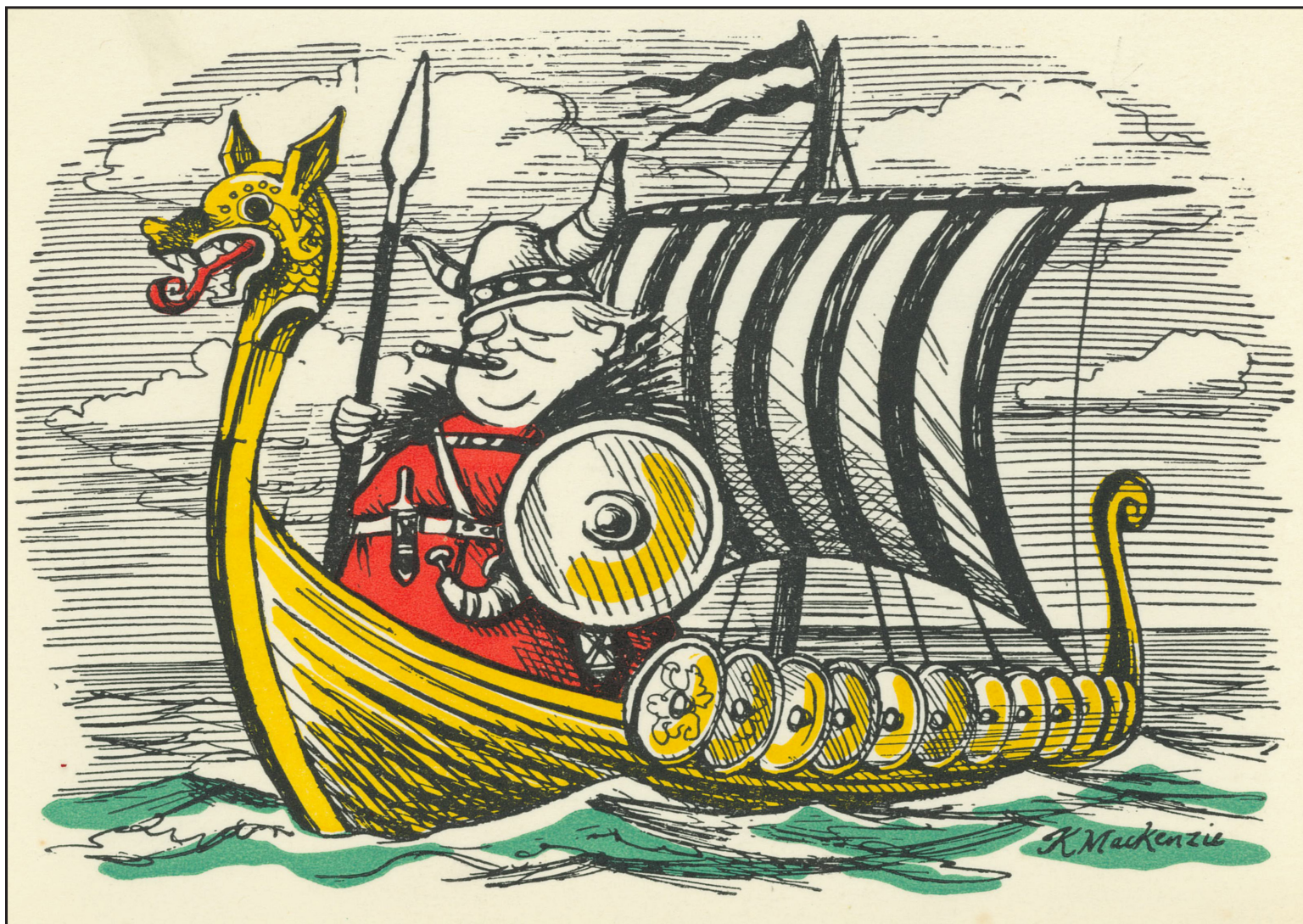




FINEST HOUR

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Churchill and Europe



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FROM THE EDITOR

Churchill and Europe

The subject has never been more relevant. During the campaign in the United Kingdom this past spring to decide whether the nation should remain in the European Union or depart after more than forty years as a member, voices on both sides of the “Brexit” debate invoked the spirit and words of Sir Winston Churchill. The theme of this issue, however, was chosen to commemorate an event from the past: the seventieth anniversary of Churchill’s call for “a kind of United States of Europe” made in Zurich on 19 September 1946.

