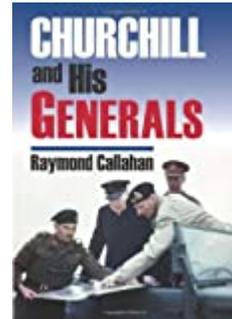
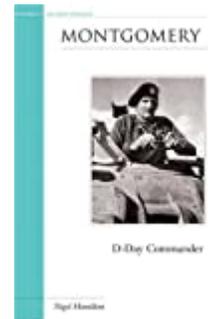


**Raymond Callahan.** *Churchill and His Generals*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. x + 310 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1512-4.



**Nigel Hamilton.** *Montgomery: D-Day Commander*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007. xiv + 142 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57488-904-8.



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## Battles of Egos

Just as devotees of “Monty” will be familiar with Nigel Hamilton’s copious output on the great soldier (he was Bernard Montgomery’s official biographer, with three comprehensive volumes published between 1981 and 1986), specialists of Churchill studies will remember Raymond Callahan’s older book on Winston Churchill, *Churchill: Retreat from Empire* (1984). This year, Dennis E. Showalter’s handy series, *Military Profiles*, offers a short biography of Montgomery as military commander, while the University Press of Kansas publishes a monograph on what is arguably (and incredibly) a new topic.

In contrast to John Keegan’s well-known edited collection, *Churchill’s Generals* (1991), which concentrates on individual generals, Callahan’s new book, *Churchill and His Generals*, examines relations between Churchill and the men who worked under him. *Churchill and His Generals* must not have been an easy book to write; it is not an easy book to read, and therefore not an easy book to review.

The subject is an extremely complex one (which may explain why nobody had tackled it before), since it draws

on highly technical military considerations. The military in modern times involves intricate economic, industrial, technological, diplomatic, geopolitical, electoral, cultural, and psychological elements. These elements are often mutually incompatible, frequently resulting in an intractable situation for war leaders, let alone historians and commentators who try to recapture the mental process of the times in top government circles or in battlefield headquarters and assess the merits of warlords and the decisions that they made. Callahan strives to concentrate on his stated subject—the relations between Churchill and his generals—but to examine these relationships in depth, he also provides the ins and outs of the generals' strategies and tactics as well as the way they tried (or not) to justify them before a highly critical Churchill ("the first prime minister since Wellington in 1829 to have been a regular soldier," [p. 235]), whose perception of them, as stated to his entourage and in his memoirs, is also given in detail.

Callahan's approach is certainly legitimate (how can one pass judgment if one does not have all the available data), but unless a reader is particularly well versed in the military arts, his book is at times difficult to read. For example, he (rightly) describes the minutiae of the encounters between Erwin Rommel and the various British and imperial generals facing him. This exhaustive description is necessary, because the reader then understands why specific military moves received Churchill's approval or censure, as the case may be. But Churchill alone understood (or tried to understand) the general geopolitical picture of the war, unlike the field commanders, who did not have this overview, but only the realities of the local situation, to guide their actions. Thus a prudent reluctance to attack Rommel in Libya and Egypt on the part of Archibald Wavell or Claude Auchinleck, which might be seen as perfectly justifiable according to the canons of military technique, was seen as disastrous by Churchill, who had to impress his American backers and Russian allies (as well as Arab nationalists who increasingly saw their British masters as losers and the Germans as potential liberators) in autumn 1941. On strictly military grounds, neither deserved to be sacked, Callahan suggests. But for international considerations (the survival of the British Empire as one of the Great Powers) and domestic reasons (his own survival), Churchill absolutely needed a victory against the Germans before the end of 1942.

Callahan's book also reminds readers that historians must never forget that they benefit from a perspective historical actors did not have. The best example of this re-

minder is Auchinleck who reasonably kept forces in Persia and Iraq in case of a German breakthrough from the Caucasus in early summer in 1942 (the "northern front," as it was then called). Of course, the German breakthrough never came, but this does not invalidate Auchinleck's precautionary action. As Callahan rightly puts it, "By the time Churchill wrote his memoirs, the northern front was a minor historical footnote; to Auchinleck, it was an all too real problem" (p. 109).

