2.2 What characterized Churchill’s relationship with his generals?

Churchill was keen to influence how the war was run. As has been seen, he would not tolerate figures in the style of Haig or Kitchener who, he believed, had had outsized influence during the Great War.

However, Churchill had limited military experience – especially compared with his generals. He had seen some action during World War One, and been in the army as a young man, but this did not qualify him to give strategic direction to a worldwide conflict.

His generals were also acutely aware of his shortcoming, most notably the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign in 1915. Churchill was also known for giving his views as First Lord of the Admiralty. Indeed, somewhat ironically, he was a strong advocate of the Norway campaign in 1940 – the event that would pave the way for his ascent to the premiership.

Churchill also had a mixed outlook when it came to the military and how battles should be fought. On the one hand he loved new and innovative ideas. He was a strong supporter of radar, had called for dramatic spending increases on the RAF long-before it was politically popular, and gave strong support to the SOE (Special Operations Executive). He was also an early supporter of the creation of giant floating portable harbours (later known as Mulberry Harbours) that would play a critical role in the successful invasion of Normandy in 1944.

On the other hand, Churchill’s generals could be critical of his military outlook. In 1941 Sir Hastings Ismay, Churchill’s Chief of Staff during the war, wrote in a private letter that Churchill ‘does not appreciate the changes that have taken place in modern armies, with their heavy and complicated logistic needs.’

Similarly, Field Marshal Wavell complained that ‘Winston’s tactical ideas had to some extent crystallised at the South African War of 1899’.

Churchill’s views on generals

His views on generals can be summarised in two key points:

1. He feared that Haig and others had been given too much power in WWI - and had not had proper supervision. He would not allow the same to happen.

2. He would often grow frustrated with a general if he believed them to be were overly cautious (see: Wavell, Auchinleck)

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1 Alan Brooke’s wife’s first husband had died at Gallipoli, so he knew full well the limits of Churchill’s strategic wisdom.
The generals, in return, believed Churchill to be an amateur strategist with a boyish enthusiasm for wild ideas. Indeed, Alan Brooke wrote after one row: ‘[Churchill] behaved like a spoilt child that wants a toy in a shop irrespective of the fact that its parents [the COGS] tell it that it is no good’.

Churchill made some mistakes early during the war:

- He gave an order to Lord Gort after the Germans broke the lines at Sedan (in the Ardennes) with their fast-moving attack. Gort ignored the order – and saved many British lives in doing so.
- Churchill demanded that Calais be defended by Claude Nicolson and his men. It was, bravely, but it was militarily pointless and led to an unnecessary loss of life.

Churchill preferred attitude over ability, would frequently interfere, and on more than one occasion sacked able and thoughtful commanders. Sir John Dill (right), Chief of Imperial General Staff (CIGS), who Churchill nicknamed ‘Dilly-Dally’, was removed as soon as possible.

He was replaced by Sir Alan Brooke in December 1941.

Sir Alan Brooke - Chief of Imperial General Staff (head of the British Army), Dec. 1941-45. Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, March 1942-45

From March 1942, Brooke was the foremost military adviser to Churchill and the other relevant bodies. He had a tempestuous relationship with the prime minister, although this was by design. As Churchill described:

‘When I thump the table and push my face towards him, what does he do? Thumps the table harder and glares back at me. I know these Brookes – stiff-necked Ulstermen and there’s no one worse to deal with than that!’

Similarly, when Churchill became upset because he learned Brooke apparently hated him, Brooke told Ismay (who had been sent to keep the peace): ‘I don’t hate him, I love him, but when the day comes that I tell him he is right when I believe him to be wrong, it will be time for him to get rid of me.’

Brooke was highly competent and highly professional – and wanted to be cautious to preserve the lives of soldiers. Whilst the two often clashed, they did nonetheless tend to agree on the big decisions. Brooke did not challenge Churchill when he took the decision in 1940 to send troops to the Middle East to defend the Suez Canal against a potential Italian threat.

We know most about Churchill and Brooke’s relationship because Brooke kept a diary throughout the war which he published in 1957. The entries are often acerbic, revealing Brooke’s frustration with
Churchill, and caused much hurt to Churchill when they were published. Towards the end of the war they also show Brooke beginning to doubt Churchill had the energy to sustain himself.

Much has been made of how rude Brooke was about Churchill’s strategic ability. However, as Best points out, the entries were ‘instantly recorded for private consumption’.

There are plenty of instances of Brooke’s exasperation. For example, Brooke once wrote:

\[We\ have\] a **peevish temperamental prima donna of a Prime Minister**, suspicious to the very limits of imagination, always fearing a military combination of effort against political dominance... He has been more unreasonable and trying than ever this time... I wonder whether any historian of the future will ever be able to paint Winston in his true colours?

