MINISTERS
AT WAR
To Margaret, Ben and Seth
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GLOSSARY OF NAMES

These brief notes are provided as an aid to the identification of the people discussed in this book.

**Aitken, William Maxwell, First Baron Beaverbrook (1879–1964):** A Canadian who moved to Britain before World War I, Beaverbrook made a fortune and became proprietor of the *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Express* and the *London Evening Standard* as well as two newspapers in Scotland. He was also an enthusiastic supporter of imperial economic cooperation and strongly supported Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. Nevertheless, Churchill put him in charge first of the Ministry of Aircraft Production and then the Ministry of Supply. Beaverbrook suffered from ill health, and eventually Churchill let him resign. But then Beaverbrook took up a new crusade, “All Help to Russia,” and supported the idea of opening a Second Front in the war.

**Alexander, Albert Victor (1885–1965):** Alexander was a Labour politician who began his career as parliamentary secretary to the British co-operative movement. He served in the second Labour government (1929–1931) as First Lord of the Admiralty, and Churchill returned him to that position in 1940.

**Amery, Leopold (Leo) Charles Maurice Stennett (1873–1955):** A Conservative politician who advocated economic protectionism and cooperation within the British Empire, Amery served as colonial secretary under Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin from 1924 to 1929, but remained
on the backbenches throughout the 1930s, partly because he did not enthusiastically support Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement. On May 7, 1940, he delivered a great speech against Chamberlain that helped lead to the latter’s downfall. A few days later, Churchill appointed him secretary of state for India.

**Anderson, Sir John, First Viscount Waverley (1882–1958):** Anderson, a remarkably effective and efficient civil servant who entered Parliament in 1938 independent of any party, was appointed home secretary and minister of home security by Chamberlain at the outbreak of war. When Churchill took over in May 1940, Churchill asked Anderson to remain in these posts, but he later made him Lord President, with a seat in the War Cabinet, to replace the dying Chamberlain.


**Beaverbrook:** See Aitken, William Maxwell, First Baron Beaverbrook (1879–1964).

**Beveridge, William Henry, Baron Beveridge (1879–1963):** A prickly, ambitious and able academic and civil servant, Beveridge was appointed during the war to head a committee studying the coordination of social services. He turned this small task into a broad investigation of their deficiencies, and in the Beveridge Report made sweeping recommendations for their improvement in postwar Britain. His report caused a sensation.

**Bevin, Ernest (1881–1951):** Bevin, a former carter on the Bristol docks, built the Transport and General Workers’ Union into the largest workers’ organization in Europe during the interwar period. Churchill knew he needed Bevin’s support to make his national coalition government work and so appointed him minister of labor and then promoted him to the
War Cabinet. Churchill judged Bevin and Beaverbrook to be his most dynamic and able colleagues, among an outstanding group.

**Bracken, Brendan Rendall, Viscount Bracken (1901–1958):** Bracken was a Conservative politician with a background in journalism and was devoted to Churchill. When the latter became First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939, he made Bracken his parliamentary private secretary. In 1941 Churchill appointed Bracken to be minister of information.

**Brooke, Alan Francis, First Viscount Alanbrooke (1883–1963):** A highly respected career soldier with much experience both of war and preparing for war, Brooke was appointed by Churchill as commander in chief of home forces during the summer of 1940, and then, in December 1941, as commander of the Imperial General Staff. Soon thereafter Brooke became chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and thus the principal strategic adviser to the War Cabinet. When necessary he stood up to the prime minister.

**Butler, Richard Austen (Rab), Baron Butler of Saffron Walden (1902–1982):** Butler was a Conservative politician who was closely associated with the appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain. In May and June 1940, he supported Halifax, who desired a negotiated peace with Germany. Churchill nevertheless appreciated his parliamentary skills, and far from sacking him, eventually made him minister of education. At this post Butler carried through important reforms.

**Cadogan, Sir Alexander George Montagu (1884–1968):** Climbing to the top position in the Foreign Office, permanent undersecretary, Cadogan advised first Halifax and then his successor as foreign minister, Anthony Eden. He sat in on War Cabinet meetings. And he kept a diary.

**Cecil, James Edward Hubert Gascoyne-, Fourth Marquess of Salisbury (1861–1947):** Belonging to the famous Salisbury political dynasty (his father had been Conservative prime minister), Cecil himself became a Conservative Party grandee and one of Britain's most influential peers. He opposed Chamberlain's appeasement policy. During the war, he led a “watching committee” that played a major role in forcing Chamberlain's resignation.
Chamberlain, Neville (1869–1940): Chamberlain was the Conservative prime minister and architect of the appeasement policies that failed to prevent World War II. He was replaced by Churchill as prime minister on May 10, 1940.

