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Review of Churchill's Cold War: The Politics of Personal Diplomacy

David Lindsey Snead
Liberty University, dlsnead@liberty.edu

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Reviewed by David L. Snead (Department of History, Texas Tech University)

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Churchill's Personal Diplomacy: A Lot of Effort for Limited Success

Churchill's Personal Diplomacy: A Lot of Effort for Limited Success

Klaus Larres impressively traces Winston Churchill's political career from his early positions in the British government starting in 1908 to his resignation as prime minister in 1955 and argues that the famous leader actively pursued personal diplomacy and summitry while in office. He stresses that Churchill's personal diplomacy was "an imaginative and perhaps even visionary policy through which he attempted to reverse his country's declining fortunes and prevent or undo major catastrophes before the First World War, in the course of the Second World War and during the Cold War years" (p. xx). While Churchill was not always successful in his efforts, Larres asserts that recognizing his continuous pursuit of personal diplomacy provides a lens through which to understand his policies and actions. Although Larres at times overstates Churchill's commitment to personal diplomacy, his study does effectively illustrate a fairly consistent effort by Churchill to preserve Great Britain's power position in the world and to resolve disputes through face-to-face diplomacy.

Larres opens his study with an examination of when and how Churchill attempted to use personal diplomacy before World War I and then in World War II. His purpose is to show that Churchill's commitment to personal diplomacy was long-lived and was not a product of the early Cold War. Larres's first example showing Churchill's personal diplomacy occurred in 1908 when the future prime minister joined with David Lloyd George in attempts to initiate talks with Germany. Although these efforts failed, they did not stop Churchill from continuing to pursue personal diplomacy after the 1911 Agadir crisis and his appointment as First Lord of the Admiralty in October of the same year. His last effort before the start of the First World War was to ask Foreign Secretary Edward

Grey for permission to meet with Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz in May 1914. While Grey refused, Churchill's efforts show how he "sought to set up informal conferences without any strict agenda but with himself at the center of attention to further world peace and, above all, ensure Britain's continued status as a great power" (p. 28).

>From the start of World War I to the start of World War II, Churchill had few opportunities to engage in personal diplomacy but never lost his desire to do so. After Germany attacked Poland in September 1939, Churchill immediately began to develop a relationship with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Britain's desperate situation in 1940 and 1941 led Churchill to turn to the United States for as much support as possible. "The high point of Churchill's personal diplomacy," Larres claims, "was achieved in the course of the Second World War. In 1940-41 his influence and powers of persuasion were decisive in securing Washington's assistance for a beleaguered Britain" (p. 34). This success was not entirely emulated through the remainder of the war. Despite his efforts to maintain a close relationship with Roosevelt and to cultivate one with Joseph Stalin during the war, Churchill faced great difficulties. Differences in American and British goals grew as the United States emerged as the senior partner in the Anglo-American partnership; Stalin and other Soviet officials never trusted Churchill because of the prime minister's virulent anti-communism before the war; and Churchill's failure to seek advice from within his own government often led to conflicting agendas.

Churchill's defeat in July 1945 left him as the head of the Conservative Party but with little voice in British policy making. However, Larres sees much continuity in Churchill's thinking throughout his leadership of the opposition party. Larres claims the former prime minister had three goals in terms

of waging the Cold War: preserving Britain's status as a world power, standing firm against communism, and preserving peace by having summits where the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union could overcome their differences through personal discussions between the key leaders. What is interesting about these goals is that Churchill "never explained how such negotiations would lead to a relaxation of tension and perhaps even to an end of the Cold War. He remained silent on the question of which topics were to be raised at a summit and in what sequence they were to be discussed" (p. 137).

Churchill's time as the head of the opposition provided few opportunities for his summit goals to be implemented. However, his re-election as prime minister in October 1951 set the stage for almost four years of concerted efforts to bring an end to the Cold War through the use of personal diplomacy. "Churchill," Larres asserts, "concentrated almost exclusively on summit diplomacy and related issues. He neglected nearly all other external and domestic matters" (p. 155). Unfortunately for Churchill, none of the other major leaders—Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Joseph Stalin and his successors, and officials within his own party—showed much interest.