This issue looks not at what people in the English-speaking world make of Churchill’s views on Europe but rather what people in Europe today make of Winston Churchill. Writing from the Netherlands, **Felix Klos** makes the important point that no one today can say what position Churchill might have taken in the United Kingdom’s recent referendum debate. What Klos does do is analyze the statements Churchill made about European unity—and Britain’s relationship to it—in the context of the times in which they were made.

Without doubt, France was the continental nation with which Churchill was most deeply involved and which he most loved. **Antoine Capet** charts the long history of this *affaire de cœur*. Churchill found Italy to be equally “paintacious” and relaxing, but the long years of Fascism made for dark times, as **Patrizio Romano Giangreco** and **Andrew Martin Garvey** explain. **Werner Vogt** shows how Switzerland was another nation for which Churchill developed a deep affection, and the Swiss people also did for him.

Only once did Churchill ever visit Iceland, Europe’s westernmost outpost, but the circumstances could not have been more dramatic or the impact more electric. **Magnús Erlendsson**, now eighty-five, remembers the summer day when he was just ten years old and personally witnessed the arrival of his nation’s most famous visitor.

From Portugal, Britain’s oldest ally, **João Carlos Espada** provides an outsider’s perspective on Churchill’s political philosophy and the government and legal traditions developed in Britain and imparted to the nations that emerged from its empire.

Even our book review section has a notably European perspective, including a new novel about Churchill and Charlie Chaplin written by an Austrian in German. The publication in English translation of the diaries of Ivan Maisky, Soviet ambassador in London from 1932 to 1943 provides an important new primary source for the Russian view of Churchill. And finally, we also have a fresh perspective on Churchill from Ireland, the European nation with a relationship to Britain that even now continues to be redefined.

David Freeman, July 2016

Tourism, Politics, Painting, and Personal Staff: Churchill's Many Links to Switzerland

It would be pretentious to assume that Switzerland played a major role in Winston Churchill's life. Nevertheless he had many links to Switzerland, starting with his first travel abroad and finishing in the last year he lived, when his friend and supplier of his oil paints Willy Sax died shortly before him. For the Swiss people Churchill became a hero in 1940, and when he visited the city of Zurich on 19 September 1946 tens of thousands of people were cheering along the streets. The Swiss people's gratitude was limitless. They made his drive through the city a triumphal parade. Never before and never after Churchill have the Swiss paid tribute to a great man like this.

A Most Tiring Mountain

Churchill's first encounter with the Swiss and their homeland happened when he visited the country as a tourist in the summers of 1893 and 1894 together with his brother Jack and their tutor, Mr Little. These were in fact Churchill's first travels abroad as a young man. He had a keen eye for the beauty of nature and wrote a series of enthusiastic letters to his mother, wherein he described the astounding scenery of the Swiss mountains and lakes but also some cities, which were to his liking. He even went so far as to climb Monte Rosa in the Valais, a substantial but by no means difficult mountain in the Canton of Valais. In a letter to his mother Churchill wrote:

While in Zermatt I climbed the Monte Rosa. It was not dangerous....More than 16 hours of continual walking. I was very proud & pleased to find I was able to do it and to come down very fresh. It is a most tiring mountain—mainly on account of the rarification of the air on the long snow slopes. There were several Sandhurst and Harrow boys at Zermatt and they climbed Dent Blanche—the Matterhorn

and the Rothhorn—The most dangerous and difficult of Swiss mountains. It was very galling to me not to be able to do something too, particularly as they swaggered abominably of their achievements. I had to be content with toilsome but safe mountains. But another year I will come back and do the dangerous ones.¹

Churchill's first experience of Switzerland was, however, not an entirely positive one. Swimming in Lac Léman, the Lake of Geneva, he feared for his life when, swimming in the middle of the lake, a thunderstorm developed. The rowboat he and a colleague had left un-

attended was blown away. Fortunately, young Churchill was a good swimmer and was able to reach the boat in a desperate

effort. Happily, both young men survived the ordeal.

