

“The End of the War”

The Guardian, November 12, 1918

The war is over, and in a million households fathers and mothers, wives and sisters, will breathe freely, relieved at length of all dread of that curt message which has shattered the hope and joy of so many.

The war is over. The drama is played out. After years of tedium there opened on March 5 a short and sharp fifth act of swift and surprising changes. Our language misses that single word applied by the Greeks to those suddenly and complete changes of fortune which they regarded as appropriate to the final act of a tragic drama.

No historic change of fortune so swift, so pulverising to the loser has occurred since Napoleon's retreat from Moscow as the reversal that began on July 18. And since July 10 18 blow has followed blow with a rapidity which, if it has almost bewildered the victors, must have stupefied the enemy. But it is not of the drama that we would think mainly for the moment, nor even of the problem that the war has opened.

For, if peace between the nations has returned, within each nation there is open or suppressed ferment. The old order in Europe has perished. The new is hardly born, and no one knows what its lineaments will be. To-morrow we shall be brought up against the hard immediate problems of re-establishment. Before we grapple with these, let us give a moment to the review of the position gained and try our best to sum up the result of four tremendous years as it may be measured by the historian. From Waterloo to Mons there elapsed almost 100 years.

The first part of this period was one of peace and progress, industry and optimism. Below the surface were seething forces of democracy and nationalism, and soon these began to break forth to disturb the complacency of statesmen. But for the thinker these forces were full of hope, and the men of the mid-nineteenth century foresaw a better order, a civilised humanity, a race dedicated to the works of peace and the cultivation of a race dedicated to the works of peace and the cultivation of a gentler and yet a nobler life.

Towards the end of the century their optimism gave way to a gloomier view. Unrest and anxiety took hold of the more thoughtful minds. Democracy had everywhere progressed but had not brought healing. The burden of armaments lay heavy on the nations, and the war cloud lowered dark on the horizon.

The main cause of this change was the success of the Prussian system under Bismarck. The year 1870 divides the period of which we have spoken into two nearly equal halves, of progress and hope on the one side, and reaction and apprehension on the other. The union of Germany was, indeed, accepted, even welcomed, by liberally-minded men as the overdue consummation of a long and unhappy political travail, but the mode in which it was accomplished turned out to be more fateful to Germany and the world than the achievement itself.

From 1870 men began to accept the doctrine of blood and iron. Ideas, arguments, appeals to right and justice took a lower place. Force and fraud seemed to make their way, if only men would be thorough in the use of them. The Prussian idea enjoyed all the prestige of immense success, and the pre-eminence of Germany in many fields of learning, backed with this prestige, won its way in the regions of the mind. The idea of humanity receded

in favour of the State, freedom gave way to disciplined and organisation, right to the strong hand, reason to passion, and self-restraint to ambition.

Meanwhile in one country after another there arose the sense of instability. It began to be felt that things could not last as they were. The piled-up armaments were like vast electric accumulators awaiting their discharge. In England these influences penetrated more slowly, but from the time when Germany set out seriously to become a great naval Power we felt that we, too, were being drawn in.

For long years, even to the last, many of us hoped that ours might be the balancing power, so exerted as to deter either side in the great Continental combinations from a fatal plunge. But it was not to be. The Prussian idea swept Germany out of itself and gave to the world the final demonstration of naked deformity. The circumstances of the war were such that, a very few individuals apart, it united all the humanitarian enthusiasm, all the political love of liberty, which nowadays go to the support of peace, in favour of a stern resistance, carried through, at whatever cost, to indubitable victory.

The defeat of Prussianism was rightly stated by Mr. Asquith at the outset as the object which included all others. Prussianism - an idea, a system, not a nation or an army - is hopelessly defeated to-day. It is defeated more completely by internal disruption than by any blow in the field. Its hold on the world's future is gone, and the human mind is empty, swept and garnished, of its worst idol.

That is the real and decisive victory in the war. Into the mind that is swept and garnished the parable tells us that other devils might enter. In fact anarchy - which is disorganised in place of organised force - seems waiting at the door. But anarchy is never more than a transitory evil.

When all is cleared up we believe it will be seen that by the final test as between the doctrines of might and right the foundations of a new world-order have been laid. The old sovereign nation State has destroyed itself, as the feudal nobility destroyed itself in the Wars of the Roses. As that spectacle of prolonged and senseless anarchy made men turn with relief to the order secured by the absolute monarchy, so the anarchy of the international world has forced upon people for the first time as a serious practical proposal the political organisation of civilised mankind.

It is felt to be a choice between the continued risk of mutual destruction in wars which must grow ever more deadly, on the one side, and some organised form of international co-operation on the other. The world has once sacrificed its soul in hecatombs, in masses the mere figures of which will appall future eyes. It is a thing not to be done again without sapping the very vitals of human feeling.

As it is, the loss of capacity in the extinction of the most promising men of a generation is a catastrophe only to be compared with some of the great historic pestilences. We were caught up in the vortex and could not escape. We had to go through it, whatever the sacrifice of life. But if, after this experience, we allow such a thing to recur, we ill repay those who have died for us in the hope of a better order.

If, on the other hand, we buckle to our task we can found a nobler State than any that have gained glory in former wars, a kingdom or, say rather, a commonwealth of man, in which all the great nations that have played their part in this tragedy will have their share. In this we are achieving, not anything out of keeping with human nature, but rather the natural culmination of historic development which is, stage by stage, a movement

towards more complete political organisation, of larger scope and powers, on the whole founded more broadly upon right and leaning less upon force.

The nineteenth century had already built up a higher order than any that its predecessors achieved. The democratic State on the national scale, with its deepened sense of public responsibility, still conserving regard for personal freedom, was the highest political organisation yet known to the world, and the war has proved it tougher and firmer than its autocratic rival. But the States, considered together, were an arch without a keystone, and they fell to pieces. We have now to rebuild them into a world- order, and in doing so, in dispelling fear and hostility between nations, we shall remove the main obstacles to the growth of equal freedom and brotherly comradeship within.

By the hundred thousand young men have died for the hope of a better world. They have opened for us the way. If, as a people, we can be wise and tolerant and just in 100 peace as we have been resolute in war, we shall build them the memorial that they have earned in the form of a world set free from military force, national tyrannies, and class oppressions, for the pursuit of a wider justice in the spirit of a deeper and more human religion.