Cripps, Sir (Richard) Stafford (1889–1952): Cripps, a wealthy and successful lawyer who served in the Labour government of 1929–1931, veered far to the political left during the 1930s, alienating the leadership of his party, who expelled him. Churchill appointed him ambassador to Russia in 1940 and brought him into the government in 1942.

Dalton, (Edward) Hugh Neale, Baron Dalton (1887–1962): A strong opponent of appeasement and of Chamberlain, Dalton took part in the most important discussions among the Labour Party leadership about what to do in May 1940. Churchill did not appoint him to the War Cabinet, but rather to the larger cabinet as minister of economic warfare.

Davies, Clement Edward (1884–1962): Davies was a member of Parliament (MP) first of the Liberal Party, then of the National Liberals, but in 1940 he served in the House of Commons as an Independent. He became head of “The Vigilantes,” an anti-Chamberlain parliamentary group that played an important role in bringing down the prime minister. But Churchill did not appoint him to a government post.

Eden, (Robert) Anthony, First Earl of Avon (1897–1977): A Conservative MP, Eden resigned as Chamberlain’s foreign secretary in February 1938 over policy disagreements regarding Italy. Tory rebels who opposed appeasement looked to him for leadership, but he did not provide it. With the outbreak of war, Chamberlain brought him back into the government as dominions secretary. Churchill moved him to the War Office. At the end of 1940, Churchill sent Halifax to Washington, DC, as ambassador and made Eden foreign secretary again.

Greenwood, Arthur (1880–1954): In 1940 Greenwood was deputy leader of the Labour Party. Churchill brought him into the original War Cabinet, where Greenwood played a crucial role opposing Halifax’s proposal that Britain approach Mussolini to find out what Hitler’s terms
would be for a negotiated peace. But Greenwood’s addiction to alcohol destroyed his usefulness, and Churchill sacked him in February 1942.

**Halifax:** See Wood, Edward Frederick Lindley, First Earl of Halifax (1881–1959).

**Hankey, Maurice Pascal Alers, First Baron Hankey (1877–1963):** A career civil servant and adviser to prime ministers from World War I until 1938, Hankey accepted a position in Chamberlain’s government at the outbreak of World War II. He was a strong supporter of appeasement and a Chamberlain loyalist, and not surprisingly, Churchill sacked him in March 1942. He vented in his diary.

**Hoare, Samuel John Gurney, Viscount Templewood (1880–1959):** One of the “Men of Munich,” Hoare was a Conservative politician and Cabinet minister who enthusiastically supported Chamberlain’s appeasement policy. He paid the price. When Churchill took power, he sent Hoare to Spain as British ambassador.

**Hore-Belisha, (Isaac) Leslie, Baron Hore-Belisha (1893–1957):** Hore-Belisha was a National Liberal who served in Chamberlain’s government as minister of war and who began to believe, after Munich, that conflict with Germany was inevitable. He quarreled with leading generals, and Chamberlain tried to move him to the presidency of the Board of Trade. Hore-Belisha declined this post. He hoped Churchill would bring him into his Grand Coalition, but it did not happen. He kept a revealing diary.


**Keyes, Roger John Brownlow, First Baron Keyes (1872–1945):** A former admiral of the fleet and a staunch opponent of appeasement, Keyes wore his old uniform when, on May 8, 1940, as a Conservative MP,
he made a House of Commons speech condemning British military tactics in Norway and praising Churchill.

**Lyttelton, Oliver, First Viscount Chandos (1893–1972):** Lyttelton was a businessman with extensive knowledge of and interests in the metals industry. He was also a friend of Winston Churchill, who brought him into the government in October 1940 as president of the Board of Trade. In February 1942 Lyttelton would succeed Beaverbrook as minister of production.

**Margesson, (Henry) David Reginald, First Viscount Margesson (1890–1965):** Margesson was a Conservative MP who served as government chief whip throughout the 1930s. He was much feared by Conservative backbenchers. He supported Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, yet Churchill kept him as chief whip and then made him minister of war, only to let him go in the reshuffle of February 1942.

**Marquis, Frederick James, First Earl of Woolton (1883–1964):** A successful businessman with a background in settlement work, Woolton became director and chairman of the Lewis Department Store chain. With the outbreak of World War II, Chamberlain appointed him minister of food, although Woolton belonged to no political party. Churchill kept him in that post until 1943, when he appointed him minister of reconstruction.