Larres stresses that "the period after Stalin's death would prove to be the high-point of Churchill's post-war pursuit of summit diplomacy" (pp. 190-191). Churchill attempted to take the initiative and arrange a summit but faced major opposition from within his own party, the United States, and other allies. Furthermore, the prime minister "entirely failed to understand the suspicion with which he was regarded in Moscow. Stalin's successors had been in important leadership positions during the war, and British policy in 1940-41, which the Kremlin regarded as a devious attempt by Churchill to provoke the Soviet Union to fight Hitler's Germany on behalf of the West, was still remembered with much resentment in Moscow" (p. 217). Despite the opposition, Churchill possibly had a chance at achieving his goal of organizing a summit of the key heads of state in the early summer of 1953. However, his efforts came to naught after the Soviet Union crushed the East German uprising in June 1953, and he suffered a debilitating stroke a few days later.

In response to an initiative by Soviet leader Vyacheslav Molotov, Churchill was able to arrange one last summit involving the United States, Great Britain, and France in Bermuda in December 1953.

The summit amounted to nothing as no one, besides Churchill, had high hopes for achieving any significant agreements or developing a concerted plan to wage the Cold War. In fact, the summit's main consequence was making all of its participants "aware of Churchill's increasing frailty" (p. 309).

Churchill remained in office another sixteen months, but his influence at home and abroad was increasingly marginalized. Everyone within the British government wanted him to step down. Harold Macmillan saw him as "now quite incapable—mentally as well as physically—of remaining Prime Minister" (p. 349). In the United States, Eisenhower increasingly attempted to bypass Churchill and develop a relationship with Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, the heir to the leadership of the Conservative Party. The Soviet Union continued to mistrust any of Churchill's initiatives. The only one who failed to realize the situation was Churchill himself. However, he ultimately did decide to step aside and resigned in April 1955.

Larres has made an important contribution to our understanding of Churchill and Great Britain's role in the early Cold War. His study shows the struggle of one leader who attempted "to maintain Britain's continued place in the sun" (p. 391). However, there are certain issues that Larres could have addressed more clearly and/or systematically. His definition of personal diplomacy is rather narrow. From Larres's perspective, Churchill's personal diplomacy was between himself and other world leaders. However, there are different levels of diplomacy or at least political negotiations. Did Churchill use the same type of personal diplomacy to solve domestic issues? It would seem that if Churchill consistently used personal diplomacy in pursuing foreign policies, he probably used it in domestic matters. Since Churchill was involved in domestic issues throughout his career, evidence of continuity in his use of personal diplomacy there would have produced a more convincing argument.

There are other smaller problems with Larres's arguments or at least their presentation. While Churchill's efforts to use personal diplomacy with other leaders, in particular with summits, is clear, his interaction at these meetings is left vague. How did Churchill act at these meetings? What were the relationships between leaders like? Larres tends to focus on Churchill's desire for personal diplomacy and the results of meetings that did occur without showing in much detail what Churchill's personal diplo-

macy actually meant when he was face-to-face with another leader. Two examples of this are Larres's discussions of Churchill's relationship with Roosevelt in 1940-41 and the prime minister's activities at the 1953 Bermuda Conference. Larres describes the first example as the high point of all of Churchill's personal diplomacy, yet there is no discussion of the interaction between the two leaders. The Bermuda Conference was Churchill's last summit, but Larres

spends little time exploring Churchill's efforts once the conference began. Larres would have been more convincing if he had shown how Churchill attempted to use his personal persuasive powers.

Despite these few misgivings, Larres deserves high praise for his impressive research, lucid arguments, and well-crafted prose. Anyone studying Churchill, twentieth-century British diplomacy, and the early Cold War will need to consult this work.

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