Key Topic 1: Churchill’s view of events, 1919-40

1.1 What were Churchill’s views on the Abdication Crisis (1936)?

Abdication = an act of renouncing or abdicating a throne

The Changing Role of the Monarch

During the early decades of the twentieth century the British public’s view of the role of and duties of a monarch changed. It was widely known, for instance, that Edward VII (right), king between 1901 and 1910, had kept many mistresses throughout his marriage. (One was Jennie Churchill – Winston’s mother – and another was Alice Keppel, great-grandmother of Camilla Parker-Bowles.) Few at the time considered this a disqualifying trait in a monarch.

By contrast, his son, King George V (1910-36), operated in a more respectable manner, eschewing dangerous liaisons and performing his duties with dignity. In so doing George shifted how the public believed their king should behave.

Edward ‘the Playboy’

George’s eldest son, Edward, however, had a temperament more like his grandfather. During the First World War he had a love affair with a Parisian courtesan and in 1918 he struck up a relationship with a married woman, Freda Dudley Ward.

Indeed, in the 1920s and 1930s Edward’s womanising got so out of hand that it caused deep consternation to both the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, and Edward’s father. King George was apparently disgusted by Edward’s affairs with married women and was reluctant to see him inherit the crown. “After I am dead,” George said, “the boy will ruin himself in twelve months.”

In 1935 Edward was introduced to American socialite Wallis Simpson (the introduction was made by another American, Thelma Furness, with whom Edward was at the time having an affair). Although debate remains about when Simpson and Edward began their affair, it is generally thought to have started when Furness was travelling abroad.

When George V passed away on 20th January, 1936, and his son ascended to the throne, Edward’s relationship with Wallis Simpson was brought into sharper focus.
The Constitutional Crisis

The problem with Wallis Simpson was that she was a divorcee. Indeed, she had been twice married and was in the process of getting her second divorce from Mr Simpson when she first met Edward. This posed a significant constitutional problem. The king was the Head of the Church of England, an institution committed in its opposition to divorce.

Nonetheless, Edward was determined to marry Simpson. In November 1936, less than a year into Edward's reign, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin told Edward this was not possible as the public would not accept Simpson as queen.

Tommy Lascalles, later Private Secretary to both King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II, said that the Establishment “would not tolerate their monarch taking as his wife, and their Queen, a shop-soiled American, with two living husbands and a voice like a rusty saw.”

In response, Edward suggested a morganatic marriage whereby Simpson would become consort rather than queen. However, such an arrangement would first need to be approved by the British parliament and the dominions. The cabinet refused to allow it. Therefore, if the king married Wallis Simpson, there were two problems:

- The government, having being ignored, would likely have been forced to resign, triggering a general election at a time when the economy continued to struggle and Hitler increasingly threatened a menace abroad
- The dominions (e.g. Australia, New Zealand etc.) may well have broken away from the British Empire

Until December 1936, the ongoing concerns about Edward and Wallis Simpson were little known to most of the British public. There was a gentleman's agreement by the news proprietors to keep the story under wraps so as not to upset the king. Only those with American friends or access to American papers had any real inkling of what was happening.

In December 1936, however, the news of the affair broke and the public gorged on the gossip. Churchill, who had long been on friendly terms with Edward, took up Edward's cause. According to Best, he believed he would be able to “convict the Prime Minister of heartlessness and unconstitutionality...and, in the few days available, agitated in both press and Parliament to get the decision about Edward's future delayed... [However], he had excitedly underrated Edward's resolve to marry Mrs Simpson and to make her Queen...and he had overrated the degree of popular support that might be aroused on Edward's behalf.”
Indeed, as Jenkins writes, there can be little doubt that during a dinner between Churchill and Edward at the height of the crisis Churchill came “very near to casting himself in the role of a ‘King’s party’”. This would have caused only further problems as presumably those of a different view would have been ‘anti-King’, and the political neutrality of the monarch – critical in a constitutional monarchy – would have been under serious threat.

Nonetheless, Churchill took up the King’s fight, believing he could buy more time for Edward to consider his position. He wrote to the King on Saturday 5 December:

Sir…No pistol to be held at the King’s head. No doubt this request for time will be granted. Therefore – no final decision or [Abdication] Bill till Christmas – probably February or March.

However, once Churchill took up the King’s cause in the Commons, he found he cut a lonely figure, set against the tide of opinion. The public, and most MPs, were pro-Baldwin on the matter – and anti-Edward. Jenkins observes that Churchill’s speech was “a classic example of running completely against the feeling of the House.”

Harold Nicolson, a normally friendly MP, wrote: “Winston collapsed utterly in the House yesterday… He has undone in five minutes the patient reconstruction works [in relation to rearmament] of two years.” Leo Amery, also an MP who at the time was on relatively good terms with Churchill, said that Churchill “was completely staggered by the unanimous hostility of the House.” A third member was recorded as saying that Churchill was “absolutely howled down” when he had tried to speak.

When Churchill left the Commons he shouted at Baldwin: “You won’t be satisfied until you’ve broken him [Edward], will you?”

As Best notes, “His [Churchill’s] last attempt to put the King’s case to the House of Commons, on 7 December, was shouted down… it was the most humiliating event of his parliamentary career.”

On December 11th 1936 Edward VIII was forced to abdicate the throne to marry Wallis Simpson.

Churchill won cheers from MPs in the Commons shortly after the Abdication Bill was passed by making a graceful withdrawal. He noted that “we must obey the exhortations of the Prime Minister to look forward”.

The Consequences for Churchill

Churchill himself was fairly sanguine about the abdication affair. In January 1937 he wrote to a friend: “I do not feel that my own political position is much affected by the line I took; but even if it were, I should not wish to have acted otherwise.”
Jenkins argues: “To most people at the beginning of 1937 this would have been regarded as grossly complacent. But in view of what happened less than three and a half years later it is at least arguable that Churchill’s medium-term perspective…was steadier than” the judgements of his critics.

Best broadly echoes Jenkins’ judgement, writing that Churchill’s “brief campaign [on behalf of the King] did Edward no good and did Churchill some harm, which, fortunately for the country, proved to be short lived.”

Roberts, however, is less generous. He argues that the crisis “was immediately added to the long list of Churchill’s supposed misjudgements, thus undermining the public perception of his stance on Hitler.”

Edward and Hitler

Much has been written of Edward holding ‘pro-Nazi’ sympathies and many historians have speculated how things would have unfolded had Edward been on the throne during the war.

The evidence for Edward’s pro-Nazi views is not clear cut. In 1937, Edward and Wallis-Simpson, now married, visited Nazi Germany and met various senior Nazis. After dinner with Goebbels, the propaganda minister wrote: “It’s a great shame he is no longer king. With him, we could have entered into an alliance.” The visit was deeply embarrassing to Edward’s brother, King George VI, and convinced London that the former king could not be fully trusted.

However, historian Ted Powell has pointed out that Edward was not alone in the 1930s in supporting appeasement and that he viewed Germany as a counterweight to the Soviet threat in the east. Furthermore, Edward himself later confessed in an interview to having been naïve about Hitler.

Nonetheless, Edward posed a problem for the British government during the early years of World War II. The Nazis concocted a plan to kidnap Edward and reinstall him on the British throne as a puppet king. Indeed, Churchill was so worried about it that he had both Edward and Wallis-Simpson sent to govern the Bahamas so they would be out of harm’s way.