



The Unnecessary War? An Introduction to Churchill's *The Gathering Storm**

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I.

THE GATHERING STORM IS THE FIRST OF THE SIX VOLUMES OF WINSTON CHURCHILL'S *The Second World War*.¹ In its preface, Churchill reports an anecdote: President Roosevelt had wondered what to call the war. "I said at once 'The Unnecessary War.'" "There never was a war," he explained to his readers in 1948, "more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle [World War I]"(iv).

But he also said in the same place that these volumes were "a continuation of the story of the First World War" that he had told in earlier books which, taken together with *The Gathering Storm* and the volumes to succeed it, would constitute "an account of another Thirty Years War" (iii). His account is continuous, for the earlier war set in motion a series of events that led to the second one. These events, one after the other and all portentous, made World War II ever more likely. Churchill's narrative is filled with foreboding. It is indeed the story of a "gathering storm."

This story leaves us with our question. Was World War II unnecessary? On the one hand, it may have been avoidable, and in this sense unnecessary, as

¹*The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948). Further references to this book are in the text and enclosed by parentheses. The other volumes of *The Second World War*, all from the same publisher, are *Their Finest Hour* (1949), *The Grand Alliance* (1950), *The Hinge of Fate* (1950), *Closing the Ring* (1951), and *Triumph and Tragedy* (1953).

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Churchill's explanation of his reply to President Roosevelt suggests. On the other, this possibility abstracts from the dark historical tale he tells and from the substance the tale gives to its theme: "How the English-speaking peoples through their un wisdom, carelessness, and good nature allowed the wicked to rearm" (ix) and then undertake the ventures that led to the war. Abstractly considered, it may have been avoidable; historically considered, it became more and more likely, from the time immediately after World War I. Churchill reminds us of what Marshall Foch said "with singular accuracy" about the Versailles Treaty: "This is not Peace. It is an Armistice for twenty years" (7).

Churchill's narrative is animated by this question, as we may see from a summary of its key features; and that summary in turn leads us to conclusions about the related question of war and peace in our day. What can we learn from Winston Churchill, if we recognize him as our teacher, one who speaks unusually well about his subject and with unique authority?

II.

Churchill divides *The Gathering Storm* into two parts of unequal length. The first and considerably longer part covers the years from 1919 to 1939, and he calls it "From War to War." The second covers a period of less than a year, from September 3, 1939, to May 10, 1940, and he calls it "The Twilight War," which then "broke into the glare of the most fearful military explosion so far known to man" (650).

His aim throughout is to give "the main proportions of events" (280), rather than detailed historical accounts; and the proportions of the book call our attention to the fact that the war grew out of the period between the wars. During that period, a certain pattern kept reappearing: Great Britain and its allies practiced a German foreign policy that resulted in another war, rather than in the peace that was on almost everyone's lips. "After the end of the World War of 1914," Churchill begins, "there was a deep conviction and almost universal hope that peace would reign in the world." He calls this conviction and these hopes the "heart's desire of all the peoples" and says that it "could easily have been gained by steadfastness in righteous convictions, and by reasonable common sense and prudence" (3). Absent those convictions and that common sense, and we have the story Churchill tells.

As is widely known, the story begins with the terms of the Versailles Treaty, three of which will be noted here. Germany was "condemned" to pay for the war, but could not. These terms "were malignant and silly to an extent that made them obviously futile" (7), even as they led to the "complicated idiocy" (10) of the United States lending money at profitable rates to Germany to help pay for the indemnities extorted from it. "Insane" though these terms were, they were not devoid of consequences for they "helped breed both the martial curse" and the later economic collapse of Germany (9). Churchill observes that the people of the victor nations demanded these terms, were ignorant of their economic consequences, and remained undeceived by their leaders, who were "seeking their votes":

No one in great authority had the wit, ascendancy, or detachment from public

folly to declare these fundamental, brute facts to the electorates; nor would any-one have believed if he had. (7-9)

The Versailles Treaty also imposed a political settlement on Germany, which involved both dismantling the Austro-Hungarian Empire and establishing a democratic constitution for the country. The former left Germany, though weakened by the war, intact and potentially strong alongside its now divided and antagonistic neighbors to the south and east. The latter created the Weimar Republic, "with all its liberal trappings and blessings," which was, however, "regarded as an imposition of the enemy" (11), under whose "flimsy fabric raged the passions of the mighty, defeated, but substantially uninjured German nation" (10). These passions were soon to be enlisted in support of that "maniac of ferocious genius, the repository and expression of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human heart—Corporal Hitler" (11).

