The Gathering Storm

Winston Churchill
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THE GATHERING STORM

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One of the most fascinating works of history ever written, Winston Churchill’s monumental The Second World War is a six-volume account of the struggle of the Allied powers in Europe against Germany and the Axis. Told through the eyes of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, The Second World War is also the story of one nation’s singular, heroic role in the fight against tyranny. Pride and patriotism are evident everywhere in Churchill’s dramatic account and for good reason. Having learned a lesson at Munich that they would never forget, the British refused to make peace with Hitler, defying him even after France had fallen and after it seemed as though the Nazis were unstoppable. Churchill remained unbowed throughout, as did the people of Britain in whose determination and courage he placed his confidence.

Patriotic as Churchill was, he managed to maintain a balanced impartiality in his description of the war. What is perhaps most interesting, and what lends the work its tension and emotion, is Churchill’s inclusion of a significant amount of primary material. We hear his retrospective analysis of the war, to be sure; but we are also presented with memos, letters, orders, speeches, and telegrams that give a day-by-day account of the reactions—both mistaken and justified—to the unfolding drama. Strategies and counterstrategies develop to respond to Hitler’s ruthless conquest of Europe, his planned invasion of England, and
his treacherous assault on Russia. It is a mesmerizing account of the crucial decisions that have to be made with imperfect knowledge and an awareness that the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

The Gathering Storm is the first volume of The Second World War. In some ways a continuation of The World Crisis, Churchill’s history of World War I, The Gathering Storm is his attempt to come to grips with the terrible circumstances that gave rise to Nazi Germany and a second, even more destructive world conflict. As he notes in his preface, Churchill was perhaps the only person who held such prominent positions of power in both world wars, so he is remarkably well-qualified to tell the tragic story of war to peace to war. The Gathering Storm considers the stipulations and consequences of the Treaty of Versailles, the rise of Adolf Hitler, the capitulation at Munich and the entry of the British into the war. The volume is pervaded by Churchill’s somber feeling that the Second World War was largely a senseless and avoidable conflict, but it sets the stage for the heroism and glory that are to follow.

Churchill won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953 due in no small part to this awe-inspiring work.

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Preface

I MUST REGARD THESE VOLUMES of The Second World War as a continuation of the story of the First World War which I set out in The World Crisis, The Eastern Front, and The Aftermath. Together, if the present work is completed, they will cover an account of another Thirty Years’ War.

I have followed, as in previous volumes, as far as I am able, the method of Defoe’s Memoirs of a Cavalier, in which the author hangs the chronicle and discussion of great military and political events upon the thread of the personal experiences of an individual, I am perhaps the only man who has passed through both the two supreme cataclysms of recorded history in high Cabinet office. Whereas, however, in the First World War I filled responsible but subordinate posts, I was for more than five years in this second struggle with Germany the Head of His Majesty’s Government. I write, therefore, from a different standpoint and with more authority than was possible in my earlier books.

Nearly all my official work was transacted by dictation to secretaries. During the time I was Prime Minister, I issued the memoranda, directives, personal telegrams, and minutes which amount to nearly a million words. These documents, composed from day to day under the stress of events and with the knowledge available at the moment, will no doubt show many shortcomings. Taken together,
they nevertheless give a current account of these
tremendous events as they were viewed at the time by one
who bore the chief responsibility for the war and policy of
the British Commonwealth and Empire. I doubt whether any
similar record exists or has ever existed of the day-to-day
conduct of war and administration. I do not describe it as
history, for that belongs to another generation. But I claim
with confidence that it is a contribution to history which will
be of service to the future.

These thirty years of action and advocacy comprise and
express my life-effort, and I am content to be judged upon
them. I have adhered to my rule of never criticising any
measure of war or policy after the event unless I had before
expressed publicly or formally my opinion or warning about
it. Indeed in the after-light I have softened many of the
severities of contemporary controversy. It has given me
pain to record these disagreements with so many men
whom I liked or respected; but it would be wrong not to lay
the lessons of the past before the future. Let no one look
down on those honourable, well-meaning men whose
actions are chronicled in these pages, without searching his
own heart, reviewing his own discharge of public duty, and
applying the lessons of the past to his future conduct.