Alpine Retreat

The next series of encounters with Switzerland came about ten years later. In 1904, 1906, and 1910 Churchill spent long summer holidays in the villa of his friend and mentor Sir Ernest Cassell. Cassell loved the area of the Aletsch glacier and had a spacious country home constructed on the Riederalp, virtually in the middle of nowhere. Churchill as a young minister spent weeks on end there alone, or with his mother, and eventually with Clementine. He passed his days going for extended walks and hikes with Sir Ernest, reading, writing correspondences, and playing cards. Apparently Churchill, soon after he had arrived, had a clash with the local farmers, who drove their cattle past Cassell's villa early in the morning. The young politician, who was not an early bird, was woken up and seriously annoyed by the sound of the bells and shouted at the peasants out of his bedroom window. Of course they did not understand a word, and Cassell had

By Werner Vogt

“Of all the neutrals, Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction.”

–Churchill to Anthony Eden, December 1944

to negotiate a feasible way forward. Assisted by some monetary compensation, the peasants agreed to stuff straw into the cowbells, when they walked past the villa so the VIP guest from London was able to sleep in. Apart from the cowbells, Churchill loved the place. In a letter to his mother he wrote:

I sleep like a top & have not ever felt in better health. Really it is a wonderful situation. A large comfortable 4 storied house—complete with baths, a French cook & private land & every luxury that would be expected in England—is perched on a gigantic mountain spur 7,000 feet high, and it's the centre of a circle of the most glorious snow mountains in Switzerland. The air is buoyant and the weather has been delightful.²

Respected Minister

Given his early affinity with Switzerland, it is astonishing that Churchill was not to return for thirty-six years. An increasing workload, a growing family, and the outbreak of the First World War were probably the main reasons to leave the Alpine republic aside, to say nothing of the death of his mentor Sir Ernest Cassell in 1921. Being distant from Switzerland in miles, however, by no means meant being distant from the country in mind. Although Switzerland has no access to the sea, the country crossed Churchill's mind every now and then even when he was First Lord of the Admiralty during the Great War.

As for the Swiss, Churchill for the political and economic elite became a known name in the twenties, when the foreign correspondents of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ)—the country's finest newspaper—reported about Churchill the minister, especially when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is interesting to note that during Churchill's "Wilderness Years" (1929–39) many of his articles and comments were printed in German translation by NZZ. When Hitler and the Nazis came to power in 1933, pressure on the German-speaking neighbouring countries began to rise accordingly. With the free press extinct in Germany, the Nazis hated the fact that in Switzerland there still was a free press, which reported in their language. During the Nazi era

(1933–45) and especially during the Second World War, it was forbidden in Germany and punishable by death to read Swiss newspapers or to listen to Swiss radio stations. Seen in this light, it took courage for NZZ editor-in-chief Willy Bretscher to publish Churchill until the end of 1938. Bretscher had been a foreign correspondent in Berlin in the late 1920s, and as an experienced political observer he had seen the rise of the Nazi beast. By printing Churchill's articles he expressed his own opinion. NZZ reported anything and everything Churchill did or said during the war. Every speech was announced, briefly summarised, printed in full length, and finally all the reactions were reported too. The Nazi threat continually sharpened the minds of the newspaper men in Falkenstrasse 11, Zurich, address of NZZ.