And though Germany was entirely disarmed under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, these terms were not effectively enforced, even when they could have been. Her war fleet was destroyed and she was allowed only a few small vessels and no submarines. She could have no military air force. And her army was reduced to a small force, for internal purposes only, and with no reserves. Germany laid secret plans to rearm, and her "every form of deception...baffled the Allied Commission" (49) that was to enforce these terms. As early as January 1927 this commission was withdrawn, after which the German plans became more and more transparent, even as they were not countered.

The Versailles Treaty was signed in 1919. Churchill outlines its main terms and related matters in the first chapter of his book, which he calls "The Follies of the Victors." Its remaining chapters play out the consequences of these and later follies. "Until the middle of 1934," he tells us, "the control of events was in the hands of His Majesty's Government without the risk of war" (92). But during these fifteen years "our life flowed placidly downstream" (78) and the prospects of war increased.

Churchill's shapely narrative lays out clearly the pattern of events in these years, which can be conveniently summarized. Germany began to plan secretly for its new army as early as 1921 and cognate plans for a new navy and air force followed; and then in 1936 her new military force was officially announced (44-51, 52-65, 90-109, 110-129, 130). But during these same years, Great Britain grew indifferent to these menacing changes in Germany, and in its foreign policy the United States practiced an "improvident aloofness" (77). Indeed, at the Disarmament Conference in 1931, Germany demanded that she be allowed to rearm without limit and her demand met with approval in the British press. Churchill quotes *The Times*, which supported "the timely redress of inequality" in military force, and *The New Statesman*, which favored "the unqualified recognition of the principle of the equality of states" (73). "The German Government," he goes on to observe, "were emboldened by the British demeanour" (74). And again, "once Hitler's Germany had been allowed to rearm without active interference by the Allies...a second World War was almost certain" (189).

The pattern repeats itself. In 1936, Germany simultaneously reoccupies the Rhineland and covers its military action by announcing a proposal for a twenty-five year non-aggression pact. The British take the proposal seriously, but not the occupation. Churchill quotes what he calls a “representative British view”: “After all, they are only going into their own backgarden” (196-97). In the same year, Hitler directs his military staff to prepare plans to occupy Austria; and in 1938, the plans are executed, with a view to dismembering Czechoslovakia next. Prime Minister Chamberlain’s fateful conferences with Hitler in Munich follow. “Here was a man,” Chamberlain thought, “who could be relied upon when he had given his word” (300); and Chamberlain returned to London, joint declaration with Hitler in hand, saying, “I believe it is peace in our time” (318). The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia followed in the same year, Prime Minister Chamberlain speaking of it as “the readjustment of frontiers” (332), before Poland was invaded in 1939 and World War II was underway.

III.

We may now return to our question: Was World War II “The Unnecessary War”? And the answer is obvious: yes, it was unnecessary or avoidable, *if* steady purpose and “reasonable common sense and prudence” (3) had prevailed in Great Britain and with her allies. But these were precisely the qualities that were lacking amongst the Allies, and not least of all in Great Britain, as Churchill’s narrative convincingly shows us.² And so the war became unavoidable or necessary, in the sense of being result of the pattern of unfolding historical events.³

In turn, suppose for a moment that Churchill is one of our worthiest teachers on the subject of war and peace. What lessons does he offer us as we face questions of war and peace in our day? Surely these, briefly stated:

(1) *Peace Advocacy*. As in the 1930s, people long for peace today. Some of them are called peace advocates, and they tend to be equipped with both the deliverances of modern social science and a message for our churches. They make themselves heard in the curricula of our schools, in the laborious study documents of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its “statements” about peace or about one or another war, and in the work of various peace-and-justice groups. We even have “peace professionals” who, perhaps having majored in “peace studies” in college or being identified with the “peace process,” make peace their business, a means of gainful employment, or at least of collecting fees on the college lecture circuit.

However, after duly considering Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm*, we might prefer a broader view of peace advocacy. It would include not only peace advo-

²The distinguished historian Donald Kagan agrees with Churchill. See his *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 281-436.

³Readers of Thucydides will be familiar with his reflection on the question of the “necessity” of the Peloponnesian War, on which I draw in my formulation of the main question of this essay. For an interpretation of the question that goes to its root, see Clifford Orwin’s *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994).

cates as such but also those whose often unheralded or misunderstood work may spell the difference between war and peace for our country: diplomats and Foreign Service Officers, members of our armed services and our intelligence organizations, even members of any administration and its elected officials, if they are steadfast in “righteous conviction” and have “reasonable common sense and prudence.” They too have been known to work for peace, and so they too can be called peace advocates.

