

How Sir Winston Churchill Starved 4 Million Indians

by Ramtanu Maitra

Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II

by Madhusree Mukerjee

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Madhusree Mukerjee's book is not a denunciation of the British rule of India, but a meticulous chronicling of the role of the British Raj in furthering a famine in Bengal,¹ and suppressing the fact that this deliberate holocaust took 4 million lives. British historians, including Sir Winston Churchill in his five-volume memoir, glossed over this rather "irrelevant incident." Historians around the world have made little effort either to find out how many lost their lives in the 1943 famine, or what role the British colonialists played to cause this man-made famine.

However, in 1999, Dr. Gideon Polya, a professor at La Trobe University in Victoria, Australia, made the following observation in an interview: "The wartime Bengal Famine has become a 'forgotten holocaust' and has been effectively deleted from our history books, from school and university curricula and from general

public perception. To the best of my knowledge, Churchill only wrote of it once, in a secret letter to Roosevelt dated April 29th 1944 in which he made the following remarkable plea for help in shipping Australian grain to India: 'I am no longer justified in not asking for your help.' Churchill's six-volume *History of the Second World War* fails to mention the cataclysm that was responsible for about 90% of total British Empire casualties in that conflict, but makes the extraordinary obverse claim: 'No great portion of the world population was so effectively protected from the horrors and perils of the World War as were the people of Hindustan. They were carried through the struggle on the shoulders of our small island.'"

Mukerjee, a Bengali herself, has conducted extensive research to document what she writes, and also interacted with those who survived the holocaust and lost their parents, children, and other relatives. In Bengal, millions were dying because of food shortages caused by British looting to feed the troops engaged in World War II, and partly due to nature's fury in the midst of a well-developed independence movement, which led to the end of the British rule in 1947. She documents the British War Cabinet's role, Churchill's, in particular, in exacerbating the food shortages, stonewalling attempts to send food from other countries to alleviate the crisis, and, in fact, *justifying* the necessity to cull those who are not only "inferior," but who breed like rabbits.

The author points out that Churchill, explaining

1. A province before India's partition in 1947; it was divided to form West Bengal, a state within the Republic of India, and East Pakistan, which, in 1971, became the independent nation of Bangladesh.



Winston Churchill's likeness to Hitler is documented in Mukerjee's book, in which she details the role of Churchill's War Cabinet, in exacerbating the food shortages, stonewalling attempts by other nations to send aid during the 1943 Bengali famine, in which 4 million died, and, in fact, justifying the necessity to cull those who are not only "inferior," but who "breed like rabbits."

why he defended the stockpiling of food within Britain, while millions died of starvation in Bengal, told his private secretary that "the Hindus were a foul race, protected by their mere pullulation from the doom that is their due." Pullulation, Mukerjee notes, means rapid breeding.

Mukerjee cites the notes from the British War Cabinet meetings that were released in 2006, which show that Churchill's decision not to send food to starving Bengal was anchored on the analysis that, after the war, Europe would need a lot of food, and food prices would be high, and for Britain to import food at that time would prove costly. Moreover, surplus stocks built up in Britain by the denial of food to Indians would be worth a lot more on the world market after the war. On the basis of this analysis, Churchill resolved in 1942 to build up a stock of 27 million tons through civilian imports.

The British East India Company

The author reaches back in history to document the looting of Bengal by the rapacious British East India Company, which began in the mid-1750s to form the backbone of what became the mighty British Empire,

and which made Bengal, once a much more prosperous province than the entire British Isles, so vulnerable later. The book does not deal, however, with the devastation of the region's farmlands, Bengal and Bihar, in particular. These farmlands had been wrecked by opium cultivation and indigo plantation by the British. To learn about that barbaric role of the British, one must read Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppy*, and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan* (Mirror to Indigo Cultivation), written in Bengal in the mid-19th Century.

However, Mukerjee does provide some figures of the looting by the East India Company that filled the coffers in London. Bengal fell under East India Company control in 1757, and "within five years," the author reports, "Bengal became

India's poorest province." The Company directors were looting freely and paying His Majesty's Government £400,000 annually. For centuries, gold and silver had poured into Bengal, but, by 1769, all that was gone. Between 1766 and 1768, the author notes, Bengal imported £624,375 worth of goods and exported £6,311,250: The amount going out was ten times that which was coming in.

