

# THE WORLD CRISIS

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WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

# THE WORLD CRISIS

1915

BY

THE RT. HON. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, C.H.

FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY

1911 TO 1915

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND VOLUME

**I**N the first volume of this Account I had a long and varied tale to tell: nor was it possible to avoid dealing with many episodes of peace and war necessarily exciting dispute. Still the broad and enduring results were crowned with success, and there was praise and honour for all concerned in their achievement. This second volume deals with a year of ill-fortune to the cause of the Allies. Brilliant opportunities presented themselves in vain; grave mistakes were made, and losses were incurred measureless in their pain. The assignment and the division of the responsibility for these events is a task at once difficult and invidious. Moreover I was for a time an actor exercising an influence or even an authority, sometimes decisive and often potent, upon the unfolding of the tragedy. I was brought by the convictions I held and the course I took into unyielding conflict with two of the most honoured and famous war-figures of our national life—Lord Fisher and Lord Kitchener. Both are now silent for ever. Yet my contention persists, nor could I without insincerity, without concealment, without a woeful surrender of the truth as I see it, fail to make that contention good.

I must therefore at the outset disclaim the position of the historian. It is not for me with my record and special point of view to pronounce a final conclusion. That must be left to others and to other times. But I intend to set forth what I believe to be fair and true; and I present it as a contribution to history of which note should be taken together with other accounts. I cannot expect to alter the fixed and prevailing opinions of this generation. They lived and fought their way through the awful struggle in the light of the knowledge given to them at the time, and their minds are

stamped with its imprint. All I ask is that this Account shall also be placed on record and shall survive as one of the factors upon which the judgment of our children will be founded.

It is absurd to argue that the facts should not be fully published, or that obligations of secrecy are violated by their disclosure in good faith. Thousands of facts have been made public and hundreds of secret matters exposed. A whole library, for instance, has sprung into existence in the last five years about the Dardanelles Campaign and the circumstances which led to it. All the principal actors have told their stories, and many minor ones. Lord Fisher has published two volumes in which may be read not only his official memoranda, but even the full record of his personal interventions in the secret discussion of the War Committee. Lord Kitchener's biographer has printed whatever documents he considered necessary to the case he was unfolding, including even extracts from my own Cabinet papers. Sir Ian Hamilton has published in the fullest detail his records and diaries. Major-General C. E. Callwell, Director of Military Operations at the time, has written what purports to be a history of the Dardanelles. The Official Naval Historian and the Official Historian of the Commonwealth of Australia, with access to every form of secret information, have traversed the whole ground, dealing with every episode and quoting or summarising every important order or telegram for which I am answerable, and all other confidential papers which they considered relevant. The Royal Commission on the Dardanelles has issued its lengthy and searching report. There are at least twenty other works of importance and repute in the English language alone, professing to deal authoritatively with the whole subject.

Upon me more than any other person the responsibility for the Dardanelles and all that it involved has been cast. Upon me fell almost exclusively the fierce war-time censures

of Press and Public. Upon me alone among the high authorities concerned was the penalty inflicted—not of loss of office, for that is a petty thing—but of interruption and deprivation of control while the fate of the enterprise was still in suspense. In these circumstances it is my intention to set forth the facts as they are known to me without bitterness, but without compunction, seeking no offence, but concealing no essential.

It is certainly not my purpose to shift or shirk my responsibility, or to set upon other shoulders burdens which are my own. On the contrary, as will be seen, I accept the fullest responsibility for all that I did and had the power to do. I take also my share for the unforeseeable consequences of these actions. But I wish to define and recount exactly what that share has been, and what those actions were, and to do this not in the easily turned language of the aftertime, but as far as possible in the actual operation orders and counsels given by me at the time and *before* the event.

Concerning the more general aspects of the war on which this volume touches, I am equally conscious of running counter to many established opinions, to the dominant military doctrines of those days, and to some extent to the naval performance. I cannot therefore expect to do more than submit the convictions by which I was actuated, and in which I still reside, to the consideration of my countrymen. I cannot ask them to share my views. I am content that they should know them. But here again I shall not use the light of after knowledge, but shall rest exclusively upon what was put on record in the stern days of war.