Similarly, after a difficult meeting in September 1944 Brooke wrote:

**I find it hard to remain civil.** And the wonderful thing is that three-quarters of the population of the world imagine that Winston Churchill is one of the Strategists of History, a second Marlborough, and the other quarter **have no conception what a public menace he is and has been throughout this war!** It is far better that the world should never know, and never suspect the feet of clay of that otherwise superhuman being. **Without him England was lost for a certainty, with him England has been on the verge of disaster time and again... Never have I admired and despised a man simultaneously to the same extent.**

The last line of this entry captures their complex relationship. The two were not friends (Brooke, unlike many other military leaders, never visited Chartwell and would often sit opposite Churchill at the Cabinet table breaking pencils in anger) but their differences led to ‘creative tension’.

Similarly, in calmer moments, away from the noise and stress of the war, Brooke was kinder to his former boss. After the war he wrote:

I thank God that I was given an opportunity of working alongside of such a man, and of having my eyes opened to the fact that **occasionally such supermen exist on this earth.**

Perhaps more tellingly, Brooke wrote in a foreword to a book on Churchill published after the war:

**My abiding impression of him remains that expressed by an entry in my diary made in the heat and stress of the war: He is quite the most wonderful man I have ever met, and it is a source of never-ending interest studying him and getting to realize that occasionally such human beings make their appearance on this earth – human beings who stand out head and shoulders above all others.**

**Sir Archibald Wavell - Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East, Sept.1939-June 1941.**
Churchill personally disliked the poetry-loving Wavell. He found him too taciturn and cautious. Wavell scored the first British land victory of the war in North Africa by freeing Egypt from foreign troops and capturing some 40,000 Italian prisoners of war. Yet even then, Churchill refused to grant him due credit.

Often Wavell unfairly received the blame, such as when the War Cabinet in 1940 ordered 55,000 of Wavell's troops in North Africa to be sent to defend Greece from the Italians. When the attack failed, Churchill blamed Wavell.

On 21 June 1941, Churchill sacked Wavell. It was done with the approval of the Chiefs of Staff – and to some extent Wavell himself.

As Best describes it:

> The switch was presented on the grounds not of Wavell’s incompetence or lack of martial spirit but of his tiredness after an exacting period in a post with too many commitments and too few resources. The decision was accepted with grace by Wavell, but to many others just below him it appeared a poor reward for obeying over-demanding political orders.

As Chips Channon MP noted in his diary, Wavell’s demotion was ‘a sacrifice to Winston’s personal dislike. No General in all history has had so difficult a role, fighting on five fronts and harassed daily by contradictory cables.’

Sir Claude Auchinleck - Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East, July 1941-August 1942.

Unlike Wavell, Churchill personally liked the 6 feet 2 Auchinleck who had a demeanour more suited to the tastes of the prime minister. However, Auchinleck also came to be seen by Churchill as being too cautious, particularly when he insisted on delaying an attack against the Germans in North Africa.

Soon Churchill was complaining to Brooke about Auchinleck’s lack of offensive spirit.

In August 1942, fed up with inaction, Churchill flew to North Africa and sacked Auchinleck in his El Alamein headquarters. The prime minister later wrote that Auchinleck took it with ‘soldierly dignity’ and likened it to the killing of a magnificent stag. ‘It was a terrible thing. It is difficult to remove a bad General at the height of a campaign. It is atrocious to remove a good General. We must use Auchinleck again.’

Nonetheless, Churchill was determined he was right. The army needed a morale boost in North Africa: ‘I saw that Army. It was a broken, baffled Army... I made my decision. I telegraphed to the Cabinet.’

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2 He finished the description: ‘I then took off all my clothes and rolled in the surf. Never have I had such bathing.’
Sir Bernard Montgomery – ‘Monty’ – Commander in Chief of Middle East Command, August 1942-1944

Montgomery won over Churchill with his self-confidence. Churchill described to Clementine:

‘In Montgomery we have a highly competent daring and energetic soldier... If he is disagreeable to those about him, he is also disagreeable to the enemy.’

In Montgomery, Churchill saw someone who could bring order and optimism to an army that looked chaotic and demoralised.

Churchill was also aware of Montgomery’s ego. He once noted privately about Monty: ‘In defeat unbeatable; in victory unbearable.’

Nonetheless, Montgomery, building on the work of his predecessors, helped deliver one of the decisive victories of the war over Erwin Rommel at the Second Battle of El Alamein (October-November 1942). Many view this as a turning point. Church bells even rang back home for the first time since 1939.

Churchill afterwards said: ‘Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.’

Churchill later reflected: ‘Before Alamein, we never had a victory - after Alamein, we never had a defeat.’