Switzerland at Bay

Obviously Switzerland was not at the centre of Churchill's attention when he became Prime Minister in 1940. But after the fall of France, Switzerland was the only remaining democracy in the centre of Europe, Sweden playing the same role in the North of the continent. The position of Switzerland was particular, inasmuch as it was surrounded by hostile powers (Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy) or by countries under Nazi occupation (Austria and France). This fact meant that governing Switzerland was a constant balancing act between demonstrating the power and the will to resist by mobilising the army and guarding the borders on the one hand and being pragmatic enough in trade relations not to provoke a Nazi attack. Many studies written since 1945 have proven that Switzerland's neutrality was a "biased neutrality" in the sense that the country delivered far more weapons and industrial goods which were relevant for the armament industry to Germany than to the United Kingdom. Why? Switzerland was vitally dependent on imported raw materials, having none of its own. And be it coal, steel, or oil—all imported goods needed by the Swiss economy passed through Germany.

So why was the country not invaded in the summer of 1940 when Germany had the necessary number of divisions ready next to the Swiss borders? There are a number of reasons. First, there was no immediate stra-



Historically-dressed cavalymen escort the Churchill party through the Swiss capital of Bern



Churchill is driven past cheering crowds through the streets of Zurich

tegic necessity, given that thousands of tons of transports between Germany and Italy passed unhindered through the Swiss railway infrastructure. Second, given Hitler's plan to attack the Soviet Union, there was no need to bind important military forces for the occupation of Switzerland. Third, given Switzerland's claim to defend itself, the Swiss Army would have made all efforts to inflict fatal damage to the crucial transport infrastructure, particularly the bridges and railway tunnels on the North-South corridor upon which the Nazis heavily depended.

It is obvious that the policy of the Swiss government to keep the country out of war and enter the conflict only if attacked has nothing heroic to it at first sight. Nevertheless, Churchill had a considerable understanding for the Swiss position. In a letter to his Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, he wrote in December 1944:

Of all the neutrals, Switzerland has the greatest right to distinction. She has been the sole international force linking the hideously sundered nations and ourselves. What does it matter whether she has been able to give us the commercial advantage we desire or has given too many to the Germans, to keep herself alive? She has been a democratic state, standing for freedom in self-defense among her mountains, and in thought, in spite of race, largely on our side.³

Another indication of Churchill's sympathy towards Switzerland is the fact that he strongly argued against a breach of Switzerland's neutrality, as suggested by Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin at the Yalta conference. Stalin fouthmouthed the Swiss as "swine" and suggested the Allies march over Swiss territory, if this were to speed up their advance against Nazi Germany.⁴

"Let Europe Arise!"

After the war a group of Swiss industrialists wanted to invite Churchill for a painting holiday on the shores of Lake Geneva. A beautiful country estate was rented for him, the villa Choisi at Bursinel. The Churchills (Winston, Clementine, Mary, and their entourage) arrived in Geneva on 23 August 1946, welcomed by cheering crowds at the airport. The first three weeks were in fact a country retreat, interrupted only by brief visits to Geneva, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Lausanne. Apart from painting in the gardens, Churchill received visitors and was busy with a huge correspondence. But, above all, he wanted to make an important speech in Zurich, the last city on his itinerary.

On his way to Zurich, Churchill first visited the Swiss capital, Bern, where he was enthusiastically welcomed by tens of thousands of people. But this was only a foretaste of what was going to happen in Zurich. As Churchill drove through the city in an open limousine,

he was given a hero's welcome. Again tens of thousands of people wanted to pay tribute to the great man, and since school was called off, thousands of pupils and students watched him drive past, waving their flags and throwing roses into his car. The warm welcome of the common people compensated for the fact that—for all kinds of silly reasons—the University of Zurich declined to award him an honorary doctorate.

Churchill's Zurich speech, ending with the exhortation "Let Europe arise!", is certainly one of his most important post-war statements, on par with his address in Fulton, Missouri. What is interesting, though, is the fact that Churchill's enthusiastic call for some sort of United States of Europe is put into perspective by his remark that Great Britain was going to be outside of this new construction, given that it had the Commonwealth and the "special relationship" with the United States of America.

The Painting Connection

A very strong connection between Churchill and Switzerland happened to be an artistic one. Soon after he started painting, he was introduced to the Swiss painter and adviser to wealthy collectors Charles Montag. Their first encounter in 1915 must have been memorable since Churchill showed Montag a few of his early paintings, which led Montag to the sardonic remark: "If you are as strong in politics as you are in painting, Europe is bust."⁵ Churchill after a deep breath roared with laughter, and a life-long friendship began. It was in fact Montag who in 1945 was instrumental in convincing Churchill that he should accept an invitation for a painting holiday by the Swiss.