Documents written at the time and before the event are the only foundation upon which the judgment of history can be erected. They alone reveal the perplexities of the situation at the moment. They alone show how far it was understood. By their aid we can recall the light which then played over the immense battlefield with partial fleeting

gleams. We can revive again and try to gauge the pressures under which the men responsible lived, and from which action emerged. We can not only discern the points where judgment was right or wrong, but whether such judgment, right or wrong, was reasonable or even inevitable at the time and with the knowledge of the time. In laying bare the processes of thought upon this gigantic, obscure and uncertain war situation I expose myself to an ordeal to which, so far as I am aware, no responsible actor in these events has yet been subjected. Many suggestions or ideas will be found which later and fuller knowledge may discredit. There may be apparent changes of views and aims. There may be inconsistencies or contradictions. For all these the reader must make allowance, remembering how easy it would be to dress up a tale in the light of its results, and how hard it is to build it from authentic documents written while these results were lapped in the mysteries of the unknown future, while every fact was doubtful and disputable, while hazard intervened at every stage and even the most hard-wrought conclusion was little more than a guess.

I must in conclusion record my thanks to the numerous friends who have most kindly assisted me in the preparation of this account by placing material at my disposal or by checking and correcting the proofs, and in particular to Vice-Admiral Sir Thomas Jackson who, as in the previous volume, has given me the benefit of his professional knowledge.

*Ernest S. Churchill*



*August 13, 1923.*

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## CHAPTER I

### THE DEADLOCK IN THE WEST

The Year 1915—Its Lost Opportunities—The Chain of Commanding Causation—The Continuous Front—Frontal Attacks—The War of Exhaustion—Slaughter or Manœuvre—No Clearing House of Ideas—The Mechanical Deadlock—Monitors and Tanks—Smoke—The Eastern Front—The Opening Battles—The Winter Campaign—Failure of the Russian Munitions—Impending Disasters—The Last Resource of Russia—Amphibious Solutions—The Northern Flank—The Southern Flank—The Flexibility of Sea Power—The Great Amphibian.

THE year 1915 was disastrous to the cause of the Allies and to the whole world. By the mistakes of this year the opportunity was lost of confining the conflagration within limits which though enormous were not uncontrolled. Thereafter the fire roared on till it burnt itself out. Thereafter events passed very largely outside the scope of conscious choice. Governments and individuals conformed to the rhythm of the tragedy, and swayed and staggered forward in helpless violence, slaughtering and squandering on ever-increasing scales, till injuries were wrought to the structure of human society which a century will not efface, and which may conceivably prove fatal to the present civilisation. But in January, 1915, the terrific affair was still not unmanageable. It could have been grasped in human hands and brought to rest in righteous and fruitful victory before the world was exhausted, before the nations were broken, before the empires were shattered to pieces, before Europe was ruined.

It was not to be. Mankind was not to escape so easily from the catastrophe in which it had involved itself. Pride was everywhere to be humbled, and nowhere to receive its satisfaction. No splendid harmony was to crown the wonderful achievements. No prize was to reward the sacrifices

of the combatants. Victory was to be bought so dear as to be almost indistinguishable from defeat. It was not to give even security to the victors. There never was to be 'The silence following great words of Peace.'<sup>1</sup> To the convulsions of the struggle must succeed the impotent turmoil of the aftermath. Noble hopes, high comradeship and glorious daring were in every nation to lead only to disappointment, disillusion and prostration. The sufferings and impoverishment of peoples might arrest their warfare, the collapse of the defeated might still the cannonade, but their hatreds continue unappeased and their quarrels are still unsettled. The most complete victory ever gained in arms has failed to solve the European problem or remove the dangers which produced the war.