Churchill, or Hitler: Take Your Pick

One of the interesting aspects in this book is the author's observation that, when it came to India, there was hardly any difference between Hitler and Churchill. Both were avowed racists and killers; both loved wars and had a particular hatred for the Indian people; and both were eager to see Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as the Mahatma Gandhi, or Gandhiji, killed. The author notes that Hitler was a great admirer of Britain and the British Raj. Indeed, the British bankers did a yeoman's job to get Hitler to seize power and build his Third Reich.

Hitler's and Churchill's common view on how to deal with the growing demand of the Indian leaders,

Gandhi in particular, is most revealing. In November 1937, Hitler, during his meeting with the Viscount of Halifax (formerly Lord Irwin, Viceroy of India), advised him to “shoot Gandhi, and if this doesn’t suffice to reduce them to submission, shoot a dozen leading members of Congress; and if that doesn’t suffice, shoot 200 and so on until order is established. . . . You will see how quickly they will collapse as soon you make it clear that you mean business.”

Gandhi was eventually assassinated in January 1948, a few years after Hitler had shot himself, and little more than a year after the British finally left India.

While Hitler was advising fellow representatives of a “superior race” to shoot Gandhi and other Congress Party leaders, Churchill was spitting venom against Gandhi. In 1931, after Gandhi was released from one of many times that he was imprisoned, Churchill charged Viceroy Irwin with “craven capitulation.” He said: “It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir [selfless person] of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience to parley in equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor.”

In 1944, British historian Penderel Moon recorded Churchill saying: “He [Gandhi] is a thoroughly evil force, hostile to us in every fiber, largely in the hands of native vested interests.” On another occasion, Churchill sent a note to then-Viceroy Archibald Wavell, asking why Gandhi was not dead yet.

What is also revealing is that Churchill’s major-domo in his aggressive service of the British Empire was Frederick Alexander Lindemann (1886-1957), a German-born and English-bred racist, anti-semitic, and physicist. His German origins were somewhat covered up when he was made Baron Cherwell (1941), while serving in the Statistics Division or S branch. Lindemann attended War Cabinet meetings as Churchill’s science advisor, and saw Churchill almost daily during the war.

Mukerjee writes: “On most matters, Lindemann’s and Churchill’s opinions converged, and when they did not, the scientist worked ceaselessly to change his friend’s mind.” Naturally, his objective was to provide rationales for whichever course the prime minister—as interpreted by the professor—wished to follow. As a

result, when the famine was raging in Bengal and starved bodies littered the rural areas, with people lacking strength of their own to bury them, Lindemann would pronounce judgment on the best use of shipping space, the inadequacy of British supplies, the optimal size of mustard gas stockpiles, and the necessity for carpet bombing of German cities. And, when the time came, Professor Lindemann would expound the pointlessness of sending famine relief to Bengal.

Churchill’s Dr. Mengele

Mukerjee pointed out, in an article published elsewhere,² “that Lord Cherwell considered the rescuing of imperial subjects to be an inefficient use of resources may be deduced from the drafts of a lecture he had delivered during the 1930s. . . . In the lecture, he outlined a science-based solution to the challenging problem of perpetuating imperial control over subject peoples. The professor envisioned that technologies such as surgery, mind control, and drug and hormone manipulations would one day allow humans to be fine-tuned for specific tasks. Furthermore, he postulated, at the low end of the race and class spectrum one could remove from ‘helots’ (Greek for slaves) the ability to suffer or to feel ambition—thereby creating a lobotomized subclass that would do all the unpleasant work without once thinking of revolution or of voting rights. The result would be a perfectly peaceable and stable society, ‘led by supermen and served by helots.’

“Lord Cherwell evidently considered the existence of certain peoples to be justified only to the extent that they served their racial and class superiors—which may explain his reluctance to expend resources on imperial subjects who were unimportant to the war effort. Churchill himself may have subscribed to such a view. After attending one of the War Cabinet debates on sending famine relief, for instance, Field Marshal Wavell noted in his diary that Churchill wanted to feed ‘only those [Indians] actually fighting or making munitions or working some particular railways.’”