Unfashionable as this suggestion may be, it does emerge from Churchill’s book. He gives us many an example from the period between the wars of “the law of unintended consequences,” as it is sometimes called. In these years, the zealous advocacy of peace led to war, not peace: “a sincere love of peace is no excuse for muddling hundreds of millions of humble folk into total war” (190). Who, then, best served the cause of peace at the time? Those who, like Churchill himself, advocated military preparation, clear-headed negotiations with Germany, and the limited if unavoidable use of military force to forestall greater military dangers later.

(2) *Wild Beasts*. The phrase is drawn from a familiar passage in Luther’s *On Secular Authority*, in which he touches on the indisputable function of secular government, which is to “keep the peace outwardly.”⁴ Churchill digresses at one point to offer this characterization of Hitler and his work: “he had conjured up the fearful idol of an all-devouring Moloch of which he was the priest and incarnation,” and Churchill speaks in the same place of “the inconceivable brutality and villainy by which this apparatus of hatred and tyranny had been fashioned and was now to be perfected” (71). In our century, it should go without saying, we have had no shortage of wild beasts, either on the world political stage or in our country. How do we protect ourselves against them? By studying “conflict resolution” and teaching its lessons to them? Will a “sincere love of peace” rid us of them? When such measures fail, what comes next?

Later, in a remarkable conclusion to the chapter on “The Tragedy of Munich” (319-21), Churchill describes ministerial responsibility in these terms:

Their duty is first so to deal with other nations as to avoid strife and war and to eschew aggression in all its forms....But the safety of the State, the lives and freedom of their fellow country men, to whom they owe their position, make it right and imperative in the last resort, or when a final and definite conviction has been reached, that the use of force should not be excluded. (320)

In the United States, we may have forgotten or grown uncomfortable with this view of the responsibilities of our chief office holders, especially in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. But Churchill’s book can serve the useful purpose of enlarging our view of war and peace, and of why, in a world like ours, a nation may go to war in defense of its own. To reduce our view of this matter to the experience of the last thirty years, and its attendant cultural modes, is surely short-sighted and illiberal.

(3) *Contingency*. Churchill writes about the Second World War with a view to

⁴*Luther’s Works*, 45:90.

the future. To mention only the preface to *The Gathering Storm*, he speaks of the future three times in two pages: he is sure that his book “is a contribution to history which may be of service to the future”; “it would be wrong not to lay the lessons of the past before the future”; “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” (iv-v).

But on the other hand, “the veils of the future are lifted one by one, and mortals must act from day to day” (634). History is the realm of the contingent, of the unexpected, of a future likely to be more “awful” than the past. How best might the teacher, Churchill, prepare his readers, his students, for the terrible contingencies that await them?

By teaching them, as he does in *The Gathering Storm*, that war itself is a contingency rather than a necessity. If statesmen and statesman-like citizens avoid it, for so long as it is avoidable, by preparing for it, they may in this uncertain world find peace.

Will his students learn the lesson he teaches? “It must not be supposed,” he says, again in the preface, “that I expect everybody to agree with what I say, still less that I only write what will be popular” (iv). But if his readers are *engaged* by what he says, become parties to the conversation he inaugurates, they stand a chance of becoming his students. A comment by Emerson about books and readers may help us understand the point:

‘Tis the good reader that makes the good book; a good head cannot read amiss, in every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides hidden from all else and unmistakably meant for his ear.⁵

Churchill’s book, like its subject, is a contingency. It is a good book, if it has good readers:

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. (iv)

In his remarkable eulogy of Churchill, Sir Isaiah Berlin calls him “the largest human being of our time” and says that “his narrative is a great public performance and has the attribute of formal magnificence.” If Churchill’s readers catch a glimpse of that magnificence in “the words, the splendid phrases, the sustained quality of feeling,” they will sense that *The Gathering Storm* and *The Second World War* as a whole are a possession for a long time, if not for all time.⁶ 

⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Success,” in *Solitude and Society* (Boston: Fireside Edition, 1949) 279.

⁶Isaiah Berlin, “Winston Churchill in 1940,” in *Personal Impressions* (New York: Viking, 1981) 22. Readers of *The Gathering Storm* will be well rewarded if they also read Berlin’s essay, which among other things is a tribute to Churchill’s prose. Thucydides, with a view to his articulation of the permanent questions of politics, offers his book as a “possession for all times” (Book I:22). Similarly, Churchill’s prose and the shape it gives to some of these questions for our century makes *The Second World War* a book of enduring value.