

What Leadership Can Be



LONDON AFTER A LUFTWAFFE RAID.

Erik Larson's new book intimately explores Churchill and Britain during the Blitz

By Eric Uhfelder

Erik Larson's remarkable account of Winston Churchill's first year as Britain's Prime Minister—when Germany unleashed the Luftwaffe against England in 1940—is a read to be savored.

The Splendid and the Vile, Larson's eighth book, proceeds like a thriller. He accomplishes this by shifting narratives told by a host of compelling characters, intertwining individual lives with the war, and breathing life into everyday events.

We hear directly from the most essential Minister of Air-craft Production Lord Beaverbrook, Churchill's daughters Pamela and Mary, his wife Clementine, one of the prime minister's personal secretaries, John Colville, German Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, German fighter pilot Adolf Galland, English diarists who brought us contemporaneous accounts of daily life during the Blitz, and, of course, Winston Churchill himself. This construct works because Larson understands so well what makes history engaging.

The author constantly changes pace and focus, at one moment inviting us into 10 Downing Street where top officials are making critical decisions about the war, to an intimate gathering in a peaceful country estate, then to the rush of citizens into the tube upon the sound of air raid sirens, to a dinner party at Churchill's weekend home, to dancing and carousing in a popular nightclub that suddenly takes a direct hit, to the obliteration of the town of Coventry.

Larson deftly shifts back and forth from the ob-

scure to the grand, propelling the story across all phases of Churchill's first year in office.

In a recent interview I had with Erik he described the years spent researching the project, the depth of which would leave most PhD candidates feeling horribly inadequate.

Chronology is the key to sequencing the story. He photographed and scanned reams of original source material, scribbling thoughts on each page to organize his cache. He didn't really take notes; rather, he proceeded as if relying on osmosis to absorb and integrate raw material into storytelling that reads as if he had conjured up the tale himself.

When asked for a "Wow" moment during his research, he recalled discovering that the British had sunk a French battleship, killing nearly 1,200 sailors after their commanders refused the British request to sail to neutral ports away from the advancing German army.

France and Britain had gone at each other for centuries. Larson found certain British strategic military planners in the 1930s feared, as war was approaching, that France might turn against England. Such thinking is hard to reckon when just a score earlier, the two countries allied in beating Germany in the First World War. And as a navy man, well aware of the kinship between sailors of all navies, friend and foe, Churchill agonized over giving the order to attack the French fleet. "But it was a critical decision," explains Larson, "in making the point to U.S. President Roosevelt and to Hitler that Britain was never going to cave in."

The result: Britain largely removed the French navy from the picture, and may have saved the country from invasion. Larson explains that while Germany had built a formidable fleet of submarines, its overall naval capacity was constrained, which inhibited a ground invasion of England.

For Larson, the most exciting moments of his research were discovering original first-hand material. While at the UK National Archives in London, he came across remarkably detailed interrogation reports of downed German fliers. He marveled at "Mass Observation," a private initiative set up well before the war to encourage citizens to record ordinary day-to-day existence. "The effort had recruited hundreds of diarists to write about the most quotidian aspects of British life," Larson explains, "and then comes the war; and these journals, to me, were just incredible."

His single biggest coup was when he got permission to use Mary Churchill's diary. (She was Churchill's youngest daughter, age 17 when the war started.) "I secured access from her daughter," Larson recalls. "It was unpublished, and I was one of only two people to have seen it. That was just extraordinary because it gave me insights into Churchill, and the war and the family, that I never ever would have had otherwise."

EU: What inspired the title of your book?

EL: An entry from John Colville's diary when he described watching a very intense raid through his bedroom window. He was struck by the beauty of the night, the clear black sky, the searchlights, the whole cataclysmic thing—the juxtaposition of natural splendor and human vileness. As soon as I read that passage, I knew what my title was going to be.

EU: What has been the response to the book?

EL: Its focus on good and evil has really resonated in the U.S., especially at this moment.

EU: What inspired you to write the book?

EL: I moved from Seattle to New York and began to better imagine what September 11th meant to New Yorkers. Then I thought what Britain endured during the war, at its peak, suffering 57 straight nights of bombing.

EU: What was your initial thought when you heard the U.S. presidential press secretary invoking the spirit of Churchill in describing Trump's misadventure going to St. John's Church after protestors had been gassed out of the way?

EL: Nothing could possibly be more ludicrous.

The Splendid and the Vile contains remarkable pieces of history. We learn the first time central London was bombed on August 25, 1940, it was by accident, against Hitler's explicit orders. The likely cause: Britain had discovered the Luftwaffe was relying on electromagnetic beams to direct bombers to their targets. Britain learned how to distort these beams, confusing Luftwaffe pilots.

Had this mis-drop not occurred, Churchill may not have responded by bombing central Berlin. Aerial attacks on cities may not have escalated, which devastated many British towns like Coventry and obliterated German cities like Dresden.

Then, in revealing the absurdity of Hitler's war, Larson found a diary entry from early 1941: "What a glorious spring day outside. How beautiful the world can be! And we have no chance to enjoy it. Human beings are so stupid. Life is so short, and they then go and make it so hard for themselves."

The author was Joseph Goebbels.

Erik Larson, *"The Splendid and The Vile,"* Crown, 2020.

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