It must not be supposed that I expect everybody to agree
with what I say, still less that I only write what will be
popular. I give my testimony according to the lights I follow.
Every possible care has been taken to verify the facts; but
much is constantly coming to light from the disclosure of
captured documents or other revelations which may
present a new aspect to the conclusions which I have
drawn. This is why it is im¬portant to rely upon authentic
contemporary records and the expressions of opinion set
down when all was obscure.
One day President Roosevelt told me that he was asking publicly for suggestions about what the war should be called. I said at once “The Unnecessary War.” There never was a war more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle. The human tragedy reaches its climax in the fact that after all the exertions and sacrifices of hundreds of millions of people and of the victories of the Righteous Cause, we have still not found Peace or Security, and that we He in the grip of even worse perils than those we have surmounted. It is my earnest hope that pondering upon the past may give guidance in days to come, enable a new generation to repair some of the errors of former years and thus govern, in accordance with the needs and glory of man, the awful unfolding scene of the future.

Winston Spencer Churchill
Chartwell
Westerham
Kent
March 1948
Acknowledgments

I HAVE BEEN GREATLY ASSISTED in the establishment of the story in its military aspect by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall; in naval matters by Commodore G. R. G. Alien; and on European and general questions by Colonel F. W. Deakin, of Wadham College, Oxford, who also helped me in my work Marlborough: His Life and Times. I have had much assistance from Sir Edward Marsh in matters of diction. I must in addition make my acknowledgments to the very large numbers of others who have kindly read these pages and commented upon them.

Lord Ismay has also given me his invaluable aid, and with my other friends will continue to do so in the future.

I record my obligations to His Majesty’s Government for permission to reproduce the text of certain official documents of which the Crown copyright is legally vested in the Controller of His Majesty’s Stationery Office.
Moral of the Work

In War: Resolution
In Defeat: Defiance
In Victory: Magnanimity
In Peace: Good Will
Theme of the Volume

How the English-speaking peoples through their unwisdom, carelessness, and good nature allowed the wicked to rearm
From War to War
The Follies of the Victors

AFTER THE END of the World War of 1914 there was a deep conviction and almost universal hope that peace would reign in the world. This heart’s desire of all the peoples could easily have been gained by steadfastness in righteous convictions, and by reasonable common sense and prudence. The phrase “the war to end war” was on every lip, and measures had been taken to turn it into reality. President Wilson, wielding, as was thought, the authority of the United States, had made the conception of a League of Nations dominant in all minds. The British delegation at Versailles moulded and shaped his ideas into an instrument which will for ever constitute a milestone in the hard march of man. The victorious Allies were at that time all-powerful, so far as their outside enemies were concerned. They had to face grave internal difficulties and many riddles to which they did not know the answer, but the Teutonic Powers in the great mass of Central Europe which had made the upheaval were prostrate before them, and Russia, already shattered by the German flail, was convulsed by civil war and falling into the grip of the Bolshevik or Communist Party.

In the summer of 1919, the Allied armies stood along the Rhine, and their bridgeheads bulged deeply into defeated, disarmed, and hungry Germany. The chiefs of the victor Powers debated and disputed the future in Paris. Before them lay the map of Europe to be redrawn almost as they
might resolve. After fifty-two months of agony and hazards the Teutonic Coalition lay at their mercy, and not one of its four members could offer the slightest resistance to their will. Germany, the head and forefront of the offence, regarded by all as the prime cause of the catastrophe which had fallen upon the world, was at the mercy or discretion of conquerors, themselves reeling from the torment they had endured. Moreover, this had been a war, not of governments, but of peoples. The whole life-energy of the greatest nations had been poured out in wrath and slaughter. The war leaders assembled in Paris had been borne thither upon the strongest and most furious tides that have ever flowed in human history. Gone were the days of the Treaties of Utrecht and Vienna, when aristocratic statesmen and diplomats, victor and vanquished alike, met in polite and courtly disputation, and, free from the clatter and babel of democracy, could reshape systems upon the fundamentals of which they were all agreed. The peoples, transported by their sufferings and by the mass teachings with which they had been inspired, stood around in scores of millions to demand that retribution should be exacted to the full. Woe betide the leaders now perched on their dizzy pinnacles of triumph if they cast away at the conference table what the soldiers had won on a hundred blood-soaked battlefields.

