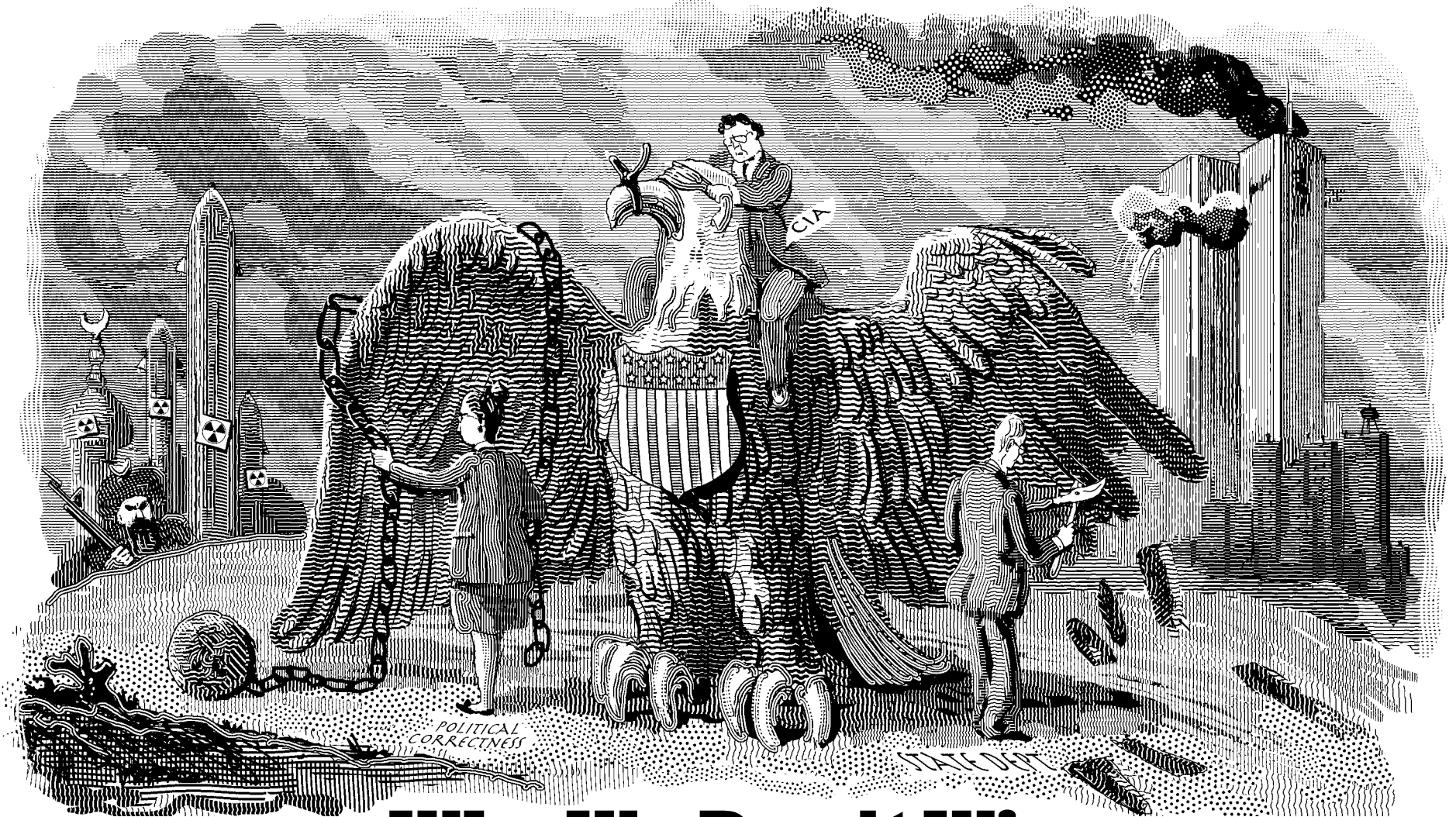


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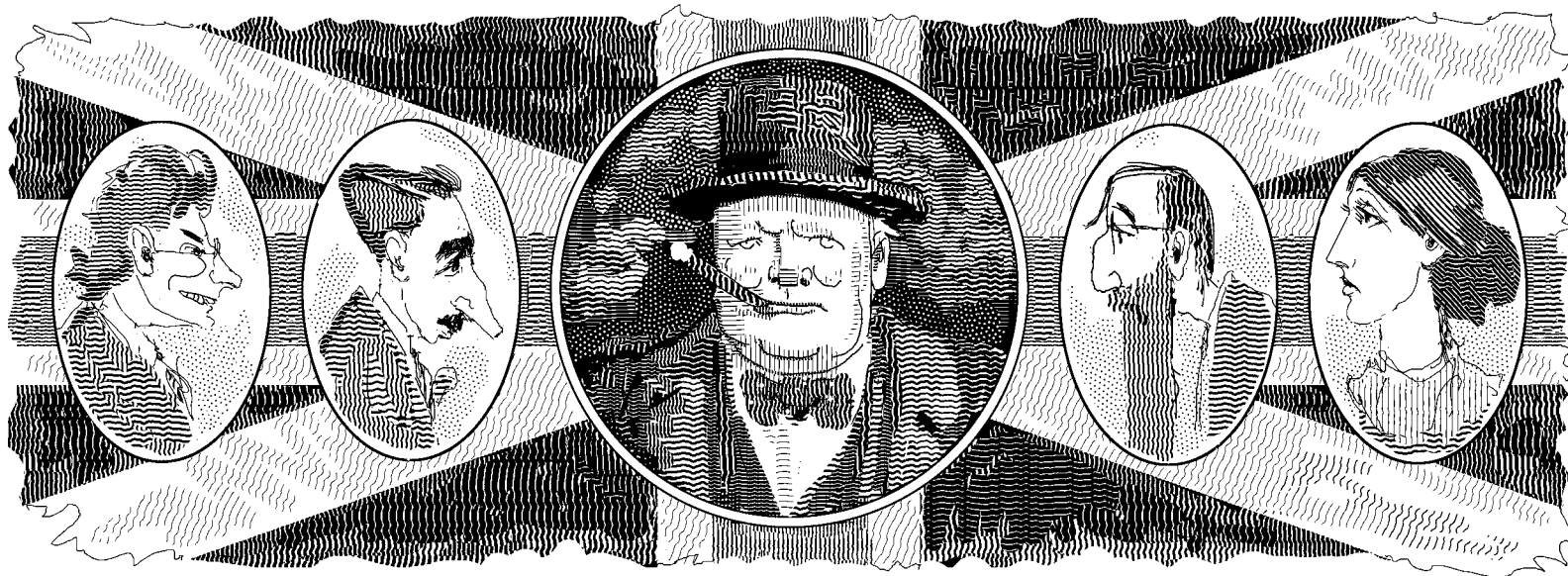
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SHALL WE FIGHT FOR KING AND COUNTRY?



WHO ARE THE SUPREME MEN AND women of modern civilization, the human types most worthy of our esteem and aspiration? Twentieth-century England produced two famous, and contradictory, answers to that question, and how we choose between them will largely define our intellectual and moral life.

Winston Churchill was the public man par excellence, his native element the political arena, his animating desire to embody the British Empire at its best and, not incidentally, to join the most celebrated figures of history in the imperishable roll of honor. As he remarked with characteristic drollery, he would go down in history not least because he would write the history. He wrote a book about every war he took part in, from the wars of empire against savage tribesmen on the northwest frontier of India and in the Sudan, to the Boer War (where his daring escape from a prisoner-of-war compound made him a national hero and launched his political career), to the two world wars (in the first of which he served in the Cabinet and briefly in the trenches, and in the second as prime minister worthy of legend); besides these, he wrote biographies of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, and his ancestor the nonpareil general John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, as well as a history of the English-speaking peoples. It is sometimes said that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature only because there is no Nobel Prize for War, but in fact he did write the two

finest histories of the 20th century, *The World Crisis* (1923–31) and *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (1933–38). When one numbers the greatest men of his time, he ranks at or near the very top; certainly no one approaches his dual accomplishment as intellectual and man of action.