Although this account pretends to deal only with a partial aspect of the immense theme, it will follow throughout, as I conceive, the pathway on which footsteps were decisive. In the vast tangle of arguments, here will be found the unraveling thread. In the clash, overbalancing or equipoise of gigantic forces, here were the determining factors. Amid increasing chaos, here lay the potential dominants. Much action and the play of forces even on a huge scale and with enormous material effects is often irrelevant, and counts for little or nothing in the final result: but along the chain of commanding causation even the smallest events are vital. It is these which should be studied and pondered over; for in them is revealed the profound significance of human choice and the sublime responsibility of men. No one can tell that he may not some day set a stone rolling or take or neglect some ordinary step which in its consequences will alter the history of the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the old year closed a complete deadlock existed between the great combatants in the West by land and by sea.

<sup>1</sup> Rupert Brooke—his last and most pregnant line.

The German fleet remained sheltered in its fortified harbours, and the British Admiralty had discovered no way of drawing it out. The trench lines ran continuously from the Alps to the sea, and there was no possibility of manœuvre. The Admirals pinned their faith to the blockade; the Generals turned to a war of exhaustion, and to still more dire attempts to pierce the enemy's front. All the wars of the world could show nothing to compare with the continuous front which had now been established. Ramparts more than 350 miles long, ceaselessly guarded by millions of men, sustained by thousands of cannon, stretched from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea. The Germans had tried in October and November to break through while these lines were still weak and thin. They had failed with heavy losses. The French and British Headquarters had still to be instructed in the defensive power of barbed wire and entrenched machine guns.

For more than forty years frontal attacks had been abandoned on account of the severity of modern fire. In the Franco-German War the great German victories had been won by wide turning movements executed on one flank or the other by considerable forces. In the Russo-Japanese War this method was invariably pursued by the victors. Thus at Liao-yang it was General Kuroki's army which turned the Russian left; and at Mukden General Nogi's army brought specially from Port Arthur turned the Russian right. It was certain that frontal attacks unaccompanied by turning movements on the flank would be extremely costly and would probably fail. But now, in France and Flanders for the first time in recorded experience there were no flanks to turn. The turning movement, the oldest manœuvre in war, became impossible. Neutral territory or salt water barred all further extension of the front, and the great armies lay glaring at each other at close quarters without any true idea of what to do next.

It was in these circumstances that the French High Com-

mand, carrying with them the British, turned again to the forlorn expedient of the frontal attack which had been discarded in the bitter experiences of the past. Meanwhile, the power of modern weapons had doubled and trebled since the Russo-Japanese War, and was increasing almost daily. Moreover, the use of barbed wire and the consequent need of prolonged bombardment to destroy it, effectually prevented any chance of surprise. There existed at this period no means of taking the offensive successfully in France: the centre could not be pierced, and there were no flanks to turn. Confronted with this deadlock, military art remained dumb; the Commanders and their General Staffs had no plan except the frontal attacks which all their experience and training had led them to reject; they had no policy except the policy of exhaustion.

No war is so sanguinary as the war of exhaustion. No plan could be more unpromising than the plan of frontal attack. Yet on these two brutal expedients the military authorities of France and Britain consumed, during three successive years, the flower of their national manhood. Moreover, the dull carnage of the policy of exhaustion did not even apply equally to the combatants. The Anglo-French offensives of 1915, 1916 and 1917 were in nearly every instance, and certainly in the aggregate, far more costly to the attack than to the German defence. It was not even a case of exchanging a life for a life. Two, and even three, British or French lives were repeatedly paid for the killing of one enemy, and grim calculations were made to prove that in the end the Allies would still have a balance of a few millions to spare. It will appear not only horrible but incredible to future generations that such doctrines should have been imposed by the military profession upon the ardent and heroic populations who yielded themselves to their orders.