Another strong connection in the field of art evolved out of his visit to Zurich in 1946. For some years already, Churchill had painted with colours produced by Sax Farben in Urdorf near Zurich. Churchill wanted to meet the man whose oil and tempera colours he liked so much. So Willy Sax, the company owner, met him in the Grand Hotel Dolder on the day of the Zurich speech. Out of this encounter an astonishing friendship developed, which lasted until the two men died, Sax half a year before Churchill. Sax was invited to Chartwell several times, introduced Churchill to famous Swiss painters like Cuno Amiet, and spent painting holidays with Churchill in the South of France.

The Kitchen Connection

There is yet a further Swiss connection unknown to high politics. Winston and Clementine Churchill developed an affection for Swiss staff, especially after the Second World War. A considerable number of young ladies from Switzerland worked in Chartwell as cooks, kitchen aides, or maids to the master or the lady of the house. Apparently the Churchills liked the Swiss way of cooking and the discipline the "Swiss girls" had. The Prime Minister was especially touched when "the Swiss girls" Lilli Wyss (cook) and Liselotte Kaufmann (kitchen aide) surprised him with a basket of home-coloured Easter eggs in 1952.⁶

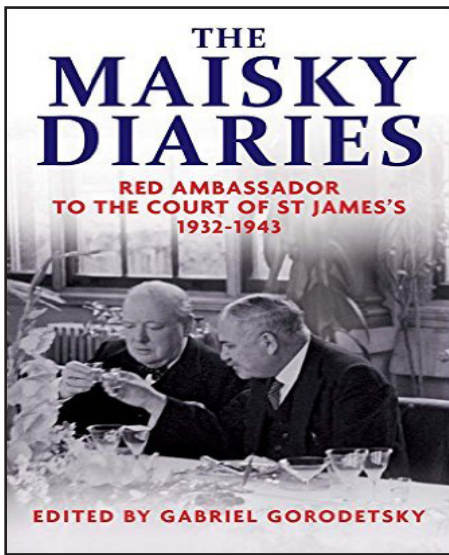
Highest Respect for Churchill

To this day Winston Churchill is spoken about with the highest respect in Switzerland and not just by the fast-diminishing war generation. Young and middle-aged entrepreneurs often answer the question "With which historical figure would you like to dine?" with the reply, Winston Churchill. I am personally convinced that I owe my life to him. My father (1910–1994) served as an infantryman in Schwaderloch next to the River Rhine—in shooting distance to the German Reich. Most probably he would not have survived any Nazi invasion. Thank you Mr. Churchill! ☺

Werner Vogt wrote his PhD dissertation about Churchill's pictures in Switzerland's leading daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung. The author of numerous newspaper articles and books, his latest book, about Churchill's relationship to Switzerland, is reviewed on page 41.

Endnotes

1. Randolph S. Churchill, ed., *Winston S. Churchill*, Companion Volume I, Part 1, 1874–1895 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 517–18.
2. Randolph S. Churchill, ed., *Winston S. Churchill*, Companion Volume II, Part 1, 1901–1907 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 450.
3. Christian Leitz, *Nazi Germany and Neutral Europe during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 175.
4. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, Vol. VII, *The Road to Victory 1941–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 1027.
5. Max Sauter, *Churchills Schweizer Besuch 1946 und die Zürcher Rede* (Herisau: Schläpfer and Co. AG, 1976), p. 14. I have translated from the original, since Montag spoke in French.
6. Werner Vogt, *Winston Churchill und die Schweiz: Vom Monte Rosa zum Triumphzug durch Zürich* (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2015), p. 198.



and jokes and, most likely, consume a bit of alcohol.

Not the least of the intrigues in this marvelous work is how Maisky and his wife, Agniya, navigated the vagaries of the Soviet government that ebbed and flowed as a result of Stalin's paranoia. Called back to Moscow during the height of the purges, Maisky delicately avoided falling into the abyss of an on-going Soviet purge. But, in the end, his own success resulted in his demise as he was arrested, tried, and convicted, not for a political crime but an administrative one.