France, by right alike of her efforts and her losses, held the leading place. Nearly a million and a half Frenchmen had perished defending the soil of France on which they stood against the invader. Five times in a hundred years, in 1814, 1815, 1870, 1914, and 1918, had the towers of Notre Dame seen the flash of Prussian guns and heard the thunder of their cannonade. Now for four horrible years thirteen provinces of France had lain in the rigorous grip of Prussian military rule. Wide regions had been systematically
devastated by the enemy or pulverised in the encounter of the armies. There was hardly a cottage nor a family from Verdun to Toulon that did not mourn its dead or shelter its cripples. To those Frenchmen – and there were many in high authority – who had fought and suffered in 1870, it seemed almost a miracle that France should have emerged victorious from the incomparably more terrible struggle which had just ended. All their lives they had dwelt in fear of the German Empire. They remembered the preventive war which Bismarck had sought to wage in 1875; they remembered the brutal threats which had driven Delcassé from office in 1905; they had quaked at the Moroccan menace in 1906, at the Bosnian dispute of 1908, and at the Agadir crisis of 1911. The Kaiser's “mailed fist” and “shining armour” speeches might be received with ridicule in England and America. They sounded a knell of horrible reality in the hearts of the French. For fifty years almost they had lived under the terror of the German arms. Now, at the price of their life-blood, the long oppression had been rolled away. Surely here at last was peace and safety. With one passionate spasm the French people cried, “Never again!”

But the future was heavy with foreboding. The population of France was less than two-thirds that of Germany. The French population was stationary, while the German grew. In a decade or less the annual flood of German youth reaching the military age must be double that of France. Germany had fought nearly the whole world, almost single-handed, and she had almost conquered. Those who knew the most knew best the several occasions when the result of the Great War had trembled in the balance, and the accidents and chances which had turned the fateful scale. What prospect was there in the future that the Great Allies would once again appear in their millions upon the
battlefields of France or in the East? Russia was in ruin and
convulsion, transformed beyond all semblance of the past.
Italy might be upon the opposite side. Great Britain and the
United States were separated by the seas or oceans from
Europe. The British Empire itself seemed knit together by
ties which none but its citizens could understand. What
combination of events could ever bring back again to
France and Flanders the formidable Canadians of the Vimy
Ridge; the glorious Australians of Villers-Brettonneaux; the
dauntless New Zealanders of the crater-fields of
Passchendaele; the steadfast Indian Corps which in the
cruel winter of 1914 had held the line by Armentières?
When again would peaceful, careless, anti-militarist Britain
tramp the plains of Artois and Picardy with armies of two or
three million men? When again would the ocean bear two
millions of the splendid manhood of America to
Champagne and the Argonne? Worn down, doubly
decimated, but undisputed masters of the hour, the French
nation peered into the future in thankful wonder and
haunting dread. Where then was that SECURITY without
which all that had been gained seemed valueless, and life
itself, even amid the rejoicings of victory, was almost
unendurable? The mortal need was Security at all costs
and by all methods, however stern or even harsh.

On Armistice Day, the German armies had marched
homeward in good order. “They fought well,” said Marshal
Foch, Generalissimo of the Allies, with the laurels bright
upon his brow, speaking in soldierly mood: “let them keep
their weapons.” But he demanded that the French frontier
should henceforth be the Rhine. Germany might be
disarmed; her military system shivered in fragments; her
fortresses dismantled: Germany might be impoverished;
she might be loaded with measureless indemnities; she
might become a prey to internal feuds: but all this would pass in ten years or in twenty. The indestructible might “of all the German tribes” would rise once more and the unquenched fires of warrior Prussia glow and burn again. But the Rhine, the broad, deep, swift-flowing Rhine, once held and fortified by the French Army, would be a barrier and a shield behind which France could dwell and breathe for generations. Very different were the sentiments and views of the English-speaking world, without whose aid France must have succumbed. The territorial provisions of the Treaty of Versailles left Germany practically intact. She still remained the largest homogeneous racial block in Europe. When Marshal Foch heard of the signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles he observed with singular accuracy: “This is not Peace. It is an Armistice for twenty years.”

