1954, Eisenhower’s „New Look“ and the risk of precipitate US action over Dien Bien Phu provoked intense soul-searching and then clarity and wisdom, and not merely the „hubristic conceit“ (p. 313) of an old man convinced he must cling to power long enough to talk at the summit to US and Soviet leaders who, he felt sure, would listen and see sense.

With his „years of nuclear learning“ (p. 293), Churchill was quick to grasp the point, made by the Chiefs of Staff and others, that a balance of assured destruction between the superpowers was in prospect. And indeed, as Ruane shows, it is possible to trace a genuine learning process over many years in a statesman whose mind was open to change and alive to the importance of science, even if he often failed to grasp the details. Without this open mind, and Cherwell’s timely prompting, the British government could easily have missed the atom’s importance in the darkest days of a war for national survival in 1940, and without Churchill’s perseverance it would surely have failed to gain Roosevelt’s consistent attention and eventual close atomic cooperation. This is a carefully researched and structured book with a thoughtful conclusion, and deserves a wide readership.

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