Despite having incredible access to British power, insight into western policy, and excellent intelligence value, Maisky was not always trusted by the Soviet leadership. He was wrong on most big issues: the opening of the elusive second front and the Nazi perfidy, to name but a few. Yet he understood the British and was able to protect the interests of his homeland.

The Maisky Diaries reveal a vast amount of new information about Churchill's prewar and wartime musings; they contain many new anecdotes and witticisms, as well as an insight into what others were saying about Churchill. Maisky obviously held Churchill in high regard, and there are fascinating

details of the many one-on-one meetings that the two had at familiar locations such as Chartwell, Chequers, and Number 10, as well as in Maisky's private quarters in the Soviet Embassy in London. Their frequent encounters at social and political events from football games to funerals often resulted in sidebar conversations that revealed policy and personnel changes that are all chronicled in these diaries.

But, in the end, they both knew that when Maisky was summoned to Moscow in 1943, the termination of an era was at hand. The inherent insecurity of the Soviet leadership moved to checkmate its own best chess piece. Maisky was ever the best defender of the very same power that he knew to be his mortal enemy. Nevertheless, he remained confident in his own abilities; he knew well the art of walking the diplomatic tightrope.

The Maisky Diaries is an indispensable resource for historians, students, and researchers: a primer for the arts of statesmanship and international relations work from the vantage point of one who understood the game and whose instincts served him well. Make no mistake: this is not an easy read, but it is an important one. Although Churchill is renowned as the British bulldog, Maisky was a bulldog of a different breed. These were men whose fortitude and dedication will stand forever as an example of loyalty to their cause. ☺

D. Craig Horn is a former Russian linguist for the United States Air Force currently serving in the North Carolina General Assembly. He is chairman of the Churchill Society of North Carolina and serves on The Churchill Centre's Board of Trustees.

Let Europe Arise!

Werner Vogt, **Winston Churchill und die Schweiz: Vom Monte Rosa zum Triumphzug durch Zürich**, Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2015, 231 pages. ISBN 978-3038100867.

Review by Jochen Burgtorf

If Winston Churchill's 1946 "Sinews of Peace" address, delivered in Fulton, Missouri, drew international attention to the disheartening notion after the Second World War of an "iron curtain" coming down on eastern Europe due to the policies of the Soviet Union, then his "Let Europe Arise" speech, given in Zurich, Switzerland, later that same year, suggested an appropriate antidote: the United States of Europe, based on a partnership between France and Germany.

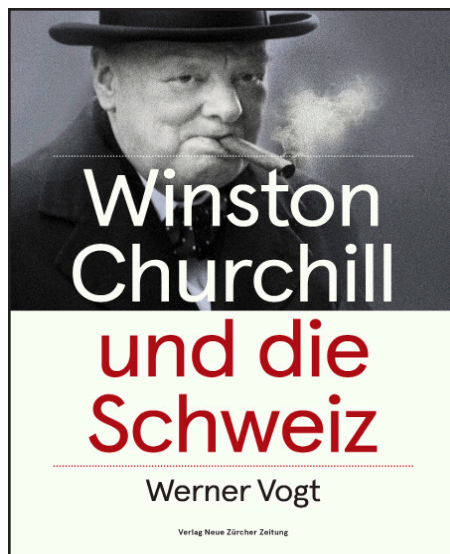
Werner Vogt's *Winston Churchill und die Schweiz: Vom Monte Rosa zum Triumphzug durch Zürich* ("Winston Churchill and Switzerland: From Monte Rosa to the Triumphal Procession through Zurich") places Churchill's Zurich speech into a broad context and promises to go beyond Max Sauter's 1976 dissertation by including Churchill's early connections to Switzerland and, above all, the "human factor" (13). The latter is accomplished on the basis of oral histories conducted by Vogt with eyewitnesses and their descendants, including the son of Churchill's physician in Switzerland and the dining-car waiter who served Churchill on the Swiss "Red Arrow" train.