Lord Cherwell was so allergic to people with dark skin color, that after his retirement he wanted to settle in a warm country such as Jamaica, but the thought of spending his days with black people was too much, so he stayed shivering at Oxford.

2. Madhusree Mukerjee, “Was Churchill responsible for the Bengal famine?” George Mason University’s History News Network website, Aug. 9, 2010, <http://hnn.us/articles/129891.html>

Famine That Killed 4 Million

The 1943 famine was not only man-made, but the outcome of the British Empire's looting of India, using free trade as one of its vicious weapons. The white-washing of Indian famines extends to two centuries of famine in British India. How many Indians died in these famines has not been fully established, but one figure indicates that at least 28 million died in the 19th-Century famines. A 1933 survey revealed that 41% of India's inhabitants were "poorly nourished," and another 20% "very badly nourished," with the statistics for Bengal being worst of all: 47% and 31%, respectively. By the time World War II hit, India was importing between 1 and 2 million tons of rice a year from Burma and Thailand.

In her book, Mukerjee writes that a more meaningful measure would be life expectancy, which can be calculated after 1871, when the first nationwide census took place. Life expectancy for a newborn Indian hovered around 24 until 1920, and then rose slowly. In contrast, life expectancy in Great Britain improved significantly throughout the Victorian era, to reach 47 by its end. This was mostly due to better nutrition provided by the crops that were raised in British India, and exported to the imperial headquarters. While the Indian nationalists demanded that cereals not be allowed to be exported in times of famine, the British authorities pressed home the "virtues of free trade," and local administrators who curbed exports or otherwise interfered with market forces were severely chastised. Mukerjee points out that even during devastating famines, the government rigorously collected agricultural taxes; thereby feeding whatever harvest there was into the free market.

The crux of the matter was that India's agricultural exports had become crucial to the British Empire's economy. In 1905, arguing in favor of free trade, Churchill observed: "The harvests of the world are at our disposal, and, by a system which averages climatic risks, we secure not merely a low but a fairly stable price. With that marvelous operation by which the crowded population of this island is fed, we cannot take the responsibility of interfering."

The famine that killed 4 million Indians in Bengal was orchestrated from outside. "Since 1939," Mukerjee wrote, "the United Kingdom had been drawing grain and manufactures from India for the war effort, and the colonial government had been printing money to pay for these purchases. The resulting inflation had com-

bined with other factors to precipitate famine in early 1943. The following summer, the Government of India asked the War Cabinet for half a million tons of wheat by year-end. The cereal would feed India's two-million-strong army and workers in war-related industries; if any happened to be left over, it would relieve starvation. The mere news of the arrival of substantial imports would cause prices to fall, because speculators would anticipate a drop in prices and release any hoarded grain to the market.

Churchill's close friend and technical advisor, Lord Cherwell, demurred, however: he erroneously argued that India's food problem could not be solved by imports. In any case, expending valuable shipping on Indians 'scarcely seems justified unless the Ministry of War Transport cannot find any other use for it,' he added in a draft memo. (In the final version, this sentence was changed to a straightforward recommendation against sending grain.)"³

Near the end of her book, Mukerjee provides the following anecdote: "In June 1953, after witnessing the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, Churchill found himself standing next to Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, while they both waited for their cars to drive up. 'You must have hated the British for the treatment meted out to your father,' Churchill said. 'It is remarkable how he and you have overcome that bitterness and hatred.'

"'We never hated you,' she answered.

"'I did, but I don't now,' he replied."

Indira Gandhi might have been generous, or she might have been muttering under her breath: "We loathe you."

The next time Prime Minister David Cameron and his ilk come prancing to India seeking a bailout of Britain's dwindled, technologically obsolete industrial sector, Premier Manmohan Singh, or the future powers-that-be, and the Indian people, must demand, not only the return of the crown jewels looted from India, but an admission and apology for the 4 million Indians they starved to death in 1943-45. No compensation would suffice.

This book should be read by those in the West, as well as elsewhere, who have been brought up with the anglophile's version of the British Empire. The book documents that those who served the British Empire were not just perfidious; they were killers, just as the Nazis were.

3. Ibid.