In 1918 British and Dominion forces played a crucial role in winning the war on the Western Front. The Royal Navy and the recently created Royal Air Force also ended the war in strong positions vis-à-vis present allies and future rivals. Lloyd George had enhanced his power base at the head of a coalition government by means of the ‘Khaki Election’ held in December 1918. In the prolonged peace negotiations at Versailles he secured virtually all Britain’s war aims both as regards security in Europe and also in the wider world. With the additions of Mandates in the Middle East and Africa the British Empire was enlarged, if not politically enhanced, and reached its greatest extent. Even allowing for the heavy debits of unprecedented casualties, loss of trade and indebtedness to the USA, this was a tremendous achievement, not just for the armed forces and the government, but for the nation as a whole. Yet the outcome of the war was soon to be regarded as, at best, a Pyrrhic victory or at worst as a futile enterprise that had neither put an end to wars nor created a ‘land fit for heroes’.

By contrast, in 1945 Britain’s war effort was flagging, particularly as regards the Army, which was desperately short of trained manpower. By 1944 Britain had clearly become the junior partner to the USA and this was made painfully evident in a series of political and military decisions. Moreover, between 1941 and 1945 there could be no illusions about the dominant role of the Soviet Union in first absorbing the shock of Nazi invasion and then remorselessly wearing down and defeating the Wehrmacht; in the process suffering horrendous losses that dwarfed those in other theatres.
In contrast to Lloyd George, Winston Churchill suffered a humiliating electoral defeat immediately after the end of the war in Europe and was replaced by Attlee, who became Prime Minister on 26 July 1945 and took Churchill’s place at the Potsdam Conference. Churchill had failed in a valiant attempt to restore a democratically elected government for an independent Poland and, more widely, to stem the tide of Soviet-backed Communist control of most of Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Britain was left financially and industrially impoverished, and her hold on the Empire had been fatally undermined, most critically by Japan’s rapid conquest of Malaya with the humiliating surrender of Singapore and her subsequent drive to the north-east borders of India.

Paradoxically, however, the outcome of the Second World War was generally regarded – and still is – as a greater triumph than that of victory in the First World War. This study has attempted to account for this anomaly by examining the role of hindsight, which has distorted popular interpretation of the two wars.

Recent historians, including A. J. P. Taylor, Margaret Macmillan and David Stevenson, have been generally sympathetic towards the intractable problems confronting the peace-makers who met at Versailles between December 1918 and June 1919; showing why the terms of the settlement were unavoidably based on controversial compromises that failed to produce a Utopian world free from war.¹

The Versailles Peace Treaty with Germany had numerous defects and problematic loose ends but this was bound to be the case. Fighting did not end neatly on 11 November 1918 but continued in widespread sporadic conflicts in, for example, the former Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe and in Germany itself. Revolution and civil war engulfed the former Tsarist Empire and threatened to break out in several other countries, notably those which had experienced defeat and others, such as Ireland, which saw their oppressor’s grip loosened by the war. Several new countries had already emerged before November 1918 from the break-up of the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires, defying neat and tidy settlements on the basis of national self-determination or economic viability. The chief European peace-makers, France, Britain and Italy, all had separate and in some respects, irreconcilable, priorities.

¹ See especially Margaret Macmillan’s *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World* (John Murray, 2002), pp. 203–204, 475–489.
while President Woodrow Wilson introduced disturbing idealistic notions of international security through his championship of a League of Nations that his country would soon prove unwilling to endorse.

The future of Germany lay at the centre of the peace-makers’ problems. When the Armistice was signed on 11 November the Kaiser had already fled to Holland and a Republic had been proclaimed. The country was in turmoil with widespread strikes and civil unrest but, apart from a tiny corner of upper Alsace, German troops were still everywhere fighting on foreign soil. Many regiments would soon march home still bearing arms, garlanded and with bands playing. The German Socialist delegates who signed the Armistice knew that their country could not continue the struggle, but wrongly assumed that Wilson’s Fourteen Points would form the basis for negotiations in which they would participate. These assumptions proved illusory, thus causing a sense of injustice even before the terms were known. Although the Germans had imposed severe reparations demands on France in 1871, and in 1918 had inflicted a draconian peace settlement on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and harsh economic terms on Romania in the Treaty of Bucharest, their delegates were bitterly resentful at the terms the Allies obliged them to sign. Reparations presented the most intractable problem. Britain, France and Belgium all expected compensation for war damage and human losses, but could not agree on the total amount, their relative percentages and the schedule for payments. After months of wrangling and delays due in part to British objections, a decision on the total sum to be paid was deferred until 1921 by which time public passions had cooled considerably. Germany was required to pay 132 billion gold marks or £6.5 billion, but it was recognised that her ability to pay would have to be taken into account.

In the longer term what counted far more than the sums involved (and the fact that only a small part of the total was ever extracted) were Articles 231 and 232 of the Treaty. The former assigned responsibility to Germany and her allies for all the damage caused by the war; the latter Article modifying this unlimited liability to specific damages. The former Article, known as the ‘war guilt clause’, had been insisted upon by Britain and France to establish Germany’s legal liability for reparations, but it provoked undying resentment and, with hindsight, was not worth all the trouble it caused.

Resentment against the Treaty was widespread in Germany, but particularly on the part of the military and their conservative
sympathisers, who quickly established the ‘stab in the back’ myth. Why, these groups protested, should Germany lose 13 per cent of her territory and 10 per cent of her population? Why should Germany be forced to disarm unilaterally, and why, above all, should she be obliged to take sole responsibility for causing the war?

In the event Germany paid only about £1.1 billion, which, in relation to national wealth, was rather less than France had repaid Germany after 1871. Unfortunately, for the future of Europe, Germany’s statesmen never admitted that they were primarily responsible for the war; reparations were held to be unjust and to be ruining the country. Britain was unwilling to use the sanctions available under the Treaty to enforce payment or prolong the occupation of the Rhineland, while France’s occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 only exacerbated German resentment. By the 1930s both Britain and France preferred to appease rather than confront Germany over the latter’s determination to challenge the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty.²

German sympathisers in the West who later argued that she had been treated too harshly had missed the point that the Allies had failed to impress the scale of their victory on the enemy nation. The Allied governments, and nearly all their military leaders, including Foch and Haig, were willing to accept the Armistice without pressing on to an invasion of Germany, partly because they wished to prevent further bloodshed and suffering on all sides, but also because they believed the enemy’s powers of resistance were still strong and might easily prolong the war into 1919. Only after the Armistice had been accepted did the British War Cabinet learn that revolutionary groups had established soviets in several German cities, bringing the state itself to the brink of complete collapse. As David French has written, ‘Had the Entente invaded Germany and imposed harsher armistice terms, the Weimar regime might have been able to democratise the post-war officer corps, and so rob the Reichswehr of its ability to organise a militarised Germany which would once again be capable of waging industrialised warfare.’³

Did the Allies’ failure to press home their military supremacy by accepting a premature armistice, followed by the punitive aspects of the Versailles Treaty, which caused such bitter and lasting resentment, lead

inexorably to the downfall of the Weimar Republic and the outbreak of another and even more terrible world war? Historians should be very wary of using the word ‘inevitable’, and in this case it seems far from certain that hatred of the Versailles Treaty would lead directly to the advent of Hitler and all that followed up to 1939. The separation of East Prussia from the rest of Germany and the establishment of Danzig as a free city were certainly irritants but not a sufficient cause for war in the West. France was greatly weakened by the war and, deprived of the support from the USA and Britain promised in the peace negotiations, was most unlikely to risk another war with Germany. Indeed the latter became a guarantor of the post-1918 boundaries in Western Europe as a signatory of the Locarno Treaty in 1925. The last British troops were withdrawn from the occupied zone of the Rhineland in 1929, and it was evident by then that Germany could quite soon regain full control of her former western boundaries without war. As Margaret Macmillan concludes, ‘with different leadership in the Western democracies, with stronger democracy in Weimar Germany, without the damage done by the Depression, the story might have turned out differently . . . The Treaty of Versailles is not to blame.’

Britain ended the war in an impressively strong position with the largest army, navy and air force in the world. Already, at the time of the Armistice, she had achieved some of her main war aims: German forces had withdrawn from France and Belgium; much of her High Seas Fleet was in captivity in Scapa Flow; and all her U-boats had been captured. The Versailles Treaty confirmed the loss of all Germany’s overseas territories and effectively disarmed her. Germany’s Army would be limited to 100,000 men (all regulars), and her Navy to 15,000 career sailors. She would have no air force, tanks, armoured cars or submarines. Only a few factories would be allowed to produce war materials, and all imports that might be used for rearmament were forbidden. Furthermore, public services and private societies were to be strictly supervised to prevent clandestine training of soldiers and airmen. Consequently, until the Nazis came to power Germany remained extremely weak militarily, with defence spending less than 1 per cent of national income. She was thus totally unable to wage offensive operations, and was scarcely able to defend her own borders. It was a cause of bitter resentment that the Allies’ rash promise that they too

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would implement similar drastic disarmament measures were not fully implemented.\(^5\)

In retrospect the collapse of the post-war settlement and the slide towards another world war may seem inevitable, but this was far from clear in the 1920s. Certainly there were ominous signs such as America’s withdrawal from Europe, the obvious limitations of the League of Nations, and France’s vulnerability in relation to an economically resurgent Germany. Nevertheless a recent scholarly survey has concluded that ‘the treaty could have stopped another bloodbath if it had been upheld’.\(^6\)

Britain’s outstanding success in achieving her main war aims regarding the Continent and the protection of her Empire were purchased at a tremendous cost to her domestic industry and finance. About 40 per cent of the merchant fleet had been sunk, the railways overworked and the best coal seams ruthlessly exploited. Concentration on military transport had not created a basis for the mass production of automobiles. Financial losses were also extremely serious. Britain had lost about £1,825 million to her allies and borrowed a further £1,340 million. The government owed about £850 million to the United States and was, in turn, owed more than twice that sum by former allies, principally Russia. Although inter-Allied debts soured international relations for many years, in A. J. P. Taylor’s opinion, Britain’s global financial position was not seriously damaged in the 1920s. A much more alarming situation was caused by the huge increase in the National Debt, which was fourteen times greater at the end of the war than in 1914. Servicing it took nearly half of the yield from taxation, which, post-war governments decided, must entail economy in every sphere of public expenditure. This did much to undermine electoral promises of a new and better country for returning servicemen. Clearly these drastic measures contributed to the rapid growth of disappointment in the 1920s with the anticipated benefits of military victory.\(^7\)

Nevertheless domestic hardships did not immediately eclipse public appreciation of the nation’s great achievements in the war. The Army’s reputation had never been higher. Though later to be vilified,


Earl Haig was regarded as a national hero and when he died prematurely in 1928, mainly as a result of over-working for the better treatment of ex-servicemen, his lying-in-state and funeral attracted huge, reverent crowds in both London and Edinburgh.

Beyond all the tangible achievements, as embodied in the peace settlements, lay the intangible benefit of national prestige. ‘The willingness of British policy-makers to sacrifice almost three-quarters of a million men to defeat the Central Powers made a profound impression on the minds of its former enemies.’ This should have remained a powerful instrument in Britain’s diplomatic armoury because other powers held it in such great respect. Tragically, policy-makers in the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps unduly influenced by the growing national concern with loss and mourning, behaved increasingly as though Britain had lost the war. This neglect of the priceless asset of national prestige found political expression in the policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany, and culminated in Neville Chamberlain’s naïve and spineless behaviour during the Munich crisis, causing Hitler to describe him and his colleagues as ‘little worms’. The generation of men and women who had won the war and achieved a triumphant peace settlement should not be held responsible for the abysmal performance of Chamberlain and his principal colleagues, few of whom had seen active service.

In reality Chamberlain had quite a good hand at the time of Munich: Britain was still a world power with the most powerful navy, a global empire and access to vital overseas commodities. By contrast Germany’s forces, and especially her navy, were far from ready for a major war, and Hitler knew it. But Chamberlain played his hand badly because he assumed that behind his arrogant, bullying façade Hitler basically, like himself, wanted peace after the settlement of specific demands, and therefore could be appeased.

Less than a year later Britain would go to war with Germany in fulfilment of her guarantee to Poland – an even more distant country than Czechoslovakia for whom no immediate aid was available. This left Britain in an ambivalent position; formally at war but reluctant to hot up land and air operations and still hoping that a negotiated peace was achievable.


\[9\] Ibid., pp. 296–297.
When Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940 his position was much weaker, and would soon become desperate. He was not popular with the Conservative Party, whose leader Chamberlain remained for the next few months, and he himself was largely responsible for the debacle in Norway that, ironically, had given him his chance to lead the country. The Nazis had overrun Denmark and Norway and would shortly defeat the Low Countries and France. Germany and the Soviet Union were still committed to a mutually beneficial pact, and the United States showed little sign of willingness to enter the war on Britain’s behalf.

In these dire circumstances John Charmley’s contention that Churchill’s appeasement of Roosevelt and, after June 1941, Stalin was analogous to Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler and so contributed to ‘the end of glory’ for Britain and the Empire is not convincing because Churchill had little room to manoeuvre. Half-American himself, Churchill did indeed place excessive faith in his friendship with President Roosevelt, and belief in a special relationship between the two very different peoples, but it is difficult to see an alternative. Similarly, though holding few illusions about the repressive Soviet system, Churchill felt obliged to trust in Stalin’s ultimate integrity and good faith because he judged, correctly, that only the Red Army could hold up and eventually destroy the majority of the Wehrmacht’s divisions. Stalin’s undertaking not to impose a Communist regime in Greece gave Churchill hope for broader co-operation after the defeat of Germany, but the latter’s efforts to secure free elections and a genuine measure of independence for a reconstituted Poland were to be cruelly disappointed.

The tough bargaining position of the United States was made clear as early as the summer of 1940. Britain desperately needed destroyers to protect the Atlantic convoys and was offered fifty American ships of First World War vintage in return for the ‘free gift’ of facilities in Newfoundland and Bermuda and ninety-nine-year leases on bases in the Caribbean and British Guiana. The War Cabinet felt obliged to accept these harsh conditions.

Even more ominous for Britain’s commercial and financial future was the ‘lend-lease’ agreement of March 1941, which was far

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from being an act of disinterested American generosity as later propaganda suggested. Britain had already committed herself to a huge purchasing programme of war materials in the United States and her stock of gold and dollar reserves was near exhaustion. It was clearly to America’s advantage to remain neutral while British and Imperial forces carried her weapons and material into battle. Although likely that America would eventually be drawn into the European conflict to protect her own lives and interests, it took Hitler’s quixotic declaration of war on her after Pearl Harbor to bring this about in December 1941. By then Britain had been at war, much of the time in great peril, for twenty-seven months.¹¹

In his study *The Collapse of British Power* (1972), Correlli Barnett is very critical of Churchill for waging all-out war in the pursuit of ‘victory’, virtually as an end in itself and without due consideration of the nation’s longer-term economic interests. Under his leadership the entire nation and its resources were mobilised for war. Barnett’s alternative strategy was to postpone the collapse of the economic foundations of British power for as long as possible by waging war on a scale commensurate with her reserves of gold and dollars. In practice this would entail hanging on, effectively on the defensive, in the hope that more powerful allies might eventually be drawn in. In hindsight there is much to be said for such a Fabian strategy, and to be fair it was this optimistic vision that underlay Churchill’s courageous rhetoric in 1940. It is far from clear, however, that the United States would have intervened in the European conflict without clear evidence that Britain would stay in the war, fight offensively, and provide a secure base for American forces.¹²

Churchill’s bellicosity and propensity for risk-taking did indeed contribute to a series of disasters, including Norway, Greece and Crete, the loss of Prince of Wales and Repulse, Singapore, Dieppe and Tobruk, but this was the debit side of Churchill’s leadership, which had to be accepted as the price for his dynamism, offensive spirit and faith in eventual victory, even in the darkest days of 1940 and 1941. It may also be doubted that the public’s morale and willingness to fight on would have been maintained without Churchill’s courageous rhetoric and his

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aggressive strategy with the promise of eventual victory. Furthermore, the very fact of the British forces’ mediocre performance in offensive operations before El Alamein in October 1942 made it imperative for the nation to be seen to attempt to ‘punch above its weight’ in order to maintain its influence on its much stronger allies as the tide turned towards eventual victory.

Churchill and his strategic advisers (the Chiefs of Staff) achieved a remarkable success in persuading the United States to make its initial intervention in the European war in the peripheral North African theatre in November 1942; followed by an even more impressive negotiating feat at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 by getting an agreement to follow up victory in North Africa by a joint invasion of Sicily. However, by this time the Western Allies knew that Germany was deploying more than 200 divisions on the Eastern Front as against twenty-five in the whole Mediterranean theatre. Clearly, American insistence on an Allied invasion of North-West Europe could not be put off indefinitely. At the Teheran Conference in November 1943 Churchill was made acutely aware of his waning influence in relation to both the United States and the Soviet Union.

The last occasion on which Britain could claim to be the senior partner in relations with America was Operation Overlord in June 1944 when Montgomery was in overall command of the Normandy landings. In July Churchill could still insist that the British Empire had more divisions than the United States ‘in fighting contact with the enemy’, but the balance would soon swing to three to one in the latter’s favour. The unpalatable truth for Britain was that as a great surge occurred in the arrival of new American divisions in Europe the former was running out of combat troops, especially infantry replacements. The changing nature of the relationship was symbolised by Montgomery’s subordination to Eisenhower’s overall command on 1 September 1944, which placed him on an equal footing with the American Army commanders, Bradley and Patton.

After the failure of the Arnhem operation in September it became clear that the European war would drag on into 1945 with the relative decline in British military manpower and war production.

13 French, Raising Churchill’s Army, p. 274. In mid-1944 the German Army numbered 237 divisions, more than two-thirds of them on the Eastern Front. The Russians had 480 divisions.
causing the United States’ predominance to become ever stronger. Neither at the Yalta nor the Potsdam Conferences could the British leaders speak as equals: hence the failure of the British aim for the Western Allies to reach Berlin and Prague before the Russians, and Truman’s insistence, at Potsdam, that Anglo-American forces must withdraw to the agreed occupation zones so as not to harm Soviet–American relations.

At Yalta Churchill strove in vain to secure agreement on a strong, free and independent Poland. ‘He stressed Britain’s debt of honour to the Poles, whose independence they had ineffectually guaranteed in 1939.’\textsuperscript{14} He received very little support from the ailing Roosevelt, who made the shocking declaration at the first plenary session that American forces would be withdrawn from Europe within two years. Given the Red Army’s presence in Poland, Churchill could only extract a bland reassurance from Molotov that the existing pro-Soviet Polish government would be widened and that eventually ‘free and unfettered elections’ would be held ‘on the basis of universal suffrage and a secret ballot’. On returning from Yalta, Churchill told the House of Commons ‘he was sure that Stalin and the Soviet leaders wished to live in honourable friendship and equality with the Western democracies’. He believed that ‘their word is their bond’. The ensuing debate aroused intense passions with twenty-five MPs daring to vote against the government for what they regarded as a shameful sell-out of the Polish government in exile and its forces gallantly fighting for the Allied cause.\textsuperscript{15} Churchill was bitterly disappointed when his hopes were soon shown to be delusory but, in retrospect, felt that he had had no alternative but to trust Stalin’s assurances, given that the European war was far from over and Soviet forces were expected to play a vital role in the defeat of Japan.