**Monckton, Walter Turner, First Viscount Monckton of Brenchley (1891–1965):** A friend of Stafford Cripps, and, like Cripps, an extraordinarily successful lawyer, Monckton became the confidant of King Edward VII and yet maintained good relations with the man who succeeded him, King George V. He served in a number of government posts during the war, but refused to make a parliamentary career.

**Morrison, Herbert Stanley, Baron Morrison of Lambeth (1888–1965):** Morrison, a Labour politician who had served in the 1929–1931 Labour government, had ambitions to lead the party and the country, which made him a rival of Clement Attlee and the bête noir of Ernest Bevin. He took part in important Labour Party strategy sessions before and during the Phony War; he also played an important role in bringing down Neville Chamberlain, although he appears to have thought that Halifax, not Churchill, would succeed him. Churchill appointed him first
as minister of supply and later as home secretary, with a seat in the War Cabinet.

Simon, John Allsebrook, First Viscount Simon (1873–1954): Beginning as a Liberal and gaining Cabinet rank in Asquith’s pre–World War I government, Simon moved to the National Liberals in 1931. He served in various Cabinet posts throughout the following decade, rising to become Chamberlain’s chancellor of the exchequer. He strongly backed Chamberlain’s appeasement policy and paid the price when Churchill took over. The new prime minister excluded him from his Cabinet and made him Lord Chancellor, with a seat in the House of Lords.

Sinclair, Archibald Henry Macdonald, First Viscount Thurso (1890–1970): Sinclair was a Liberal MP who had become leader of the party in 1935. He favored rearmament, opposed appeasement, and turned down Chamberlain’s offer of a government post when World War II began. His old friend Churchill offered him the Air Ministry when he became prime minister, and this post Sinclair accepted.

Wood, Edward Frederick Lindley, First Earl of Halifax (1881–1959): Halifax was a Conservative politician who served Chamberlain as foreign secretary after Anthony Eden was forced out. He was considered a “Man of Munich,” but developed hesitations about the appeasement policy after Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. When Chamberlain stepped down, he hoped that Halifax, rather than Churchill, would replace him. Later, Halifax suggested asking the Italians to find out Hitler’s peace terms. Churchill would have none of it and eventually sent him to Washington, DC, as ambassador.

Wood, Sir (Howard) Kingsley (1881–1943): Wood was a Conservative politician who served in various Cabinet-rank posts during the 1930s, most relevantly as minister of air from 1938 to 1940, and then for a short period as Lord Privy Seal. Although he supported appeasement, under his direction British production of aircraft increased dramatically. His role in Chamberlain’s downfall is ambiguous. Churchill made him chancellor of the exchequer, at first without a seat in the War Cabinet. Wood gained his place there in October 1940, but then lost it in the reshuffle of February 1942, although he retained his position as chancellor until his unexpected death in 1943.
Introduction

On May 10, 1940, King George VI of England reluctantly accepted the resignation of his prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, and following Chamberlain’s advice asked First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill to form a new government. The king would have preferred to ask someone else—even though, like most people, he recognized that the First Lord possessed extraordinary qualities and talents. But he did not trust Churchill to control them. He judged him to be unbridled, a loose cannon.

The disgraced Chamberlain did not trust Churchill either. He would have preferred to steer Britain’s highest political post to Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, whom he considered a much steadier personality. But Halifax would not take it, for complicated reasons, while Churchill wanted it badly. During the previous decade Churchill had occupied the political wilderness, shunned by most Conservatives largely because he would not toe the party line of appeasement. Finally, with the outbreak of war, when Churchill’s counsels had proved prescient, Chamberlain grudgingly appointed him First Lord of the Admiralty in charge of the great British Navy. Now came this further elevation. It marked the climax of Churchill’s political rehabilitation and capped his lifetime ambition.

Britain stood in deadly peril at this moment—how deadly, no one, not even the prime-minister-to-be, recognized. Germany, which had taken Round One of the war, by defeating Poland in a matter of weeks, and then Round Two, with lightning attacks that established German control over Scandinavia, had just opened Round Three. Adolf Hitler had just
unleashed a Blitzkrieg upon Luxembourg, Holland, Belgium and France. Panzer divisions were racing through Western Europe and the Luftwaffe roaring above it, and no countervailing force could stop them or even delay them much. Britain and her French ally were taken by surprise; Germany had pushed them back onto their heels. Indeed, France was nearly on her back. Churchill confronted emergency from his first day in office.

