

Churchill's Confidant: Jan Smuts, Enemy to Lifelong Friend by Richard Steyn

5 stars

Two great political leaders who changed history.

Who would have thought that two men from such dissimilar backgrounds could forge a friendship that would change the world's history? Richard Steyn has painstakingly gathered letters and telegrams, not just between Winston Churchill and Jan Smuts but others as well, to show us just how deep their partnership was during both the First and Second World Wars.

Winston Churchill came from an aristocratic background, where he was used to all the finer things in life. Although used to getting his own way from an early age, his ambition was present from the very beginning and his superiors had very little chance of keeping him under their control. He decided very early on in his army career to supplement his income by becoming a war correspondent. It was as a war correspondent that took him to South Africa. He was captured by the Boers and after he managed to escape he returned to fight the war with his exclusive and upper-class cavalry regiment, the 4th Queen's Own Hussars

Jan Smuts was four years older than Churchill. He was born on a farm in the isolated area of Riebeeck West. His parents were deeply Calvinist of Dutch origin. He was only sent to school at the age of twelve. He managed to not only catch up but to also surpass all his classmates. He graduated from Stellenbosch University and won the Ebdon scholarship to attend Cambridge University where he studied law.

It was after the ill-fated Jameson Raid in December 1895 that Smuts lost his trust in Cecil Rhodes and decide to join the Boers in their fight against the English. President Paul Kruger very quickly realised that Jan Smuts would be his best representative in the negotiations with the "uitlanders" (men who came from all corners of the earth to seek their fortune in the Transvaal gold rush).

Jan Smuts was devastated when the British, under the leadership of Governor of the Cape, Alfred Milner, refused to negotiate with the Boer contingent when they met in Bloemfontein on 9 October 1899 and, shortly after this, the Boers declared war on Britain.

Jan Smuts was twenty-nine when the war started. He "virtually singlehandedly" ran the administration of Paul Kruger's government in Pretoria.

Smuts and Churchill first encountered each other after Churchill was captured. His escort took him to the tent of Commandant-General Joubert. Smuts happened to be visiting Joubert at the time. They were not introduced. However, Churchill made an impression on Smuts who described him thus, "Winston was a scrubby, squat figure of a man, unshaved. He was furious, venomous, just like a viper."

They were to meet officially when Jan Smuts was in London for the British to grant permission to the South Africans for self-government. At the time, January 1906, Winston Churchill had "crossed the house" and had joined the Liberals. He represented the government as the Undersecretary for the Colonies. South Africa was one of Churchill's primary responsibilities. Churchill had great respect for the Boer army. He wrote that "the individual Boer, mounted in suitable country, is worth three to five regular soldiers"

Their friendship and the respect they had for each other started at this meeting and was to continue through both world wars and through their roles in the establishment of first, The League of Nations (after WW1) and then The United Nations (after WW2).

What is so very clear in this book is that the world was “given” two men with vision. Men who could work together and had complete understanding of each other. Smuts, much to the hatred of the Afrikaner opposition party, took South Africa into the First World War because he realised that unless there was a combined force to stop the Germans, the balance of the world would be overthrown. He took a similar stance to send troops to help the allies during the WW2.

I shudder to think how the the world would look today if Winston Churchill was not at the helm during those long years of fighting. I also hate to think what would have happened to Southern Africa if Jan Smuts had not brushed his critics aside and stopped the Afrikaner Broedebond (brotherhood) from allowing the Nazis to take hold of the entire area from East Africa to what is now Namibia.

What is also astonishing is that Mohandas K Gandhi, who played such a pivotal part in India, had started his legal career in South Africa and was one of the first people to fight against the system of keeping the white race “pure.” Both Churchill and Smuts admired his initiative for peaceful protest but neither particularly liked the man.

This is a book that would appeal to anyone interested in not only the Boer War, but the role that South Africans took in the two World Wars, thanks to their leader, Jan Smuts.

I wonder if we will ever truly appreciate just how much Winston Churchill did for world freedom from what could have been worldwide capture by the Nazis and their allies. But what this book has also given me is the insight into not just these two formidable men in Churchill and Smuts but at the same time a man like Gandhi.

Will we ever again see three men with so much foresight and intelligence prepared to do whatever was necessary to preserve justice and (relative) peace for the world as a whole?

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