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A HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Volume One: 1900–1933

MARTIN GILBERT

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INTRODUCTION

How like a paradise the world would be, flourishing
in joy and rest, if men would cheerfully conspire in
affection, and helpfully contribute to each other's
content: and how like a savage wilderness now it is,
when, like wild beasts, they vex and persecute, worry
and devour each other.

ISAAC BARLOW, Doctor of Divinity
Sermon, *Works*, 1683

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAS witnessed some of humanity's greatest achievements and some of its worst excesses. By any scale of values it has been a century of improvement in the quality of life for millions of people, yet also one of decline in many parts of the globe.

Every twentieth-century historian will have particular perspectives on a period so rich in diversity of experience. Given the confines of an 846-page book covering the century up to 1933, and a limit of three volumes for the whole century, not much more than twenty-five pages can be devoted, on average, to any one year. The choice of topics, the stresses, the episodes and the focus must be personal. I have tried to give a fair balance of the different powers, regions and conflicts.

My focus as the century starts is on the empires and ideologies which ruled or controlled so much of the world at that time, or sought to control it. In the coming decades these empires, dominated in Europe by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, were to be defeated, fragmented or transformed, some by war and some by revolution, some into dictatorships and others into parliamentary democracies. Yet even after war and revolution

had mauled them, Germany and Russia struggled to remain at the centre of the world stage.

When the century began, some of its future tyrants were already alive, and had embarked upon their destructive careers; science and medicine were making enormous strides forward; the motorcar was in its infancy, and within a decade, aircraft would take to the skies. As in previous centuries, the value placed on human life by religion and custom was almost daily confronted by the savageries of war.

This history is one in which the clash of nations and their alliances, the strivings of empires and their collapse, and the struggles of nationalities and national groups, are central to the narrative, as they are central to the century itself. No year passed without soldiers and civilians being killed in war, or struggling to recover from its ravages. By chance, while writing the chapter which includes the Armenian massacres of 1915, I walked through the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem; there, maps pasted on the walls of houses and courtyards showed the towns and villages throughout Asia Minor in which the Armenians had been massacred. 'It is called the century of the common man,' wrote Winston Churchill, 'because in it the common man has suffered most.'

The often tragic fate of the 'common man', and woman and child, runs like a dark thread through these pages. There are also golden threads among them – the courage and perseverance of innumerable individuals, and the assertion of the equal rights of all nations, and of the rights of the individual, against the frequently crushing burdens of State oppression and military tyranny.

By 1933, air power had added another dimension of terror, presaging a time, the poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote, when 'Fear will be synonymous with Flight'. Yet that same invention of flight also brought with it great opportunities, as did most of the inventions of each decade. For example, the Bosch magneto, a small but crucial component in the working of the internal combustion engine, was essential if cars and lorries were to run at all. Without the mobility it provided, the continuing warmaking powers of the combatants would have been seriously diminished after 1914, and the domestic and commercial vehicles, which added so much to commerce and leisure once the war was over, unthinkable.

Coal, and fuel oil, which drove the destructive machinery of two world wars, likewise fuelled many of the improvements and comforts of daily life: as I write these words, more than 20 million barrels of oil are being con-

sumed in the world every day, one third of them in the United States. Also in the twentieth century, nuclear power was to reveal its destructive and constructive sides; and, like so many of the century's scientific and industrial advances, to create massive problems of pollution and waste disposal. The planet was a much less crowded, cleaner and less scarred one when the century began than as it draws to its close. The ocean floor has suffered from the discarded detritus and rubbish of war, and even the atmosphere above the planet is crowded with man-made satellites, space stations, and the debris of space exploration. These add a new dimension even to Byron's caustic reflection of two hundred years ago:

Man marks the earth with ruin – his control
Stops with the shore.

I have tried in this volume to indicate the national and international efforts by which the human race sought to control its own destiny and regulate its conflicts. Treaties and agreements, promises and armistices, seemed in any year or decade to be the pointers of hope for the future. They are an integral part of this narrative. Some of them are international treaties, some were signed between a group of States, others between two States, others by would-be States and national groups and autonomous regions. The Müritzsteg Programme of 1904 which attempted to resolve Balkan conflicts, the Treaty of Portsmouth of 1905 following the Russo-Japanese war, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which promised the Jews a National Home in Palestine, the decisions of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the London Ultimatum of 1921, the Geneva Protocol of 1924, the Nettuno Conventions of 1928 settling the dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia over Dalmatia, the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 in which war itself was outlawed: these were only a few of the pledges and agreements that brought, every year, every month, and sometimes even at weekly intervals, a manifestation of hope in some region of the world. Often prompted by suffering and conflict, much was expected from these solemn instruments of diplomacy and negotiation.