The economic clauses of the Treaty were malignant and silly to an extent that made them obviously futile. Germany was condemned to pay reparations on a fabulous scale. These dictates gave expression to the anger of the victors, and to the belief of their peoples that any defeated nation or community can ever pay tribute on a scale which would meet the cost of modern war.

The multitudes remained plunged in ignorance of the simplest economic facts, and their leaders, seeking their votes, did not dare to undeceive them. The newspapers, after their fashion, reflected and emphasised the prevailing opinions. Few voices were raised to explain that payment of reparations can only be made by services or by the physical transportation of goods in wagons across land frontiers or in ships across salt water; or that when these goods arrive in the demanding countries, they dislocate the local industry except in very primitive or rigorously controlled societies. In
practice, as even the Russians have now learned, the only way of pillaging a defeated nation is to cart away any movables which are wanted, and to drive off a portion of its manhood as permanent or temporary slaves. But the profit gained from such processes bears no relation to the cost of the war. No one in great authority had the wit, ascendancy, or detachment from public folly to declare these fundamental, brutal facts to the electorates; nor would anyone have been believed if he had. The triumphant Allies continued to assert that they would squeeze Germany “till the pips squeaked.” All this had a potent bearing on the prosperity of the world and the mood of the German race.

In fact, however, these clauses were never enforced. On the contrary, whereas about one thousand million pounds of German assets were appropriated by the victorious
Powers, more than one thousand five hundred millions were lent a few years later to Germany, principally by the United States and Great Britain, thus enabling the ruin of the war to be rapidly repaired in Germany. As this apparently magnanimous process was still accompanied by the machine-made howlings of the unhappy and embittered populations in the victorious countries, and the assurances of their statesmen that Germany should be made to pay “to the uttermost farthing,” no gratitude or good will was to be expected or reaped.

Germany only paid, or was only able to pay, the indemnities later extorted because the United States was profusely lending money to Europe, and especially to her. In fact, during the three years 1926 to 1929 the United States was receiving back in the form of debt-instalment indemnities from all quarters about one-fifth of the money which she was lending to Germany with no chance of repayment. However, everybody seemed pleased and appeared to think this might go on for ever.

History will characterise all these transactions as insane. They helped to breed both the martial curse and the “economic blizzard,” of which more later. Germany now borrowed in all directions, swallowing greedily every credit which was lavishly offered her. Misguided sentiment about aiding the vanquished nation, coupled with a profitable rate of interest on these loans, led British investors to participate, though on a much smaller scale than those of the United States. Thus, Germany gained the two thousand millions sterling in loans as against the one thousand million of indemnities which she paid in one form or another by surrender of capital assets and valuta in foreign countries, or by juggling with the enormous American loans. All this is
a sad story of complicated idiocy in the making of which much toil and virtue was consumed.

The second cardinal tragedy was the complete break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by the Treaties of St. Germain and Trianon. For centuries this surviving embodiment of the Holy Roman Empire had afforded a common life, with advantages in trade and security, to a large number of peoples, none of whom in our own time had the strength or vitality to stand by themselves in the face of pressure from a revivified Germany or Russia. All these races wished to break away from the federal or imperial structure, and to encourage their desires was deemed a liberal policy. The Balkanisation of Southeastern Europe proceeded apace, with the consequent relative aggrandisement of Prussia and the German Reich, which, though tired and war-scarred, was intact and locally overwhelming. There is not one of the peoples or provinces that constituted the Empire of the Hapsburgs to whom gaining their independence has not brought the tortures which ancient poets and theologians had reserved for the damned. The noble capital of Vienna, the home of so much long-defended culture and tradition, the centre of so many roads, rivers, and railways, was left stark and starving, like a great emporium in an impoverished district whose inhabitants have mostly departed.

