

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Madhusree Mukerjee.** *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II.* New York: Basic Books, 2010. 332 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-00201-6.

Reviewed by William Logan (Auburn University)

Published on H-War (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The popular narratives of World War II that get published in Europe and North America tend to focus on the heroic exploits of the Allied nations as they fought back the scourge of fascism. Every year, publishing houses churn out dozens of books about the Battle of Britain, El-Alamein, D-Day, Iwo Jima, and other dramatic military episodes of the war. The battle-centric narratives tend to gloss over, or ignore entirely, the far-reaching effects of the war as they were felt far from the major theaters of conflict, especially in the colonies. This is a historiographical shortcoming that Madhusree Mukerjee has tried to overcome in her book *Churchill's Secret War*. She has done an admirable job.

The book centers around the Bengal Famine of 1943, a catastrophic event that left millions dead in eastern India. The famine was simply the last and most devastating outcome of a long-established colonial policy of resource-extraction. Mukerjee uses the famine as a case study for the effects of colonial economics on India. The extraction of resources depleted Indian food supplies, leading to famine after a cyclone destroyed the crops in the colony's rice belt. At the same time, resource extraction enriched Britain by building up the island's food supplies so that the British would not have to go hungry during the war or their postwar reconstruction.

Although Churchill is singled out in the book's title, the book is not a simple piece of Churchill-bashing. Mukerjee's narrative is much more complicated than that. The book examines the interactions and clashes between the British prime minister, his close advisers, the secretary of state to India, the viceroys, and representatives

of the American government. In the end, Churchill does come across badly, but he is not a two-dimensional villain. Instead, Mukerjee's Churchill is a real person whose failed Indian policies were influenced by his unconscious but deeply held racial beliefs that light-skinned Europeans deserved food more than dark-skinned Asians.

Mukerjee interweaves this top-down narrative of diplomacy and statecraft with bottom-up narratives that illustrate the lived experience of India during the war. Her narrative draws in voices of English soldiers stationed in India, combatants in the Japanese-supported Indian National Army, and farmers in rural Bengal. Particularly compelling is the story of the resistance movement in Tamluk Subdivision of Bengal. The resistance fighters attempted to use violence against British officials to destabilize colonial rule, in much the same way as underground resistance movements in occupied Europe fought against the Nazis.

Mukerjee did a tremendous amount of research in writing *Churchill's Secret War*. The book is not only well researched, but well written, readable, and even engrossing in parts. It gives enough context to inform the casual reader, but it also has enough analysis to satisfy the serious historian. In particular, Mukerjee made good use of Bengali-language sources, including oral history interviews of famine survivors and published sources. Many of these sources have never been translated into English. Too many Indian histories (even many written by Indians) use only English sources, thus relying too heavily on official English-language accounts while ignoring the wealth of sources in vernacular languages. Mukerjee's

book bucks this trend.

Another positive point is the book's inclusion of rural narratives. Although it was the starving famine victims in Calcutta who first drew worldwide attention to the famine, it was in the countryside that the effects of the famine were felt most keenly. Too many writers on India stay in the cities because they do not understand the country and wish not to try. Mukerjee has overcome this tendency.

I enjoyed and appreciated the book so much that my critiques will be few. For all of the visual documentation said to exist of the famine, I would have liked to see some more pictures in the book. As it is, there is only one, on the dust jacket. More significantly, Muker-

jee's analysis is not uniformly critical. While she paints balanced portrayals of the British leaders, she portrays some Indian leaders two-dimensionally. Her portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, is based mostly on recent nationalistic narratives such as Bipan Chandra et al.'s *India's Struggle for Independence* (2012). I would have liked to see some more critical work cited. The nationalistic narratives, and Mukerjee, take Gandhi's importance and agency as a given. But what was his true significance? This needs to be explored in more detail. In a similar vein, Mukerjee relies on Indian narratives about the "deindustrialization" of India by the British during the colonial era, although some more recent work, such as that of P. H. Vries, has called this thesis into question.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** William Logan. Review of Mukerjee, Madhusree, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37898>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.