The borders of new or established nation States are also a theme of this work: the battles to secure them, the plans to preserve them, and the designs to change them. The century began with imperialism in the ascendant, and yet already under daily threat. As empires tried to overcome that threat, national movements devised means of subverting them. Lines on the map, and regions remote from the centres of power, became the locations of

national passions and international wars. Places that one is hard pressed to locate in an atlas without the use of a good gazetteer were, for a few months, or a few weeks, the centre of attention and the focal point of ambition and dissent. A small port, an obscure mountain pass, a remote monastery, an unimpressive stream, focused for a short while the patriotic hopes and nervous apprehensions of millions of people and their leaders.

The First World War, which forms the watershed of the years covered in this volume, was fought predominantly by the European empires, each of which had established, during the second half of the nineteenth century, commercial dominance and territorial control over much of the globe. In the last years of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth these efforts to assert imperial control led to repeated wars against the local populations, mostly in Africa, but also (as the century opened) in China. The rivalries between the great industrialized and militarized nations were also to pit their peoples against each other. Starting with the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, this rivalry reached a terrible climax ten years later, with the outbreak of the First World War. At its outset a European war, it was to draw in both Japan and the United States, as well as the distant self-governing Dominions of the British Empire.

The confidence generated by industrial progress, mass industrial production, and the success of Empire-building, gave the European powers, the United States, and (increasingly) Japan, a sense that they controlled, or ought to control, the destinies of peoples not blessed with similar advantage, materially or technologically. As such advances increased – wireless telegraphy is one of the early achievements of the twentieth century – so the confidence of the Powers increased. Yet Europe's optimism in the nineteenth century, generated by tremendous effort, victories overseas, and economic expansion, was to be confronted by a very different reality.

It was Winston Churchill, who had just experienced war in three imperial conflicts – in India, the Sudan and South Africa – who warned publicly in 1901: 'The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of kings.' Not only war – and the genocide that sometimes accompanies war – but assassination, terrorism, and later even the heavy death toll generated by the motorcar – were to be grim counters to progress in the medical, technological and environmental sciences, and the civilizing influences of the arts.

The empires which dominated the world when the century began have all dissolved, some more recently than others. The Soviet Union, successor

to the Russian Empire of the Tsars, survived into the final decade of the century. Other national groupings, such as Yugoslavia, came into being as the century moved forward, but have likewise dissolved. On 19 December 1996, *The Times* listed the diplomats who had attended a memorial service in London on the previous day. They included the Ambassadors of Macedonia, Croatia, Albania, Lithuania and Ukraine, and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Slovak Republic. None of these six countries existed as an independent State in 1900. Only one – Albania – was independent by 1914 and only one more – Lithuania – by the time this volume ends in 1933.

The ever-changing, ever-renewing drama on the world stage is the focus of this volume. Episodes in one decade reflect those of another, personalities take nations in their grip, ideologies enforce discipline and sacrifice, propaganda heightens, and knowledge questions the demands of one nation upon another. Revolutions and revolutionaries everywhere strove to change the old order, and in the process often did not respect the rights which even the worst of the old orders had established. Indeed, the secret police regimes of the old order were not necessarily any worse, and were often more benign, than those by which they were replaced in the hope of a better tomorrow.

Everywhere mankind strove, and continues to strive for that better tomorrow, while not always preserving what has been achieved for today. The 'common man', the ordinary citizen, the soldier, the prisoner and the refugee are usually anonymous, yet it remains the century in which their lives have been transformed the most, sometimes for the better, sometimes very much for the worse. Even so, as the century ends, there are still those national leaders in the world who believe that they can improve the lot of their people, and that they can do so, not at any one else's expense, but in harmony with the common good.

It was the poet Thomas Hardy who wrote, in disillusionment, after the First World War:

After two thousand years of Mass
We've got as far as poison gas.

This history explores the way in which the twentieth century, the culmination of many centuries of political and social evolution, was not the inevitable progress towards perfection that so many fighters for truth in previous centuries had assumed it would be.

