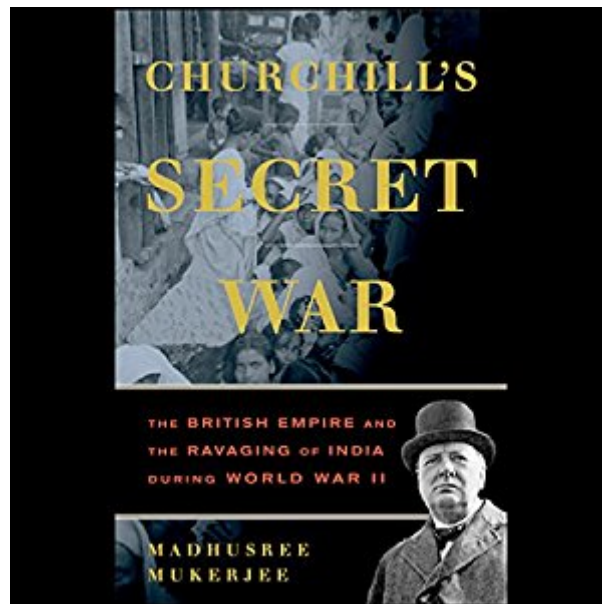


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Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire And The Ravaging Of India During World War II



Synopsis

In the tradition of *The Rape of Nanking* and *A Problem from Hell*, this account will change the way we think of Churchill and World War II. In 1943 Winston Churchill and the British Empire needed millions of Indian troops, all of India's industrial output, and tons of Indian grain to support the Allied war effort. Such massive contributions were certain to trigger famine in India. Because Churchill believed that the fate of the British Empire hung in the balance, he proceeded, sacrificing millions of Indian lives in order to preserve what he held most dear. The result: the Bengal Famine of 1943-44, in which millions of villagers starved to death. Relying on extensive archival research and first-hand interviews, Mukerjee weaves a riveting narrative of Churchill's decisions to ratchet up the demands on India as the war unfolded and to ignore the corpses piling up in the Bengali countryside. The hypocrisy, racism, and extreme economic conditions of two centuries of British colonial policy finally built to a head, leading Indians to fight for their independence in 1947. Few Americans know that World War II was won on the backs of these starving peasants; Mukerjee shows us a side of World War II that we have been blind to. We know what Hitler did to the Jews, what the Japanese did to the Chinese, what Stalin did to his own people. This story has largely been neglected, until now.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 12 hours and 46 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: September 27, 2010

Language: English

ASIN: B0044X82CW

Best Sellers Rank: #87 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Asia #196 in Books > History > Asia > India #268 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Europe

Customer Reviews

Between 3 and 5 million people died of starvation and famine in Bengal in India in 1943. The drought was a result of nature. The resulting famine and the millions of deaths can be attributed to the policies of the colonial power ruling India - the British, and one person is most culpable in this crime against humanity - Winston Churchill. This scandal is what the author details immaculately, punctuated by impeccable research. Human, economic, political, imperial, racist, and social angles

are all brought out in vivid detail. The case against Winston Churchill turns out to be damningly severe, even to the author - "I had no idea the book would end up targeting Churchill to this extent", but the evidence is as strong as could be. As it turns out, the carefully constructed narrative and myth of the gentlemanly and benevolent nature of British rule in its colonies is shattered, devastatingly so. The book is part history. It tells of the riches in India and Bengal before the advent of the East India Company and then English rule. This is covered in the Prologue. The bulk of the book then deals with the famine of 1943. Since that was a tumultuous period - in India on account of the independence struggle with Mahatma Gandhi at the forefront, and in the world on account of World War II, we are provided pertinent accounts of key events that had a relevant bearing on the famine. Of Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha, of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army, of local uprisings in Midnapore and the now mostly forgotten revolutionaries like Sushil Dhara, Ajoy Mukhopadhyaya, and others, of the Japanese conquest of Singapore, Burma, and their landing at the doorstep of India's eastern borders, of the Denial Policy (really a scorched earth policy).

In the Western world, Churchill is regarded as one of the great heroes of his time. In India he is widely detested, regarded as an arch-colonialist and racist ("I hate Indians. A beastly people with a beastly religion"). Madhusree Mukerjee presents the Indian view in this book, in which she accuses Churchill of causing the devastating Bengal famine of 1943-44, which killed three million people. It might be helpful to list the probable causes of the famine in the order in which they appeared. Rises in the price of food were caused by the government expanding production of paper money. The Japanese conquest of Burma cut off the imports which had supplied Bengal with fifteen percent of its rice. To prevent resources from falling into the hands of the Japanese, should they invade the province, the British instituted a "denial policy", relocating some rice stores and confiscating 66,000 boats, which were needed for cultivation and to transport foodstuffs. In October, the crop was severely damaged by a cyclone and subsequent fungal infection. Mukerjee finds plenty with which to damn Churchill, but, I think, omits some data and misses some ambiguities that are part of the story. Mukerjee paints a severe picture of the effects of the denial policy. One of her most useful sources is the firsthand account of civil servant Asok Mitra, who attributes the famine entirely to the denial policy, at least so far as his own district of Munshiganj is concerned. Mitra argues that the real purpose of the policy was to punish Bengalis, not to impede invasion. Mukerjee rejects Amartya Sen's conclusion that there was not a serious decline in Bengal's food supply.

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