Writing about relations among men naturally introduces into the equation psychological factors that are absolutely impossible to assess—the elusive chemistry of "elective affinities" being beyond the realm of historians. And yet Callahan makes every effort to provide possible reasons why this chemistry worked between Churchill and some generals and not others, offering psychological portraits of the military commanders who Churchill appointed, promoted, or dismissed (sometimes, of course, in the form of promotion). Callahan insists on the total incompatibility between the personalities of Churchill "the extrovert" and Wavell "the introvert"—and in contrast, on the empathy with Harold Alexander, "Churchill's favorite among British generals" (p. 103). Naturally, one does not have to enter into complex psychological considerations to understand why Churchill had no time for losers, even if their defeat and/or surrender was largely due to past incompetence and lack of foresight on the part of politicians, as was the case for Arthur Percival at Singapore.

Montgomery was, of course, a winner and a very popular general among troops and perhaps even more among the population. As Callahan tersely puts it, "Churchill understood all this" (p. 218). In other words, there was no love lost between Churchill and Montgomery, but their marriage of reason for public consumption served the interests of both. William Slim, "the finest British general since Wellington" (p. 232), was also a winner—and Callahan repeatedly castigates Churchill for taking little interest in the Burma campaign and final victory. But then, the war in the Far East is often described as the forgotten war: the campaign there apparently started in the last months of the war, and Callahan argues that "the war that mattered most to the prime minister, the CIGS [Chief of the Imperial General Staff Alan Brooke], and most of the British public was the war against Germany" (p. 5), thus indirectly suggesting that Churchill's *rapprochement* with his generals was in proportion to their effectiveness in defeating the German army.

This brings us back to Montgomery, no doubt pop-

ularly perceived as the British general most instrumental in this defeat, and according to Callahan, “the best known—and, by some British and most American officers, the least liked—British general of the war” (p. 4). It is, of course, Hamilton’s self-imposed task to explain why he “remains a controversial figure” (p. ix). Classically, Hamilton begins with the years that preceded Montgomery’s fame. Montgomery had at least two points in common with Churchill: he went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, and, Hamilton reminds us, “without the advent of World War II, Montgomery, like Winston Churchill, would have gone down in history as a failure—both men considered by their colleagues and superiors as talented mountebanks: selfish, vain, arrogant, and impossible to work with” (p. 5). Like Callahan, Hamilton naturally details the battles in which “Monty” established his reputation—El Alamein, Normandy, the Bulge—but also the rows, notably with the American chieftains, including Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and George Patton, that accompanied these achievements. Here, the book becomes overtly judgmental, often presenting Eisenhower as a military nonentity (though an astute political navigator, which Montgomery was not) and approving Montgomery (admittedly no saint in Hamilton’s eyes) for his many fits of rebellion, starting with the landings in Sicily in 1943. Hamilton defends the thesis that Montgomery’s admirable victory in the Battle of Normandy was squandered by Eisenhower’s failure to prepare plans for the next moves. If only the American commander in chief had listened to Montgomery (who had his own plans) in August 1944, the Allies would have crossed the Rhine before Christmas. Likewise, Mont-

gomery had warned the Americans against a possible major counterattack by the Germans in the Ardennes, and not only was he proved right, but Eisenhower also had to take the humiliating decision of asking him to come to the rescue of the beleaguered American troops. Naturally, Hamilton adduces excellent arguments to sustain his theses, but those who defend contrary arguments also have impeccable documentation.

Thus, it is somewhat difficult to recommend Hamilton’s book to undergraduates, the risk being that they will not be aware of another version—and interpretation—of events if they do not read his text with a desirable critical distance. It would be a pity, however, since Hamilton is an author full of professional integrity, who explains in a remarkable ten-page bibliographic note that his point of view (which he calls “the pro camp”) is not the only one: “For cultural reasons as much as for military-historiographical reasons, the contra camp has so far prevailed in the United States, while the pro camp has proved the more powerful in Britain” (p. 123). He then recommends books that contradict his own theses. For this state-of-the-art bibliographic note alone, Hamilton’s book deserves to be in all university libraries, together, of course, with *Churchill and His Generals* (which also has a valuable “Note on Further Reading”). An additional bonus is that Hamilton’s study has two maps that enable readers to locate all the places mentioned in the text (an unfortunate omission in Callahan’s book). Both books unfortunately have endnotes, not footnotes—an incomprehensible disregard for the comfort of readers in our days when word processing techniques make it so easy to integrate footnotes into the layout.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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