The twentieth century began – as it is likely to end – with war being

fought somewhere on the globe, with troops gathered in mortal combat, and with death and injury reported daily in the newspapers. On the day I handed in the first draft of this volume to the publishers, the morning newspapers reported the death of a hundred people, including twenty civilians, in several villages in Colombia, in battles that were being fought between government forces and 'left-wing guerrillas'. There was also a news item of a total death toll, over a three-year period, of as many as ninety thousand soldiers and civilians in the war between Russia and the would-be breakaway region of Chechnya. That day, the newspapers also reported the death on the roads, in Britain, in a single car crash, of six young people aged between seventeen and twenty-two. Two of them were the grandchildren of the First World War poet Siegfried Sassoon.

On 27 July 1996, when a minute's silence was held in the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta to commemorate the civilian killed a few days earlier by a bomb, a television commentator, Bonnie Anderson, remarked that the occasion was 'a grim reminder of what is becoming life and death in the twentieth century'. In looking at the extraordinary achievements of the century, as well as its terrible failures, the reader seeking an uplifting theme may still be forced to ask, as one reader of this book did in its early stages: 'And has it really been the century of war?'

Merton College
Oxford
1 May 1997

CHAPTER ONE

1900

A most gratifying demonstration of the common ties
which bind mankind in one great brotherhood.

OTTAWA FIRE RELIEF COMMITTEE
1900

WELCOMING THE NEW CENTURY, a writer to *The Times* expressed the hope, 'May it be a fortunate one for our Sovereign and her people'. Even as he wrote his letter, imperial wars were being fought on two continents: in Africa and in Asia. In South Africa, the Boer War was entering its eleventh week. The Boers, in their two independent republics, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, had taken on the might of the British Empire in neighbouring Cape Colony and Natal. Fearing Britain's expansionist policies towards their two republics, the Boers had launched their first attacks into British territory at a time when there were only 12,000 British soldiers stationed in South Africa. As the century opened, and Britain expected a rapid reversal of its military defeats, British newspapers reported the gifts which private companies were sending out to the troops, including 1000 barrels of stout, and 5000 tablets of Lifebuoy Royal disinfectant soap.

In the first flush of victory, the Boers had laid siege to the British garrisons inside the towns of Mafeking and Ladysmith. The number of British troops seeking to lift these two sieges, to drive the Boers back, and to defeat their two republics, was increased during the course of a year to almost a quarter of a million. This was the largest number of British troops to have been sent so far from home – 7000 miles by sea – since the Crimean War half a century earlier. Each passenger liner that sailed from Britain carried further volunteers. Reinforcements for the British war effort also came from across

the British Empire, from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, India and Ceylon: more than thirty thousand men in all. Britons living in South Africa – the Uitlanders – also joined in the battles against the Boers. In December, a telegram from the town of Dawson City – in the remote frozen north of Canada – to the Canadian Minister of Defence in Ottawa reported that four former policemen had begun to walk 400 miles across the snow and ice to where they could then travel a further thousand miles by rail and ship to Victoria, British Columbia, at their own expense, ‘in the hope of being in time to join the forces in South Africa’.

Among those who witnessed the war in South Africa was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who for several years had been leading the struggle for Indian rights in Natal. Determined to show that the despised ‘coolie’ labourers from India could render good service, on the outbreak of the war he helped form an Indian Ambulance Corps of more than a thousand South African Indians. Their task was to help the wounded on both sides. ‘To carry the wounded seven or eight miles was part of our ordinary routine,’ Gandhi later wrote. ‘But sometimes we had to carry badly wounded soldiers and officers over much longer distances up to twenty-five miles.’ He added: ‘We were only too willing to enter the danger zone, and had never liked to remain outside it.’

Gandhi also recalled, with pride, the story of a fellow Indian who was with the besieged British troops inside Ladysmith. His name was Parbhu Singh. Before the war he had been the servant of an Englishman:

The most dangerous and most responsible work was assigned to Parbhu Singh, who was called a ‘coolie’. On a hill near Ladysmith the Boers had stationed a field-gun whose operations destroyed many buildings and even occasioned some loss of life. An interval of a minute or two must pass before a shell which had been fired from the gun reached a distant objective. If the besieged got even such a short notice, they could take cover before the shell dropped in the town and thus save themselves.

Parbhu Singh was to sit perched up in a tree all the time that the gun was working, with his eyes fixed on the hill, and would ring a bell the moment he observed a flash. On hearing the bell the residents of Ladysmith instantly took cover and saved themselves from the deadly cannon-ball whose approach was thus announced.

The officer in charge of Ladysmith, in eulogizing the invaluable services rendered by Parbhu Singh, stated that he worked so zealously that not