Vogt holds a doctoral degree (1996) from the University of Zurich for a dissertation on the image of Churchill between 1938

and 1946 in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Switzerland's premier newspaper. His present volume is beautifully illustrated with more than 100 photographs. Intended for a wide audience, it does not employ any footnotes or endnotes. Following an introductory chapter that sketches Churchill's life and career, Vogt turns to Churchill's pre-1910 experiences in Switzerland, which include climbing Monte Rosa (at more than 15,000 feet, Europe's second-highest mountain), almost drowning in Lake Geneva, and arguing with local shepherds in the canton of Valais over the—in Churchill's opinion—undue early-morning noise made by cow bells.

Churchill's interest in Switzerland after the First World War culminated in the somewhat regular publication of his opinion pieces on international politics in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* between 1936 and 1938. During the Second World War, Churchill acknowledged Switzerland's attempts to remain neutral, while many Swiss, especially the editors-in-chief of several newspapers, saw Churchill as a beacon of hope against the threat of a German invasion. A short chapter is dedicated to Churchill's painting instructor, the Swiss Charles Montag, whom he had met in 1915 and who was instrumental in bringing about Churchill's 1946 visit to Switzerland. That visit is the subject of three full chapters.

The visit's official program, we learn, was overloaded, perhaps to compensate for the inability of the University of Zurich's faculty to find a consensus and bestow an honorary doctorate upon its prominent guest. The "Let Europe Arise" speech drew considerable



international attention (as well as French criticism). However, it was the enthusiastic reception by the people of Zurich that made the visit an unprecedented event in Swiss history. According to Vogt, all of Zurich was "vollkommen aus dem Häuschen" (145), perhaps best—albeit somewhat atypically for the Swiss—translated as "completely gaga."

The book concludes with chapters on Churchill's friendship with Swiss artists and businessmen (especially paint manufacturer Willy Sax), and the memories of the "Swiss girls" employed at Chartwell.

Vogt emphasizes time and again that Churchill viewed Britain's role with regard to post-war Europe as that of a god-parent, not a parent, and that, to Churchill, Britain's relationship with the Commonwealth came first, that with the US second, and the one with Europe third. He concludes that Switzerland's position in modern Europe is quite "insular" and, thus, not dissimilar to that of Britain.

The book's appendix contains the English text and German translation of Churchill's Zurich speech (apparently as published

by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 1946), accompanied by photographs of the respective first pages of the original typescript and the typescript in Psalm-style format, intended to facilitate Churchill's oratory. It is curious that the speech's final phrase "Let Europe arise!" is translated as "Lassen Sie Europe entstehen!" (210/214). While the German verb "entstehen" is not incorrect, it is in this context a rather weak rendition of the English "arise," and Churchill might have preferred "auferstehen" or "sich erheben."

Considering that both anti-EU and pro-EU politicians in Britain routinely claim Churchill as one of their own, translating his speeches with the intent to capture their essence remains a tall order. Since *Winston Churchill und die Schweiz* is published under the auspices of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the author's obvious—and admittedly not unmerited—reverence for the paper's longtime (1933–67) editor-in-chief Willy Bretscher comes as no surprise. Otherwise, Vogt's book is not a hagiography: neither its Churchill nor its Switzerland is flawless, which is why, alongside the general readership, historians will appreciate this volume. ☺

Jochen Burgtorf is professor of History and former chair of the History department at California State University, Fullerton. He is currently the President of the National History Honors Society.

Everything Old Is New Again

Adrian Stewart, **February 1942: Britain's Darkest Days**, Pen & Sword Military, 2015, 198 pages, £19.99. ISBN 978-1473821156

Review by Mark Klobas

self-loathing.” Seriously? Black Dog meant Churchill was filled...with...self-loathing? Churchill, the man who thought himself a “glow worm”?