This is a book about Winston Churchill and the small group of extraordinary men he selected to help him guide Britain through this great crisis, and about how he and they continued to cope for the next five years, until Germany had been defeated. It is a book about Churchill the politician, and Churchill the manager of men, for he had to inspire and direct and chivy and soothe and manipulate the shifting cast of remarkable individuals who formed his unbeatable team. In these roles he usually succeeded, but not always.

It is a book, too, about relations between and among War Cabinet ministers. Churchill stood at the helm, but then right behind him stood the elegant Anthony Eden, whom he would designate his political heir; and his longtime friend the piratical Canadian-born press baron, Lord Beaverbrook; and the human bulldozer who was head of Britain’s largest trade union, Ernest Bevin; also the unassuming leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee; and Attlee’s rival, the ambitious Herbert Morrison; and the puritanical, high-minded socialist Stafford Cripps, among others. Taken together, these men constituted as tough and as capable a group as has ever governed Britain.

It is a staple of the memoirs of such figures that for five years they formed a matchless band of brothers, and there is more than a grain of truth to this. Had they failed to cooperate, Britain never could have survived the war. In fact, however, even at the most desperate moments—for example, in June 1940, with France on its knees and the British Expeditionary Force cut off at Dunkirk, facing likely extinction, and Britain itself bracing for invasion—the War Cabinet ministers were continually poking and prodding at one another and questioning each other’s judgment. During the wearying years that followed, some of them began to entertain fantasies about claiming the premiership themselves. Two took tentative steps to translate this thought into action. The national emergency did not eclipse personal ambition. For all that they were sometimes a band of brothers, certain of Churchill’s men warred against each other and their leader, even while they were running the war against the Axis Powers.
Meanwhile, in the country as a whole, Britons increasingly thought as the war ground on that the government should level the playing field of life by providing social security in the broad sense of the term to all citizens. They did not want to return to prewar conditions. They wanted a new Britain. Why else fight, and risk death to save it? They wanted the government to guarantee health insurance, old-age insurance, family allowances, free education, decent housing and full employment. But Winston Churchill had little sympathy with this outlook. Because he had limited interest in domestic policy, he failed to understand the power of the building wave of leftist sentiment in his country. He sought only half-heartedly to satisfy it, and therefore he failed to do so. As for the War Cabinet, it split over the desirability of such measures and over how generous the government should be if it adopted them.

Thus ideology divided the band of brothers as much as jealousy, personal distrust and conflicting ambitions did. The ensuing arguments presaged and helped provoke the fractious general election of 1945. Moreover, the growing confidence of the Labour men, and the corresponding decline among Conservatives, provided a forecast of the election’s results, although few grasped this at the time. This book, then, traces not only personal struggles among Churchill’s War Cabinet colleagues, but also an ideological struggle that never ceased—one in which the prime minister played a role and that adumbrated the great Conservative electoral defeat of 1945.

Practically everybody knows that Churchill was a giant to whom we all owe an unpayable debt. This book will not contradict that judgment. Nevertheless, I hope to have twisted the historical kaleidoscope to reveal familiar pieces in unfamiliar patterns. The internal workings of the War Cabinet, with its complex interactions of conflicting personalities and ideologies, and Churchill’s attempts to manage them, and the drama to which the conflicts gave rise, have been too often overlooked. They constitute the main focus of this book. I hope readers will discover in it novel aspects of a story they thought they knew well already. And I hope those who are entirely fresh to the subject will learn much about the remarkable “team of rivals” who steered Britain to victory in World War II, and about the even more remarkable figure who led them.
On Monday morning, May 6, 1940, the British light cruiser HMS *Aurora* cut across the icy waters of Ofotfjord, just offshore from Narvik, a far-northern Norwegian port. Winston Churchill, Britain’s First Lord of the Admiralty, had sent her there nearly a month earlier. Gray and grim she cruised the firth, a menacing portent of the terrible struggle soon to be fought by Great Britain and Germany in the unforgiving waters of the North Atlantic Ocean. On that Monday morning, however, she represented more than a portent to knowledgeable men. All Britain’s hopes for any kind of success in the present early phase of World War II focused upon her, for everywhere else in Norway the British campaign had been disastrous.

*Aurora* served as the flagship of a small fleet of destroyers under the command of Admiral William Boyle, the twelfth Earl of Cork and Orrery. A tough, pugnacious seadog from an ancient Irish aristocratic family, Lord Cork that morning stood upon *Aurora’s* bridge gazing at the shoreline and at the bombed-out skeleton buildings of the little port. He knew well what his primary objective was and how it should be attained. He must launch a frontal amphibious assault upon the ruined settlement whatever the odds; he must kill, capture or disperse the 5,000 German soldiers and sailors who held it. He must do it now before they received reinforcements.