The victors imposed upon the Germans all the long-sought ideals of the liberal nations of the West. They were relieved from the burden of compulsory military service and from the need of keeping up heavy armaments. The enormous American loans were presently pressed upon them, though they had no credit. A democratic constitution, in accordance with all the latest improvements, was established at Weimar. Emperors having been driven out, nonentities
were elected. Beneath this flimsy fabric raged the passions of the mighty, defeated, but substantially uninjured German nation. The prejudice of the Americans against monarchy, which Mr. Lloyd George made no attempt to counteract, had made it clear to the beaten Empire that it would have better treatment from the Allies as a republic than as a monarchy. Wise policy would have crowned and fortified the Weimar Republic with a constitutional sovereign in the person of an infant grandson of the Kaiser, under a council of regency. Instead, a gaping void was opened in the national life of the German people. All the strong elements, military and feudal, which might have rallied to a constitutional monarchy and for its sake respected and sustained the new democratic and parliamentary processes, were for the time being unhinged. The Weimar Republic, with all its liberal trappings and blessings, was regarded as an imposition of the enemy. It could not hold the loyalties or the imagination of the German people. For a spell they sought to cling as in desperation to the aged Marshal Hindenburg. Thereafter mighty forces were adrift; the void was open, and into that void after a pause there strode a maniac of ferocious genius, the repository and expression of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human breast – Corporal Hitler.

France had been bled white by the war. The generation that had dreamed since 1870 of a war of revenge had triumphed, but at a deadly cost in national life-strength. It was a haggard France that greeted the dawn of victory. Deep fear of Germany pervaded the French nation on the morrow of their dazzling success. It was this fear that had prompted Marshal Foch to demand the Rhine frontier for the safety of France against her far larger neighbour. But the British and American statesmen held that the
absorption of German-populated districts in French territory was contrary to the Fourteen Points and to the principles of nationalism and self-determination upon which the Peace Treaty was to be based. They therefore withstood Foch and France. They gained Clemenceau by promising: first, a joint Anglo-American guarantee for the defence of France; secondly, a demilitarised zone; and thirdly, the total, lasting disarmament of Germany. Clemenceau accepted this in spite of Foch’s protests and his own instincts. The Treaty of Guarantee was signed accordingly by Wilson and Lloyd George and Clemenceau. The United States Senate refused to ratify the treaty. They repudiated President Wilson’s signature. And we, who had deferred so much to his opinions and wishes in all this business of peacemaking, were told without much ceremony that we ought to be better informed about the American Constitution.

In the fear, anger, and disarray of the French people, the rugged, dominating figure of Clemenceau, with his world-famed authority, and his special British and American contacts, was incontinently discarded. “Ingratitude towards their great men,” says Plutarch, “is the mark of strong peoples.” It was imprudent for France to indulge this trait when she was so grievously weakened. There was little compensating strength to be found in the revival of the group intrigues and ceaseless changes of governments and ministers which were the characteristic of the Third Republic, however profitable or diverting they were to those engaged in them.

Poincaré, the strongest figure who succeeded Clemenceau, attempted to make an independent Rhineland under the patronage and control of France. This had no chance of success. He did not hesitate to try to enforce reparations on Germany by the invasion of the Ruhr. This certainly
imposed compliance with the Treaties on Germany; but it was severely condemned by British and American opinion. As a result of the general financial and political disorganisation of Germany, together with reparation payments during the years 1919 to 1923, the mark rapidly collapsed. The rage aroused in Germany by the French occupation of the Ruhr led to a vast, reckless printing of paper notes with the deliberate object of destroying the whole basis of the currency. In the final stages of the inflation the mark stood at forty-three million millions to the pound sterling. The social and economic consequences of this inflation were deadly and far-reaching. The savings of the middle classes were wiped out, and a natural following was thus provided for the banners of National Socialism. The whole structure of German industry was distorted by the growth of mushroom trusts. The entire working capital of the country disappeared. The internal national debt and the debt of industry in the form of fixed capital charges and mortgages were, of course, simultaneously liquidated or repudiated. But this was no compensation for the loss of working capital. All led directly to the large-scale borrowings of a bankrupt nation abroad which were the feature of ensuing years. German sufferings and bitterness marched forward together – as they do today.

The British temper towards Germany, which at first had been so fierce, very soon went as far astray in the opposite direction. A rift opened between Lloyd George and Poincaré, whose bristling personality hampered his firm and far-sighted policies. The two nations fell apart in thought and action, and British sympathy or even admiration for Germany found powerful expression.

The League of Nations had no sooner been created than it received an almost mortal blow. The United States