
By Robert S. Norris

The title is misleading as there was never a race for the atomic bomb between Britain and the United States. Britain had an early start in nuclear research but decided to share crucial information with American officials and stimulated what would become the Manhattan Project. At a certain point Britain, realizing the enormity of the effort, decided to join forces and became a junior partner with the Americans primarily to learn what it could for the post-war period.

Most of the book recounts how development of the atomic bomb looked from the perspective of the British with the focus on Winston Churchill. This is a useful addition to Margaret Gowing’s official histories (1964 and 1974) because of the additional archival sources and recent books that Farmelo has used to flesh out the story.

Churchill’s interest in the atom dated from reading H.G. Wells. Later he relied (perhaps too much) on the advice of Frederick Lindemann, a controversial figure among scientists and government officials. Farmelo covers the main milestones after the discovery of fission in late 1938. European émigré scientists living in Britain first established that a nuclear weapon could be built. The March 1940 memorandum by Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls led to the MAUD committee report in July 1941. This is a crucial period in Farmelo’s argument about a supposed race. During August and September of
1941 this information was conveyed to the Americans and it would strengthen FDR’s resolve to go for the bomb.

Around September 1, 1941, Churchill, according to Farmelo, “became the first national leader to approve the development of a nuclear weapon.” But approval and action were two different things. Very little resulted as the half-hearted program, codenamed “Tube Alloys,” (a special section of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research) was turned over to commercial interests (Imperial Chemicals Industries) much to the dissatisfaction of the scientists. Some research was conducted in university laboratories but virtually nothing was built during the War to enrich uranium or produce plutonium, essential ingredients for an atomic bomb.

On the other side of the Atlantic FDR’s decision led to unprecedented action. Resources were mobilized on a vast scale with an atomic bomb developed, tested, and used in about 1,000 days. Where is the race?

Britain’s actual decision to develop an atomic bomb did not occur until January 1947, authorized in secret, by Prime Minister Atlee (not Churchill) and only made public in May 1948. Churchill was Prime Minister (for a second time, from October 1951 to April 1955) when it was tested in Australia on 3 October 1952.

Churchill oversaw the decision (made on 16 June 1954), to develop and manufacture the hydrogen bomb. British scientists did not know the precise configuration at the time. It took several tries and finally in a series of tests in 1957 and 1958, with Harold Macmillan as PM, Britain achieved success. Farmelo never mentions key participants in the British H-bomb story (e.g., William R.J. Cook, John Corner, Keith
Roberts, Bryan Taylor) or its true significance. There was no American help on the British H-bomb, contrary to Famelo’s claim. But because Britain passed the test of how to make a modern H-bomb the Americans agreed to share design information and much else in a relationship that continues to this day.

A few mistakes crept in but they can be corrected in future editions. Farmelo confuses the Military Policy Committee with the Top Policy Committee (p. 227) and the full Acheson committee with the board of consultants after the War (p. 322). Secretary of War Henry Stimson actually retired on September 21, 1945, his 78th birthday. Farmelo says of Stimson at Potsdam on July 18 that he “was no longer in office and not even an official participant in the conference.” (p. 298) General Groves never directed all of the scientists to leave Los Alamos (p. 322). In a serious oversight in a book about Anglo-American nuclear relations he does not mention the Combined Development Trust or the interesting deputy chair, Sir Charles Hambro.

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