

20. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Winston Churchill as Historian

Hosted by Bernd Greiner and Dierk Walter (both Hamburg Institute for Social Research) and Markus Pöhlmann (German Armed Forces' Centre for Military History and Social Sciences, Potsdam)

Conference language: German

25 and 26 September 2015

Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: As we know, Winston Churchill was a man of many roles, a wartime leader, statesman and author. But can he really be called a historian too?

In his lecture "Politics As a Vocation," Max Weber identified the difference between scientists and artists in that only the latter should take the stage as "the impresario of the subject to which he should be devoted". This captures Churchill's role exactly. He was a vigorous, even restless writer of history who united wit with a broad horizon. Perhaps that even made him the antithesis of a professional historian.

"My war books are not precisely history," Churchill once said, "for that belongs to another generation. But I claim with confidence that it is a contribution to history which will be of service to the future." What marks have Churchill's historical writings left? Does his account of the Second World War still resonate today?

The principal relevance of Churchill's multi-volume work *The Second World War* resulted from the author's position as a central political and military decision-maker. Also, the series remained a standard work into the 1960s because of the sources it used and the sheer lack of alternatives. Since then, however, international research on World War Two has moved on so much that today, Churchill is consulted only rarely. His anecdotes and characterizations of his contemporaries remain thoroughly worth reading, though.

From today's perspective there are conspicuous gaps in Churchill's account of the Second World War. The destruction of European Jewry and the strategic bombing campaign are mere marginalia, if mentioned at all. How should these omissions be understood?

The Second World War is, much like Churchill's previous work, *The World Crisis*, about World War One, is a master narrative of the struggle and achievements of the British over the course of two existential crises for their country and society. The Shoah and the bombing campaign do not fit well into that kind of heroic story – which brings us back to the difference between the artist and historian. Moreover, regardless of the great differences in their dimensions and taking their causalities into account, both historical events were key moments in the erosion of war's boundaries in the 20th century. It might be worth asking whether Churchill as an author would at all have been able to do justice to these subjects.

What accounts for his success as a writer and historian?

That's easy: His prominent position, his boundless interest in history, his fearsome capacity for work and, finally, publishing contracts that enabled him to extensively purchase the subcontracting work that such projects require.

He is occasionally called the final and definitive exponent of the "Whig interpretation of history." What does that mean?

If, by that keyword, we mean a historiographical tradition founded in political Liberalism, associated in global history with constitutionalism, personal liberty and progressive social values, and where "great men" make history, then Churchill's works on the wars are not really prime examples of it. Let's not forget that both also tell the story of the loss of empire.

However, we do know that his literary role models included Whig historians such as Thomas Babington Macaulay. In Churchill's early depictions of British colonies, his works of family history on Marlborough or his father Randolph, and first and foremost his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, published between 1956 and 1958, this idea of history is certainly recognizable.

World War Two was, in every respect, a watershed. For Churchill was there any such thing as lessons of history? Indicators or even guidelines for how to treat this watershed?

One of the chief results of the Second World War was, of course, the bipolar global order. No lesser observer than Churchill himself chronicled this shift in the

world's system of political coordinates, the most famous example being his 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech. The process also amounted to a huge contraction in Britain's role in global affairs. Drawing political lessons from the situation would have been a tall order anyway. That was not how his historical works were conceived, and would have been lost on his broad US readership anyway.

What can Churchill the historian tell us today?

Regarding the history of the world wars, not very much any more. That has less to do with deficits in his accounts than with the enormous advances in historical research. His autobiographical works are a different matter, however. These impressionistic glimpses into the long-gone world of the British Empire are still worth reading today. The standard Churchill imposed upon himself, of bearing witness to his work and his time, is likewise remarkable.