

## Book Review

# **When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940**

By Robin Prior

Reviewed by Dr David Jordan

**R**obin Prior is a familiar name to many military historians, but mainly for his work on the First World War. His studies of the Gallipoli campaign, the generalship of Sir Henry Rawlinson and the Battles of the Somme and Passchendaele (the last three co-authored with Trevor Wilson), place him amongst the front rank of historians of the 1914-18 period. All the books are well researched and thought-provoking, often inspiring further debate and scrutiny. Any reader familiar with Prior's canon of work will, therefore, have a certain level of expectation about this venture into the Second World War – and is unlikely to be disappointed by his latest efforts.

Prior sets forward a hypothesis that the historiography of the war, and particularly 1940, is incomplete in its analysis of how important it was for the future of 'the West' that Britain remained fighting in 1940. Prior notes that there have been some excellent books dealing with 1940, but only from one aspect, while those attempting a broader sweep are either dated (he cites Lawrence Thompson's *1940 - The year of Legend*), or not up to the job (it is clear that Clive Ponting's *1940: Myth and Reality* left Professor Prior distinctly unimpressed). To do this, he examines those events which might have ended Britain's role in the war – the ineffectual nature of Neville Chamberlain's government; the near-destruction of the British Expeditionary Force and its salvation; the Battle of Britain and then, finally, the Blitz against British cities. Prior is very clear that had any of these events, or a combination thereof, brought about a British capitulation or at least forced Britain into a negative peace deal with Hitler, it might have tipped the West into oblivion.

Prior helpfully defines what he means by 'the West', preferring not to employ the term in the rather generic way many commentators do, assuming that their readership instinctively knows what 'the West' is. He helpfully explains why Hitler's Germany could not be considered part of the West in 1940 because of its rejection of core values such as freedom from fear and persecution which underpin western norms, even if the nations believing in those freedoms are often far from perfect themselves.

This carefully laid definition of terms sets the scene for Prior's overall approach. He takes us through the well-meaning but confused and slightly vacillatory approach of the Chamberlain government – both helped and hindered by the boundless energy and enthusiasm of Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty – and the doubts within parliament about it. He notes the existence of five separate groups of Conservative MPs concerned at Chamberlain's leadership, and a careful examination of the parliamentary debate ('The Conduct of the War', 9-10 May 1940) which led to Chamberlain's resignation is particularly interesting for the manner in which it deconstructs the Prime Minister's woeful performance in the debate, and Prior highlights the incongruity of his announcing that Churchill was to be given the power to direct the Chiefs of Staff – effectively placing the Prime Minister in a subordinate role to the First Lord of the Admiralty when it came to the conduct of the war. It may be that Prior perhaps overplays the dire hand which Chamberlain and his supporters managed to deal themselves on the first day of the debate, but he tells the story precisely

and with wit (including a slightly barbed pondering of whether Churchill was taking notes when Arthur Greenwood, referring to the Norwegian campaign, observed that 'masterful evacuations' do not win wars).

With Chamberlain's fall bringing about a more robust and aggressive approach to the war as a result of Churchill's appointment, Prior sets about the notion that Churchill's position was weak. While not all historians will agree with his interpretation of how strong Churchill's political capital was upon his appointment – he was anxious to solicit the support of his predecessor, careful in his treatment of 'Chamberlainites', particularly those who were subject to some vicious assaults in the media, and conscious of the fact that he was leader of his country but not his party – Prior makes his case well. We are then taken through the disaster of the Fall of France and the 'miracle' of the evacuation at Dunkirk. Prior considers whether the threat of an invasion of Britain was a giant bluff, and concludes that it was not; he concludes that the idea that Operation Sea Lion was nothing more than an attempt to coerce Britain into accepting terms was a 'myth' (p.165), in no small part generated by historians who believe that Hitler had no desire to conquer the United Kingdom.

Prior regards this as 'nonsense', stating that 'Hitler hated the British' (p.166), but it would be useful were this point to be explored further. Gerwin Strobl's *This Germanic Isle* (Cambridge UP, 2007) demonstrates the complex and confused manner in which the Germans, including Hitler, regarded the British Empire. Hitler may not have liked the British, but he certainly admired the British Empire as a construct (and the 'ruthlessness' which had gone into its creation), and was concerned as to what – or more precisely who would fill the vacuum were London to fall under German occupation, with the concern that the diminution of British power might enhance the influence and strength of Japan, the United States and possibly even the Soviet Union, all to the detriment of Germany's future global position. While Prior is surely right to regard the threat of invasion as being more than just an enormous bluff, it may be that Hitler's degree of enthusiasm at the prospect was lower than a reader might assume from Prior's view. This is not a criticism of Prior's view – simply a demonstration of how readily well-founded scholarship, expressed with conviction, can provoke debate, a point which some contributions to the historiography of both World Wars appear to have ignored in a quest for coverage and notoriety over the years.

Whether an invasion attempt would have succeeded remains a moot point, but the book brings out some important points which deserve consideration. Prior notes (p.174) that Admiral Drax, the commander of Nore Command, was worried about the risks posed by a lack of control of the air; he feared that the anti-invasion forces would be extremely vulnerable to air attack. This is, of course, echoed in the Chief of Staffs' view as expressed in the memorandum *British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality*, and highlights the critical point that while historians today might regard the air threat to the Royal Navy's surface forces as being almost negligible, this was not how it was seen at the time by the majority of the senior commanders and thus the War Cabinet. It is in this context that we need to see the Battle

of Britain, and Prior conducts yet more succinct, incisive analysis of the Battle, offering some thought-provoking conclusions. He wonders whether or not the idea that the Battle was not 'The Few versus the many', something which has gained currency over recent years, might not have gone too far. He suggests that the idea that Britain often had more serviceable fighters and more pilots available during the Battle is an oversimplification, and skilfully leads us to his view that 'German aircraft had to be destroyed. Most of them were destroyed by just a handful of men' (p.238). While at first sight this will not be news to anyone who has read the work of (say) Christopher Shores and Clive Williams which demonstrates that a small proportion of pilots (from whichever nation is being studied) destroyed a percentage of enemy aircraft far higher than might be expected, Prior demonstrates that experienced pilots were under considerable pressure throughout the Battle – and that the idea of 'The Few' remains reasonable. The Battle dealt with, Prior then looks at the Blitz and the attempts to draw the United States into the war in detail, offering salient analysis of these two critical areas, albeit with the obvious caveat that both lasted into 1941.

Overall, this is an impressive and interesting book. For those unfamiliar with the events of 1940 and their effects upon and within Britain, it is an excellent starting point, while even for those who have spent many years considering the events of 1940, it provides food for thought and potentially the basis for vigorous debate. It offers a lively, provocative counter to the tone of some recent historiography which has suggested that Britain did not, really, save anything other than itself in 1940. Prior is clear – Britain, through its actions in 1940, did indeed 'save the West' and that without the sacrifices endured then, the world would have been a much darker place. Some might consider this an old-fashioned, self-regarding British view (thus failing to note that the author is Australian), but Prior is a powerful advocate who deserves consideration.

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