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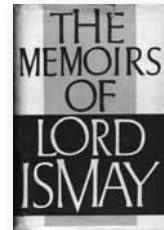


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## *The memoirs of Lord Ismay*

by General The Lord Ismay KG, PC, GCB, CH, DSO

Heinemann: London; 1960; 464 pp.; Ursula Davidson Library call no. 580.01/26245



This memoir is a masterly narrative by a participant at the very centre of British decision-making during the entire Second World War. Major General 'Pug' Ismay was appointed secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence in July 1938 and from there became, in May 1940, Churchill's senior military assistant and an additional member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Officially, his role was the leadership of the office of the minister of defence. Churchill was by then both prime minister and minister of defence and continued in these twin roles throughout the war. Ismay saw himself as Churchill's 'agent' and was once flippantly described as his 'Eminence Khaki'. Ismay was in a unique position to observe Churchill, who became a close confidante.

The book is in three parts. The first encompasses Ismay's early cavalry years on the North-West Frontier and his subsequent service in the British Somaliland Protectorate from 1914 to 1920, which was followed by attendance at the Indian Army Staff College at Quetta and the Royal Air Force Staff College at Andover, leading in turn to duties at Whitehall in the late 1920s–1930s. The second, and main, part of the memoir covers the Second World War. The last part deals with Ismay's post-war experiences back in India and later as head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Ismay has been praised by several highly-placed sources for his achievements in diplomacy and man-management during his Army service. His tact and charm kept the potential friction between the chiefs-of-staff and their political masters entirely controlled. His ability to ride the sometimes wild swings in Churchill's temperament, yet still bring to committees the correct interpretation and thrust of Churchill's views, was highly valued.

The large part-two of his work is divided into 27 succinct chapters. He commences with 'the Three Years of Suspense, 1936-1939' and the belated 1936 White Paper, through chapters devoted to 'The Twilight War, 1939-1940', the 'Rape of Norway and Denmark, April 1940', the 'Defeat of the Low Countries, May 1940', the fall of France and evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force in June 1940, and the Battle of Britain from July 1940. In a car leaving the operations room of No. 11 Group, Fighter Command, during a particularly heavy day-long German assault in August 1940, Churchill lent forward and softly said to Ismay: "Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few". Churchill then remained uncharacteristically absolutely silent for the rest of the journey.

Ismay muses, during the time of the *Bismark* operation, why it is that when there is no longer any chance of inflicting damage on the enemy, that it is the duty of the army commander of most armies of the civilized world, to avoid further loss of life by capitulation. But the navies of the world had a very different code. Capitulation was not an option. Sinking during continued resistance against overwhelmingly superior forces, often with all hands, is regarded as the true naval tradition.

He eloquently touches on all the main achievements and losses of British arms, the Anglo-American-Soviet pact and all the conferences with their staff preparations and post-conference debriefings. He recounts the problems associated with the demands of the Soviets to open a second front. He includes the side-shows of Greece, Crete, Iraq and Syria, and how they impacted on the problems of the North African Campaign and the Malta siege. Ismay accompanied Churchill to each of the seven international plenary conferences held during 1943 and thereby participated in the planning for both *Overlord* and *Anvil* (the invasion of Southern France).

The smaller third-part to the book is devoted to Ismay's sudden recall from brief retirement to be advisor to the viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, as Mountbatten managed the 1947 partition. Later in 1947, Ismay joined the British delegation to the United States to mediate the Kashmir situation. In 1948, the prime minister, Clement Attlee, appointed Lord Ismay chairman of the Council of the 1951 Festival of Britain. Later in 1951, Churchill, again prime minister, appointed Ismay secretary of state for Commonwealth relations.

Ismay's crowning achievement came in March 1952. A further call came from Churchill – this time to be the first secretary-general of NATO and vice-chairman of the North Atlantic Council. In his typical conscientious, determined, yet charming manner, Lord Ismay successfully completed a 5-year term in 1959, to then retire permanently.

This book is a masterpiece of prose. It is a remarkable product of its time and is in no way self-indulgent. It lacks military jargon and acronyms. It is full of interesting and humorous anecdotes and provides an excellent account of many aspects of Churchill's non-public persona. It contains a single monotone plate of the author as well as three organisational diagrams and four maps. Not only military historians, but anyone with an interest in British history from the 1920s to the 1950s, would be greatly satisfied with it.

**Bruce Short**