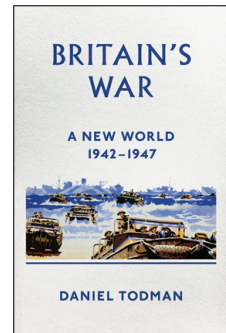


## Book Review

# Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947



By Daniel Todman

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Reviewed by Flight Sergeant Paul Marr

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**Biography:** Flight Sergeant Paul Marr joined the RAF in 1997. Trained as a Weapons System Operator (EW), his first tour was on Nimrods at RAF Kinloss. Subsequent tours included A2, the UKMAOC at Northwood, and the Directorate of Defence Studies. Currently he is an EW analyst in the P-8 Tactical Operations Centre at RAF Lossiemouth.

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### Introduction

Daniel Todman's, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942-1947*, is a fascinating and timely addition to the historiography of World War Two coming, as it does, during the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the end of that climactic global struggle. The second of two volumes, *Britain's War: A New World* combines, for the first time, the military, social, political and economic histories of the war and immediate aftermath laying bare to the reader virtually all aspects of the British experience. Currently a Professor of Modern History at Queen Mary, University of London, Todman is one of a new generation of historians rewriting the account of the Second World War for modern readers. During twenty years of research he has amassed an extraordinary collection of primary and secondary sources with which to drive his narrative. The scale of the book might seem daunting, but it very quickly becomes apparent to the reader that Todman is a master of his craft.

A short introduction skilfully sets out the book's scope to show to what extent Britain was changed by the 'total war' it endured and won, and what it cost. *Britain's War* is then structured chronologically, which some may view as unimaginative but, as the author explains, 'Wars have their own dynamic, and they change as they go on (p. 1)'. The book's division into four parts (entitled: Nadir; Peak; Victory, and Resolutions) therefore allows Todman to chart the changing nature of the Britain's war at key points. The first three sections deal with the War, from one of the greatest military defeats to befall the British Empire (the fall of Singapore) to eventual victory in the European and the Pacific Theatres. The final part, Resolutions, covers the short period after the war up to December 1947 because, as Todman states, with so much uncertainty as to the consequences of the War yet to be resolved, it could 'hardly be considered to be over' (p. 777) in 1945. Although *Britain's War* could not be considered light reading by any standard, Todman pulls together all the strands of his argument and drives his narrative with flair and imagination which makes *Britain's War* a very enjoyable reading experience. Throughout he brings to life historical figures with colourful descriptions of personality traits and physical attributes – you can almost see Churchill arguing long into the night with Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) Field Marshal Alan Brooke – and makes even the longest list of statistics interesting with occasional humorous insights. His depiction of half a million Britons visiting 'a mock medieval relic' as a demonstration of 'how much they still loved a good queue' (p. 331) being an example of the latter.

Perhaps, more than anything, *Britain's War* is a tale of strategy: of the conference table, and of political and military battlefields. Throughout, Todman demonstrates how Allied strategy was influenced by relatively few leaders particularly, from a British perspective, by Churchill whose 'determination to "move all the pieces himself" meant there was "no day to day direction of the war except by Chiefs of Staff and Winston" (p. 186)'. However, from the start, Todman charts the relative decline of British influence over the 'Grand Alliance' presided over by Churchill to the point where the 'British had lost the power to determine the post war system' (p. 611). *Britain's War* places more emphasis on the imperial nature of British strategy-making than most other histories, a device which highlights the competing priorities of the US anti-colonial policies and Britain's commitment to Empire and the resulting frictions in Allied strategies until, eventually, the US became the unrivalled leader of the 'Grand Alliance'. This, Todman argues, was due in large part to Britain's inability to win victories quickly and decisively enough to maintain its level of influence in the 'Grand Alliance' rather than individual failings of the country's leaders. He also brings out Churchill's influence in the domestic arena, and here Todman is less forgiving. Todman argues, convincingly, that Churchill's reluctance to tackle the issues presented by post-war social reconstruction – and acknowledge the obvious shift in the political leanings of the electorate – cost him the election in 1945, and had long-term ramifications for him and his party.

There is also much to consider from an air power perspective. Although less than enthused with the Combined Bomber Offensive in general, Todman is generally positive of the contributions of air power to eventual victory. He repeatedly credits the success of the

Allied amphibious landings in Italy and Normandy to the gaining and maintaining of Allied air superiority over the beachheads. Pointing particularly to the US Ninth Air Force and the British Second Tactical Air Force as important elements of the preparations for Operation Overlord. Additionally, he argues that the success of the 'Oil' and 'Transport' bombing plans 'accelerated the march to victory' (p. 653). As in other areas, Todman is keen to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all things, pointing out that whilst the achievement of air power had ensured the success of the Normandy landings, after the Allied breakout the dramatic advances on the ground 'allowed Allied aircraft to do much more damage to Germany' (p. 649). Without overstepping, Todman deftly places the role of air power in the context of eventual Allied victory.

However, there is more to Todman's history than conference tables, battlefields and politics including a willingness to tackle more ignoble subjects. For example, following the loss of Empire in South East Asia, Britain had to rely more heavily on imports from the African colonies. In this section Todman describes the measures brought in to force, such as forced labour and conscription bringing in to stark relief the dichotomy of a war being fought for freedom and Britain's treatment of native peoples. This may be uncomfortable reading for the modern audience but Todman strives to situate such decisions within the context of a global war for survival to better understand why they were made. Through such insights Todman forces the reader to confront the unsavoury realities of Britain's War.

Although the focus is generally set at the grand strategic and strategic levels, a history told from the top down would never be complete and Todman endeavours to reveal the whole experience of the war. Descriptions of strategy setting conferences and exciting depictions of set piece battles are interspersed with observations from the Mass Observation Surveys and the diary entries of 'Great Men' are countered with diary entries from those on the front lines and descriptions of life at home. Todman's ability to capture the element of 'history from below' within the overarching narrative of the great strategic events unfolding around them, sets his history apart from others of the genre.

Todman's greatest achievement is the manner in which he weaves together all elements of the military, political, economic and social histories to convincingly reveal to the reader not only why events happened but, perhaps more importantly, 'how they were represented and understood at the time' (p. 1). The result is nothing short of a masterpiece and should be read by anyone with a more than passing interest in the Second World War and *how* and *why* Britain emerged into the brave new post-war world a very different country from the nation it was in the 1930s.



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