But there were difficulties. The port of Narvik sits on a relatively flat peninsula of land near the end of a long fjord of spectacular beauty. Jagged cliffs and mountains rise up from the water on every side. On May 6, 1940, drifts of snow five feet deep in places covered the high ground; they lay as much as four feet deep on the flat peninsula below. British forecasters...
had predicted that the spring thaw would come two weeks later than usual this year, even as daylight hours grew ever longer. This meant the British could never surprise the Germans holding the port; the darkness did not last long enough. Moreover, conditions on land would be difficult once they fought their way ashore.

The Germans had descended upon Narvik nearly four weeks previously, part of a much larger invasion force that took Norway completely by surprise, and simultaneously Denmark (which surrendered practically without firing a shot). They swooped down upon Norway from the sea and from the sky. They captured Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger, Oslo—and Narvik. Almost wherever they went in Norway they succeeded, sometimes after bitter fighting, sometimes after no fighting at all. Desperately, belatedly, the Norwegian government appealed to the Allies for help. And Britain, which itself had been planning to take Narvik for her own purposes, and whose plan the Germans unwittingly had forestalled by a single day, hastily sent troops without proper ammunition or guns, or camouflage, or training, or even skis and snowshoes. They sent their main force to relieve Trondheim, where a debacle ensued: the Tommies floundered, hip deep in snow, perfect targets, black outlined on white, unable even to dodge as Luftwaffe gunners shot them down. In fact, nearly everywhere that Britons met Germans in battle, their enemy defeated them. Shocked, dismayed, furious with the politicians and strategists who had sent them off to war so unprepared and ill-equipped, those British troops who survived fell back all the way to the ships that had brought them there, and that now would bring them home.

Only in the far north, at the Ofotfjord, after a first Battle of Narvik produced inconclusive results, did British forces in a second encounter score unambiguous victory. There the Royal Navy bottled up the German battle group, denying them access to the open sea. Then the battleship Warspite and nine destroyers sank or disabled every German ship in the fjord and side fjords. German troops, who had arrived in Narvik by land already, and German sailors who had survived the pounding inflicted by British guns and had found their way to shore, or who had scuttled their ships and rowed ashore in lifeboats, now holed up in the little port, supplied mainly by seaplanes.

Lord Cork believed he could have taken the village in a frontal assault one day after the decisive naval battle finished, but at that time he shared command with Major General Pierse J. Macksey, who preferred
a more cautious approach. Macksey proposed a land campaign, which he said could not begin until the snow melted. Reluctantly, Lord Cork stayed his hand. He directed his fleet to shell the Germans instead. Now his targets crouched amid the ruins of the village, cold, hungry, weary, even frightened perhaps—but not hopeless. Their comrades held most of the rest of the country. In time they would come to the rescue. Lord Cork understood, as General Macksey apparently did not, that for Britain time in Norway was running out.

Originally the British had wanted Narvik because from that port they could have stopped shipments of iron ore, an important resource for the enemy war machine that the Germans transported from Sweden down the long Norwegian coast into the Baltic Sea. Had they taken Narvik, Britain would have commanded all northern Europe’s coastal trade. She might have been in a position to stop the German invasion of Norway. Britain’s First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, had pushed hard for the occupation of Narvik, but his colleagues had resisted. Some thought the campaign would be a diversion. Some may simply have lacked the stomach for aggressive action. Eventually they approved Churchill’s plan, but too late. Now the British needed to capture Narvik for an unanticipated reason: to show the world that Germany was not successful everywhere. The government in London waited with increasing impatience for the telegram from Lord Cork saying he had redeemed Britain’s reputation, and their own, by accomplishing this mission at least.

That morning Lord Cork did indeed send a telegram to the Admiralty and War Office. It arrived at 4:21 A.M. In it he confessed that he was writing “with great reluctance,” at the behest of his military colleagues with whom he disagreed. He served now as commander in chief, above General Macksey, but he must take his subordinates’ opinions into account. The message said, in part: “There are insufficient assault landing craft. . . . Men in open boats will be subject to air attack for at least 4 hours. . . . Troops will be unable to dig [in] on account of rocks and frost. . . . There will be no adequate defense [for them].” Lord Cork reported that he would like to launch the assault anyway, and that he believed there was a fair chance of success, but that all his “military officers experienced in war” opposed him. They insisted with General Macksey upon the approach from the ground.

When Winston Churchill and his colleagues at the Admiralty Office read this telegram several hours later in London, they must have ground their teeth.