To rival Churchill in eminence and influence required more than just one person; it took all of Bloomsbury, that glittering assemblage of intellectual and artistic talent which professed to save civilization from Churchill and his warlike kind. John Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf (née Stephen), Leonard Woolf, E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Vanessa Bell (Virginia Woolf's sister) were the heart of this coterie, which had its origin in the Cambridge Conversazione Society, the secret conclave of high-powered student brains better known as the Apostles that subsequently moved its base of operations to Bloomsbury, the London neighborhood around University College and the British Museum. If Churchill was for it—ardent patriotism, empire-building as moral duty and ordeal, the primacy of public life over private, war as an eternal feature of human existence—Bloomsbury was sure to be against it. Bold iconoclasts and antagonists, the Bloomsberries, as they called themselves with a giggle, promoted peaceable cosmopolitanism and the incomparable sweetness of the private life well lived, the worldly salvation to be found in art and love, comfort and abandon. In Lytton Strachey's words, "a great deal of a

great many kinds of love" was the desired apex of civilized living.

Young Apostles

IN THE 1939 MEMOIR "MY EARLY BELIEFS," JOHN Maynard Keynes—perhaps the past century's most influential economist, and a writer of elegant clarity whom Saul Bellow called the foremost English prose stylist of his time—describes the impact of the Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) on the young Apostles who sat at his feet.

Nothing mattered except states of mind, our own and other people's of course, but chiefly our own. These states of mind were not associated with action or achievement or with consequences. They consisted in timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to "before" and "after." ...The appropriate subjects of passionate contemplation and communion were a beloved person, beauty and truth, and one's prime objects in life were love, the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience and the pursuit of knowledge. Of these love came a long way first.

Keynes and his friends turned Moore's philosophy into a religion—and one without morals. To have said so explicitly, however, would have offended their belief in the scientific ratio-



nality of Moore's thinking and their own. What they thought about included such questions as whether the beloved person should be good-looking; they tended to agree, quite scientifically of course, that he or she should. Love was about as close as the young philosophers would come to action; they disdained "the life of action generally, power, politics, success, wealth, ambition, with the economic motive and the economic criterion less prominent in our philosophy than with St. Francis of Assisi, who at least made collections for the birds...."

Although the middle-aged Keynes says he has essentially continued to live by this youthful immoralist's religion, he acknowledges where it went wrong.

We were not aware that civilization was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skillfully put across and guilefully preserved. We had no respect for traditional wisdom and the restraints of custom.

Thinkers as disparate as D.H. Lawrence and Ludwig Wittgenstein pilloried the self-regarding embryonic Bloomsberries for their lack of reverence. Keynes admits that in their "unreal rationality," he and Moore's other devotees "completely misunderstood human nature, including our own." Nineteen-fourteen showed Keynes the black unreason that could sink pure intellect in an instant, and also made him appreciate as worthy objects of contemplation and communion "the order and pattern of life amongst communities and the emotions which they can inspire." Keynes was the pre-eminent public man Bloomsbury produced, and his putting on government harness—he worked in the Treasury during the Great War—displeased some of his comrades immensely. But as he says in his memoir, the youthful intoxication of art and love would pervade his entire life.