It is a tale of the torture, mutilation or extinction of millions of men, and of the sacrifice of all that was best and noblest in

an entire generation. The crippled, broken world in which we dwell to-day is the inheritor of these awful events. Yet all the time there were ways open by which this slaughter could have been avoided and the period of torment curtailed. There were regions where flanks could have been turned; there were devices by which fronts could have been pierced. And these could have been discovered and made mercifully effective, not by any departure from the principles of military art, but simply by the true comprehension of those principles and their application to the actual facts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Battles are won by slaughter and manœuvre. The greater the general, the more he contributes in manœuvre, the less he demands in slaughter. The theory which has exalted the 'bataille d'usure' or 'battle of wearing down' into a foremost position, is contradicted by history and would be repulsed by the greatest captains of the past. Nearly all the battles which are regarded as masterpieces of the military art, from which have been derived the foundation of states and the fame of commanders, have been battles of manœuvre in which very often the enemy has found himself defeated by some novel expedient or device, some queer, swift, unexpected thrust or stratagem. In many such battles the losses of the victors have been small. There is required for the composition of a great commander not only massive common sense and reasoning power, not only imagination, but also an element of legerdemain, an original and sinister touch, which leaves the enemy puzzled as well as beaten. It is because military leaders are credited with gifts of this order which enable them to ensure victory and save slaughter that their profession is held in such high honour. For if their art were nothing more than a dreary process of exchanging lives, and counting heads at the end, they would rank much lower in the scale of human esteem.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are many kinds of manœuvres in war, some only of which take place upon the battlefield. There are manœuvres far to the flank or rear. There are manœuvres in time, in diplomacy, in mechanics, in psychology; all of which are removed from the battlefield, but react often decisively upon it, and the object of all is to find easier ways, other than sheer slaughter, of achieving the main purpose. The distinction between politics and strategy diminishes as the point of view is raised. At the summit true politics and strategy are one. The manœuvre which brings an ally into the field is as serviceable as that which wins a great battle. The manœuvre which gains an important strategic point may be less valuable than that which placates or overawes a dangerous neutral. We suffered grievously at the beginning of the war from the want of a common clearing house where these different relative values could be established and exchanged. A single prolonged conference between the allied chiefs, civil and martial, in January, 1915, might have saved us from inestimable misfortune. Nothing could ever be thrashed out by correspondence. Principals must be brought together, and plans concerted in common. Instead each allied state pursued in the main its own course, keeping the others more or less informed. The armies and navies dwelt in every country in separate compartments. The war problem, which was all one, was tugged at from many different and disconnected standpoints. War, which knows no rigid divisions between French, Russian and British Allies, between Land, Sea and Air, between gaining victories and alliances, between supplies and fighting men, between propaganda and machinery, which is, in fact, simply the sum of all forces and pressures operative at a given period, was dealt with piecemeal. And years of cruel teaching were necessary before even imperfect unifications of study, thought, command and action were achieved. The men of the Beginning must not be judged wholly by the light of the End. All had to learn and all had to suffer. But



it was not those who learned the slowest who were made to suffer most.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mechanical not less than strategic conditions had combined to produce at this early period in the war a deadlock both on sea and land. The strongest fleet was paralysed in its offensive by the menace of the mine and the torpedo. The strongest army was arrested in its advance by the machine gun. On getting into certain positions necessary for offensive action, ships were sunk by under-water explosions, and soldiers were cut down by streams of bullets. This was the evil which lay at the root of all our perplexities. It was no use endeavouring to remedy this evil on sea by keeping the ships in harbour, or on land by squandering the lives and valour of endless masses of men. The mechanical danger must be overcome by a mechanical remedy. Once this was done, both the stronger fleet and the stronger armies would regain their normal offensive rights. Until this were done, both would be baffled and all would suffer. If we master the fact that this was the crux of the war problem, as it was plainly apparent from the end of 1914 onward, the next steps in thought will be found equally simple. Something must be discovered which would render ships immune from the torpedo, and make it unnecessary for soldiers to bare their breasts to the machine-gun hail. This very definite evil and ugly fact that a torpedo or mine would blow a hole in the bottom of a ship, and that any one bullet out of countless streams discharged by machinery would fatally pierce the body of a man, was not one which could be ignored. It must be conquered if the war was to progress and victory to be won. The remedy when stated appeared to be so simple that it was for months or even years scouted and disregarded by many of the leading men in both the great fighting professions.

*Reduced to its rudiments, it consisted in interposing a thin plate of steel between the side of the ship and the approaching*