Mary Soames said on more than one occasion that she believed that some Churchill biographers made “rather too big a meal” of her father’s casual use of a term Victorian nannies used to describe their charges’ bad moods. Well, you can add novelists to that list as well, and that is why I docked them one star each for their Churchill portrayal. For the record, Churchill never suffered from clinical depression at any point in his life. Ever. Full stop. See “The Myth of the Black Dog” in *Finest Hour* 155, Summer 2012. ☹

Michael McMenamin and his son Patrick are co-authors of the award-winning Winston Churchill Thriller series *The DeValera Deception*, *The Parsifal Pursuit*, *The Gemini Agenda*, and *The Berghof Betrayal* set during Churchill’s *Wilderness Years, 1929–39*.

Fact and Fiction about Churchill and Chaplin

Michael Köhlmeier, Translated by Ruth Martin, ***Two Gentlemen on the Beach***, Haus Publishing, 2016, 280 pages, £17.99. ISBN 978–1910376461

Review by Werner Vogt

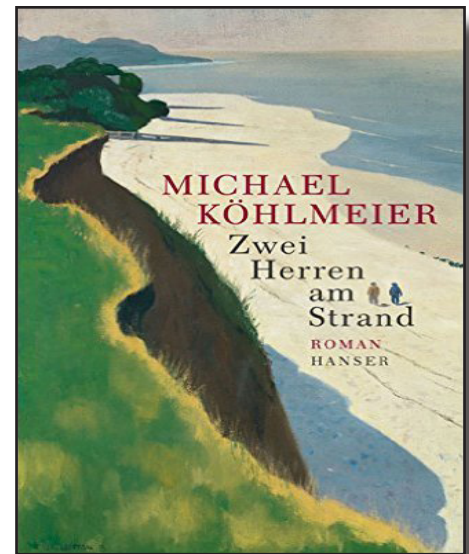
Originally published in Germany in 2014 as *Zwei Herren am Strand*, this novel by Michael Köhlmeier, an Austrian author of renown, deals with two great but very different men, Winston Churchill and Charlie Chaplin, and describes their relationship in general and their common problems with depression

in particular. Given that Köhlmeier (born in 1949) is not only an experienced but also a well-decorated writer, expectations were of course high when the work was first published in the German-speaking world.

Köhlmeier’s endeavour was courageous, especially given that more has been written about Churchill than can be read and digested in a lifetime. It was certainly an original idea to approach the two giants of the twentieth century, their relationship and their dealing with “the black dog” (as Churchill called depression with a maximum of artistic licence) in a total and deliberate mix of fact and fiction. The idea of inventing history in a historical novel with fictional characters has a lot to it. And even when history is beefed up in order to qualify for an action thriller, as in *Female Agents* (starring Sophie Marceau), no one will really protest.

However, to approach two gigantic figures with a (declared) free mix of fact and fiction—as in *Two Gentlemen on the Beach*—is not a recipe for success. Even more than fifty years after Churchill’s death and more than seventy years after the end of the Second World War, too much is known about the wartime prime minister by too many people. And precisely this knowledge about Churchill will disturb the educated reader of Köhlmeier’s book.

The most basic problem is that Köhlmeier exaggerates the importance of Chaplin to Churchill. Even though there were encounters between the great statesman and the great actor, even though there certainly was a degree of mutual appreciation, there were definitely limits to the importance of the personal relationship between the



two. The author greatly exaggerates in the general set up of the plot and equally confuses his readership in lots of details over which the more knowledgeable will stumble. The idea that Winston Churchill, together with a group of children from the Austrian province of Vorarlberg, should be taught by Charlie Chaplin how to be a clown is rather absurd. And the fact that the author freely invents sources like collections of letters adds more confusion.

The German original of Köhlmeier’s novel generated a lot of interest given the past work and merits of the author, but it was received by literary critics with much distance and scepticism. The Italians have a saying “*Se non è vero, è ben trovato*” (If it is not true, it is well invented). Unfortunately this is not the case with Köhlmeier’s novel. For the historically educated, not to say for Churchillians, the book is not a must read. ☹

Werner Vogt is a writer and a communications consultant in Zurich. For his article about Churchill’s links to Switzerland, see page 28. For a review of his most recent book, see page 41.