E.M. Forster, who was a King's College, Cambridge, undergraduate a couple years ahead of Keynes, and who became the leading English novelist of his generation, never outgrew his youthful contempt for the public life and the sort of men who cannot do without it. In the 1939 essay "What I Believe"—celebrated or notorious, depending on whom you ask—he trumpets his distaste for "Great Men." "They produce a desert of uniformity around them and often a pool of blood too, and I always feel a little man's pleasure when they come a cropper." One admirable feature of democracy is that it does not produce Great Men but turns out instead "different kinds of small men—a much finer achievement." Forster manages two cheers for democracy, which makes for human variety and allows political

criticism. Three cheers would be too many: "Only Love the Beloved Republic deserves that." In the name of love, or Love, Forster declares himself willing to disown his democratic homeland. "I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." Forster seems oblivious that the private life, the endless pursuit of aesthetic, libidinal, and other pleasures, is in fact Bloomsbury's consuming cause—as doctrinaire and intense as any Great Man's politics—which his pungent musing most infamously certifies. He also fails to see, on the eve of the Second World War, that betraying his country to, say, Hitler's Germany would render his most exalted Love defunct: to the Nazis, homosexuals like Forster were degenerates fit only for disposal. To elevate private contentment above public duty as Forster does is most assuredly to ruin both.

The most artful, and in some respects the most typical, meditation that Bloomsbury produced on the private and the public life is Lytton Strachey's biography *Queen Victoria* (1921). Strachey brilliantly undermines the traditional biography of the famous political figure, usually a multi-volume affair devoted to high public accomplishments, as he writes instead an ironic but poignant account of a woman's need for love; in public adulation Victoria regains the happiness that she believed only the love of her Consort, Prince Albert, who died tragically young, could give her. Little did she realize it, but Queen Victoria subscribed implicitly to the Bloomsbury ethic, and demonstrated that the motives driving political life are but the displaced or unsatisfied passions of the private life. At least that is what Strachey would have one believe.

Churchill would have considered such a thought to be a blot on the dignity of public men and women. It comes as some surprise, then, to read in *Lord Randolph Churchill*, Winston Churchill's 1906 biography of his father, for a time one of the leading lights of the late-Victorian Conservative Party, that in his young manhood Lord Randolph shied away from the Parliamentary role everyone around him assumed he would pursue. "Peace and quiet, sport and friends, agricultural interests—above all a home—offered a woodland path far more alluring than the dusty road to London." The home he wanted to make was with the captivating American heiress Jennie Jerome, and it was the prospect of pleasing her by success in politics that propelled him into a political career. As he wrote her in a letter during their courtship, he preferred to spend his time reading Gibbon and Horace, but if she wanted him to become an M.P. he would launch himself in that direction. He would soon be complaining to her about the grubby labor of winning over voters—"the num-

ber of unwashed hands I have cordially shaken, you would not believe"—and the satisfaction of securing election seemed less important than that of securing her hand in marriage. At which point, love begins to fade from the scene—theirs was a miserable wreck of a marriage, haunted by the syphilis that would kill him at 45 and that his son did not dare mention in his life story—and politics sets Lord Randolph ablaze.

Politics may be an unlovely business in many respects, but to Churchill's mind it is the most significant vocation a man can have, and its detractors cut themselves off from life's vital force.

The noise and confusion of election crowds, the cant of phrase and formula, the burrowings of rival Caucuses, fill with weariness, and even terror, persons of exquisite sensibility. It is easy for those who take no part in the public duties of citizenship under a democratic dispensation to sniff disdainfully at the methods of modern politics and to console themselves for a lack of influence upon the course of events by the indulgence of a fastidious refinement and a meticulous consistency. But it is a poor part to play.

Not all the Bloomsberries shunned the active life. Keynes was of course a notable exception, and so was Leonard Woolf. Upon going down from Cambridge, Woolf became a civil servant, doing his part for empire in Ceylon. In the second volume of his autobiography *Growing*, written in 1961 when he was 81, Woolf remembers being an utter political innocent along with his Cambridge friends, unaware of the chauvinistic and oppressive aspects of the imperial rule for which he signed on. He entered the political life without any real idea of what politics entailed; when he returned to England and left the civil service to marry Virginia Stephen six years later, having served honorably and risen in the ranks to assistant government agent, responsible for administering an immense territory, Woolf was disabused of any romantic notions of the imperial enterprise. The ruling English do not belong in Ceylon, or anywhere else but England, he concluded. