When India Starved and Britain Stood By

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In America's conservative political circles, the term "Churchillian" is frequently invoked with reverence and awe. This attitude of genuflection stems from Churchill's role in rallying the United Kingdom against the Nazi onslaught in World War II, his stirring prose, and his prescient warning about the descent of an Iron Curtain across Eastern Europe. It remains undeniable that he played a vital role in stiffening the morale of the British during the blitz, that his writings display verve and dexterity, and that he sounded a timely tocsin about the dangers of Soviet totalitarianism at the end of the Second World War.

However, few if any of Churchill's ardent admirers are prepared to discuss the man's early interest in eugenics; his military folly, while First Sea Lord of the British Admiralty, in ordering a disastrous attack on Gallipoli during World War I; and his rank racism when dealing with Indians in the British Empire, whom he referred to as a "beastly people with a beastly religion." All of these rather unsavory features of his personality and career were discussed in Arthur Herman's 2008 work, *Gandhi and Churchill*, a fascinating treatment of the political trajectories of the British leader and Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian nationalist and apostle of nonviolence.

What no historian, whether from the subcontinent or elsewhere, has previously documented is Churchill's contribution to the famine that swept across much of eastern India during World War II, killing nearly 4 million people. Paul Greenough's *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–44* remains a critically important work on the onset of the famine and its consequences. But Madhusree Mukerjee, a journalist who is also a

former member of the editorial board of *Scientific American*, has written an account that adds a new dimension to our understanding of this awful episode.

Churchill's Secret War documents in painful and vivid detail the utter personal callousness, administrative ineptitude, and political obliviousness that characterized the actions of Churchill, his adviser on food security (an eccentric physicist, Frederick Alexander Lindemann), and a number of Churchill's cabinet colleagues, as the specter of famine loomed and then inexorably arrived in eastern India.

The sweep and scope of Mukerjee's work are breathtaking. She is equally at home with archival research and local oral histories. It is also to her credit that she has made masterful use of secondary literature on the political climate in the United Kingdom, on the political scene in Bengal on the eve of the famine, and on British colonial policy toward India during the war years. Nor is her scholarship confined to matters of political and historical detail. Thanks to her prior scientific training, Mukerjee is also adept in discussing, in limpid prose, questions of human caloric needs for sustaining a normal and healthy existence, as well as the effects of hunger on morbidity.

CHURCHILL'S CULPABILITY

The most striking feature of her work, however, is her painstaking effort to ferret out extraordinary details pertaining to British decision making about colonial food and agricultural policies and subsequent relief efforts once the famine began. The evidence that she has mustered shows, without a doubt, the culpability of Churchill and key members of the India Office in allowing the famine to take hold—and then dawdling over any meaningful effort to alleviate the horrific plight of the famine's victims.

The account, utterly morbid and morally disturbing, is little short of riveting. Churchill and

Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II
by Madhusree Mukerjee.
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his coterie of advisers, almost without exception, were solely concerned with supplying the war effort in Southeast Asia against the Japanese and ensuring food security within the United Kingdom. What is especially troubling is their stubborn unwillingness to recognize that even a minor effort to shift a modicum of food resources to the famine-ravaged regions of eastern India could have averted human calamity.

Despite explicit warnings from Lord Archibald Wavell, the British viceroy, about an impending disaster unless more than a million tons of food grains were made available, Churchill refused to countenance the request. After persistent pleas from Wavell the government made available a mere 50,000 tons of barley. Obviously, Churchill's need to prosecute the war against the Axis powers did not hamper him from making critical choices about the fate of millions of hapless subjects in India.

The scope and depth of this book render it difficult to summarize. However, five vital themes can be teased out. First, it needs to be underscored—and Mukerjee emphasizes this with ample documentary evidence—that adequate food grain stores were available within the reach of the British Empire. Consequently, had Churchill, even at a late hour, heeded Wavell's call to divert some food on storage ships to Bengal and its environs, countless lives might have been saved.

Second, as the noted economist and Nobel laureate from Bengal, Amartya Sen, has shown in earlier scholarship, untold numbers died in the famine despite the availability of food. The tragedy occurred because much of the population was so immiserated that they could not purchase food.

Third, British analysts have made much of the propensity of a host of local merchants to hoard food and profit from soaring prices as scarcity became acute. This charge probably contains more than a grain of truth. However, as Mukerjee points out, India was under British colonial rule. When

occasion demanded, and the author provides ample evidence of this, the British had little or no difficulty in using highly coercive methods to suppress Indian nationalists or any group or individual that they regarded as hostile to the interests of colonial rule. Had the British deemed saving their subjects' lives a priority, they could have, without much effort, induced rapacious grain dealers to open their warehouses and sell at least part of their hoard at controlled prices.

Fourth, even when the local authorities did decide to provide famine relief, their efforts were limited and halfhearted. Some anecdotal evidence that Mukerjee has garnered shows that battle-hardened British soldiers stationed in India were horrified at what they saw transpiring around them, as corpses littered the streets of Calcutta. But the British municipal authorities seemed more concerned with removing the cadavers from the streets than with preventing deaths in the first place.

SILENT VICTIMS

A final issue that Mukerjee mentions, though she does not pursue it at any length, is that international reporting of the famine deaths was almost completely absent. In part, this may have been a function of wartime, as well as of colonial censorship strictures. Those who survived managed to tell their tales of horror and woe; sadly, few recorded the plight of those who were to perish.

Mukerjee has given voice to the millions who, through no fault of their own, were the double victims of crop failure and colonial neglect. Should Churchill's uncritical admirers chance on this brilliant work, and actually read it, they might discover that their demigod sinned mightily against his fellow human beings. One can only hope that Mukerjee's work will at least add more nuance to historians' appraisal of Churchill and his legacy. ■