Throughout the 1930s, Winston Churchill was a political pariah. Determined to keep Adolf Hitler mollified, leaders of his own Tory party, including Prime Ministers Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, excluded him from positions of leadership. When he insisted in a speech at Oxford University in 1934 that Germany was arming for war, Churchill was greeted with derisive laughter. In the House of Lords, Baron Ponsonby opined that he had "the greatest possible admiration for Mr. Churchill's Parliamentary powers, his literary powers, and his artistic powers, but I have always felt that in a crisis he is one of the first people who ought to be interned."

During these years, George Orwell (born Eric Blair) was regarded as a minor and rather cranky writer. His friends on the left disliked "Homage to Catalonia," Orwell's firsthand account of the Spanish Civil War, because he claimed that Stalinists were not to be trusted and that leftists lied just as much as those on the right. The book did not sell well, and Orwell spent 1939 tending his garden, ducks and chickens in Hertfordshire.

Orwell’s break with the left, Thomas Ricks (an adviser on national security at the New America Foundation, and the author of "The Generals," "The Gamble" and "Fiasco") suggests, parallels Churchill’s break with the appeasers in the British aristocracy and Tory Party. In "Churchill & Orwell," Ricks recounts the fight of two 20th century giants against the enemies of freedom. His book does not provide new information or fresh interpretations about his subjects, but it’s an elegantly written celebration of two men who faced an existential crisis to their way of life with moral courage — and demonstrated that an individual can make a difference.

Ricks documents Churchill's prescient analysis, his resolve and his skill in rallying the British people when the outlook seemed bleak. In 1937, we learn, Churchill told Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German ambassador to England, that his country would not agree to Hitler’s plan to annex Poland, Ukraine and White Russia. "If you all plunge us into a Great War," he declared, England "will bring the whole world against you like last time."

LATEST ENTERTAINMENT VIDEOS
Churchill was a magnificent war leader, the voice “of will and strength incarnate.” When she heard Churchill’s speech about fighting on the beaches, one Londoner indicated, “I suddenly wasn’t frightened anymore. It was quite amazing.” Orwell, who never met Churchill, thought him the only person in government who could be trusted not to surrender: “What was wanted was chiefly obstinacy, of which Churchill has plenty.”

Ricks acknowledges that Churchill neglected logistics, misunderstood the role of naval aviation, aircraft carriers and submarines, had excessive faith in the British military forces in Asia, got diverted by small operations at the periphery of the Axis, and dragged his feet on a landing in France. Ricks insists, however, that on the big things, he was more often right than wrong and that his “sense of strategic timing” — in buying time to build up the British military, putting his hatred of communism on hold to support the Soviet Union, and awaiting American entry into the war — was excellent.

Like Churchill, Ricks points out, Orwell was energized by the war. But his skepticism about the left was unchanged. “So much of left-wing thought,” he maintained, “is a kind of playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot.” More important, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Orwell gave voice to his disenchantment with communism in “Animal Farm,” a “fairy tale,” Ricks writes, designed to demonstrate that “(violent conspiratorial revolution, led by unconsciously power-hungry people) can only lead to a change of masters.”

Ricks also explains the relevance of “1984” decades after the fall of communism. Driving the Orwell boom, he suggests, is the rise of surveillance states, the use of torture against terrorists, and the existence of “permanent wars.” In Ukraine, Ricks reveals, the pro-Soviet forces sent protestors a text message: “Dear Subscriber,” it warned, “you are registered as a participant in a mass disturbance.” The “dear,” Ricks indicates, “is particularly evocative of the mind-set of Big Brother.”

Ricks singles out as especially prescient the description in “1984” of warfare of limited aims, involving “very small numbers of people, mostly highly trained specialists,” which to one side “means no more than the occasional crash of a rocket bomb which may cause a few scores of deaths.”

As did Churchill, Orwell got some things wrong. He did not anticipate the difficulty governments would have in controlling the flow of information, a reality that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Arab Spring. That said, Ricks is surely right that Orwell now surpasses Churchill “in terms of contemporary influence.”

He is also right to remind us in his fine book that in their words and actions, Churchill and Orwell demonstrated that liberty “is not the product of military action. Rather it is something alive that grows or diminishes every day, in how we think and communicate, how we treat each other in our public discourse, in what we value and reward as a society.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. Email: books@sfchronicle.com

Churchill & Orwell

The Fight for Freedom

By Thomas E. Ricks

(Penguin Press; 339 pages; $28)