



# Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II

By Madhusree Mukerjee

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A dogged enemy of Hitler, resolute ally of the Americans, and inspiring leader through World War II, Winston Churchill is venerated as one of the truly great statesmen of the last century. But while he has been widely extolled for his achievements, parts of Churchill's record have gone woefully unexamined.

As journalist Madhusree Mukerjee reveals, at the same time that Churchill brilliantly opposed the barbarism of the Nazis, he governed India with a fierce resolve to crush its freedom movement and a profound contempt for native lives. A series of Churchill's decisions between 1940 and 1944 directly and inevitably led to the deaths of some three million Indians. The streets of eastern Indian cities were lined with corpses, yet instead of sending emergency food shipments Churchill used the wheat and ships at his disposal to build stockpiles for feeding postwar Britain and Europe.

Combining meticulous research with a vivid narrative, and riveting accounts of personality and policy clashes within and without the British War Cabinet, *Churchill's Secret War* places this oft-overlooked tragedy into the larger context of World War II, India's fight for freedom, and Churchill's enduring legacy. Winston Churchill may have found victory in Europe, but, as this groundbreaking historical investigation reveals, his mismanagement—facilitated by dubious advice from scientist and eugenicist Lord Cherwell—devastated India and set the stage for the massive bloodletting that accompanied independence.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Misremembered as a placid imperial bastion during WWII, India was in fact racked by famine and insurrection, according to this searching history. Mukerjee (*The Land of Naked People*) surveys a country seething with violence, as Congress Party militants agitating for independence turned to rioting and assassination campaigns after bloody police crackdowns, and an army of Indian guerrillas fought alongside the Japanese against the British. The author's centerpiece is a chronicle of the 1943 Bengali famine, in which at least 1.5 million died while British authorities continued exporting Indian grain. She blames the disaster on British policy, which, she argues, sought to extract as much war production and food as possible from India while printing money to pay for it; the resulting inflation priced food beyond the reach of the poor. Mukerjee sets her well-researched chronicle amid heartbreaking scenes of starvation, bloodshed, and pungent portraits of Winston Churchill and his advisers as studies in racial disdain and deluded imperial nostalgia. This gripping account of a historical tragedy is a useful corrective to fashionable theories of benign imperial rule, arguing that a brutal rapaciousness was the very soul of the Raj. Maps.

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Review

**Ramachandra Guha, author of *India after Gandhi***

“Winston Churchill’s dislike of India and Indians has been known to scholars. But now, in *Churchill’s Secret War*, we have, for the first time, definitive evidence of how a great man’s prejudices contributed to one of the most deadly famines in modern history. In her book, Madhusree Mukerjee writes evocatively of how hunger and rebellion in rural Bengal was a product of cynicism and callousness in imperial London. Deeply researched and skillfully constructed, this is a major contribution to Indian history and to the history of the Second World War.”

**Mike Davis, Professor of Creative Writing at University of California–Riverside**

“An epic indictment of British policies that cold-bloodedly caused the death of millions of ordinary Indians during the Second World War. With impeccable research, Mukerjee debunks the conventional hagiography of Churchill, showing ‘the last imperialist’s’ monstrous indifference to the peoples of the sub- continent.”

“[Mukerjee’s] main point comes through persuasively...never has anything quite this persuasive demonstrated how devastating for the world were Churchill’s personal failings.”

***The Independent* (UK)**

“Mukerjee has researched this forgotten holocaust with great care and forensic rigor...Her calmly phrased but searing account of imperial brutality will shame admirers of the Greatest Briton and horrify just about everybody else.

***Sunday Times* (UK)**

“[A] significant and – to British readers – distressing book...the broad thrust of Mukerjee’s book is as sound as it is shocking.”

***Washington Times***

“*Churchill’s Secret War* is a disturbing read, and one that I recommend.”

***Time***

“Madhusree Mukerjee’s new book, *Churchill’s Secret War*, reveals a side of Churchill largely ignored by the West and considerably tarnishes his heroic sheen...Mukerjee’s book depicts a truth more awful than any fiction.”

**Time Out for Entertainment**

“Mukerjee makes [her] points with a skill and scholarship that are convincing, making the reader see an episode of World War II with new eyes and new sympathy.”

**John Horgan, Director, Center for Science Writings, Stevens Institute of Technology**

“*Churchill’s Secret War* is a major work of historical scholarship, which reveals that one of the 20th century’s greatest heroes was also one of its greatest villains. Mukerjee’s elegant, precise prose and meticulous research make her tale of colonial brutality all the more gripping and horrific.”

***Kirkus***

“An important though uncomfortable lesson for readers who think they know the heroes and villains of World War II.”

***Publishers Weekly***

““[W]ell-researched...This gripping account of historical tragedy is a useful corrective to fashionable theories of benign imperial rule, arguing that a brutal rapaciousness was the very soul of the Raj.”

***Providence Journal***

“A clearly written and well-researched study...Mukerjee writes with a careful hand, avoiding an easily dismissible rant and smartly allowing Churchill’s closet advisors to color in the dark details.”

***Roll Call***

“Mukerjee’s work is an important tool in repudiating the dominant legacy of Churchill.”

***Indian Express (India)***

About the Author

**Madhusree Mukerjee** won a Guggenheim fellowship to write her previous book, *The Land of Naked People*. She has served on the board of editors of *Scientific American*. She lives near Frankfurt, Germany.

**Users Review**

**From reader reviews:**

**Ruth Brinkman:**

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#### **Eugene Glover:**

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#### **Michael Patterson:**

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