

## Why can't Britain handle the truth about Winston Churchill?

*Nothing, it seems, can be allowed to tarnish the national myth – as I found when hosting a Cambridge debate about his murkier side*



*Winston Churchill speaking at Wolverhampton football field in 1949.*

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A baleful silence attends one of the most talked-about figures in British history. You may enthuse endlessly about Winston Churchill “single-handedly” defeating Hitler. But mention his views on race or his colonial policies, and you’ll be instantly drowned in ferocious and orchestrated vitriol.

In a sea of fawningly reverential Churchill biographies, hardly any books seriously examine his documented racism. Nothing, it seems, can be allowed to complicate, let alone tarnish, the national myth of a flawless hero: an idol who “saved our civilisation”, as Boris Johnson claims, or “humanity as a whole”, as David Cameron did. Make an uncomfortable observation about his views on white supremacy and the likes of Piers Morgan will ask: “Why do you live in this country?”

Not everyone is content to be told to be quiet because they would be “speaking German” if not for Churchill. Many people want to know more about the historical figures they are required to admire uncritically. The Black Lives Matter protests last June – during which the word “racist” was sprayed in red letters on Churchill’s

statue in Parliament Square, were accompanied by demands for more education on race, empire and the figures whose statues dot our landscapes.

Yet providing a fuller picture is made difficult. Scholars who explore less illustrious sides of Churchill are treated dismissively. Take the example of Churchill College, Cambridge, where I am a teaching fellow. In response to calls for fuller information about its founder, the college set up a series of events on Churchill, Empire and Race. I recently chaired the second of these, a panel discussion on “The Racial Consequences of Mr Churchill”.

Even before it took place, the discussion was repeatedly denounced in the tabloids and on social media as “idiotic”, a “character assassination” aimed at “trashing” the great man. Outraged letters to the college said this was academic freedom gone too far, and that the event should be cancelled. The speakers and I, all scholars and people of colour, were subjected to vicious hate mail, racist slurs and threats. We were accused of treason and slander. One correspondent warned that my name was being forwarded to the commanding officer of an RAF base near my home.

The college is now under heavy pressure to stop doing these events. After the recent panel, the rightwing thinktank Policy Exchange, which is influential in government circles – and claims to champion free speech and controversial views on campus – published a “review” of the event. The foreword, written by Churchill’s grandson Nicholas Soames, stated that he hoped the review would “prevent such an intellectually dishonest event from being organised at Churchill College in the future – and, one might hope, elsewhere”.

It’s ironic. We’re told by government and media that “cancel culture” is an imposition of the academic left. Yet here it is in reality, the actual “cancel culture” that prevents a truthful engagement with British history. Churchill was an admired wartime leader who recognised the threat of Hitler in time and played a pivotal role in the allied victory. It should be possible to recognise this without glossing over his less benign side. The scholars at the Cambridge event – Madhusree Mukerjee, Onyeka Nubia and Kehinde Andrews – drew attention to Churchill’s dogged advocacy of British colonial rule; his contributing role in the disastrous 1943 Bengal famine, in which millions of people died unnecessarily; his interest in eugenics; and his views, deeply retrograde even for his time, on race.

Churchill is on record as praising “Aryan stock” and insisting it was right for “a stronger race, a higher-grade race” to take the place of indigenous peoples. He reportedly did not think “black people were as capable or as efficient as white people”. In 1911, Churchill banned interracial boxing matches so white fighters would not be seen losing to black ones. He insisted that Britain and the US shared “Anglo-Saxon superiority”. He described anticolonial campaigners as “savages armed with ideas”.

Even his contemporaries found his views on race shocking. In the context of Churchill’s hard line against providing famine relief to Bengal, the colonial secretary, Leo Amery, remarked: “On the subject of India, Winston is not quite sane ... I didn’t see much difference between his outlook and Hitler’s.”

Just because Hitler was a racist does not mean Churchill could not have been one. Britain entered the war, after all, because it faced an existential threat – and not

primarily because it disagreed with Nazi ideology. Noting affinities between colonial and Nazi race-thinking, African and Asian leaders queried Churchill's double standards in firmly rejecting self-determination for colonial subjects who were also fighting Hitler.

It is worth recalling that the uncritical Churchill-worship that is so dominant today was not shared by many British people in 1945, when they voted him out of office before the war was even completely over. Many working-class communities in Britain, from Dundee to south Wales, felt strong animosity towards Churchill for his willingness to mobilise military force during industrial disputes. As recently as 2010, Llanmaes community council opposed the renaming of a military base to Churchill Lines.

Critical assessment is not "character assassination". Thanks to the groupthink of "the cult of Churchill", the late prime minister has become a mythological figure rather than a historical one. To play down the implications of Churchill's views on race – or suggest absurdly, as Policy Exchange does, that his racist words meant "something other than their conventional definition" – speaks to me of a profound lack of honesty and courage.

This failure of courage is tied to a wider aversion to examining the British empire truthfully, perhaps for fear of what it might say about Britain today. A necessary national conversation about Churchill and the empire he was so committed to is one necessary way to break this unacceptable silence.

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