So obsessed was Churchill with the fate of Poland that he briefly appeared willing to start a third world war by attacking the Soviet Union. In mid-May 1945 he secretly instructed his military planners to draft a paper on ‘Operation Unthinkable’: namely how to impose upon Russia the will of the United States and the British Empire in order to get a fair deal for Poland. Hostilities were scheduled to start on 1 July 1945. An extraordinary additional note to the planners was

\textsuperscript{14} Reynolds, \textit{In Command of History}, p. 467. \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 469.
that they could count on the use of German military manpower and what remained of the enemy’s industrial capacity. Later, in 1954, there was an impassioned but unresolved public dispute as to whether or not Churchill had told Montgomery in 1945 to stockpile captured German weapons so that they could be quickly issued to German soldiers for use against the Russians. Documentary proof was lacking but it seems quite possible that Churchill did flirt with this astonishing idea. The resulting draft plan proposed a huge Allied offensive in the Dresden area, but warned that this would not secure a lasting result. The Allies would have to wage a total war, and would have to penetrate far more deeply into the Soviet Union than the Wehrmacht had managed. Would the Americans even have contemplated the venture, bearing in mind that Japan was still undefeated? In his diary entry for 24 May, Brooke dismissed the scheme as fantastic and added that from now on Russia would be all-powerful in Europe.16

At the start of the Potsdam Conference on 17 July 1945, and shortly before Churchill heard that he had lost the general election, he made a last, vain attempt to persuade Truman to stand firm with him to secure an acceptable settlement for Eastern Europe with the Russians. Unfortunately Britain’s desperate financial position entailed that she was utterly dependent on American goodwill. Churchill pointed out that Britain had spent more than half her foreign investments for the common cause and was now ending the war with a huge external debt. Truman said he would do his utmost to help, but a month later he abruptly terminated lend-lease to propitiate Congress.17

Britain’s great achievement in the Second World War was, at first, to avoid defeat and then by her stubborn resistance tempt Hitler into risking a two-front war. Then, with her own war capacity diminishing, she secured more powerful allies whose gigantic war-making powers more than outmatched those of Germany and Japan. Consequently it is an exaggeration to claim that Britain ‘won the war’; rather she played a significant role throughout and deservedly finished on the winning side.

Victory left Britain triumphant, relieved and impoverished. With lend-lease due to end on VJ Day, the financial and economic

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burden created by the war seemed (in A. J. P. Taylor’s phrase) ‘almost beyond bearing’. Her external debt amounted to more than £4,198 million. She had drawn heavily on overseas investments and other capital assets. Her ‘invisible income’ from international financial transactions had been halved. The mercantile marine had been reduced by a third, and exports were little more than 40 per cent of the pre-war figures. Britain would have to export far more than she had done before the war, but in the immediate future this seemed impossible. In these dire circumstances the war-weary public still expected their war-time sacrifices to be rewarded with better living standards in a ‘brave new world’.  

Within a very short time, months rather than years, Churchill’s foreboding about the future of Central and Eastern Europe was completely justified. Allied victory over Germany had, in effect, replaced one appalling tyranny by another. Indeed in one important respect Soviet Communism appeared even more sinister and dangerous than Nazism: namely that its ideology exerted a profound, seductive influence on a significant number of Western intellectuals and politicians; an influence that remained remarkably persistent until the eventual demise of the Soviet Union.

Despite Churchill’s many shortcomings as a war leader and his post-war achievement in exaggerating his own and Britain’s importance in relation to allies, Max Hastings is surely right to conclude that ‘No honourable course of action existed which could have averted his nation’s bankruptcy and exhaustion in 1945, nor its eclipse from world power amid the new primacy of the United States and Russia’.  

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19 Hastings, Finest Years, p. 594.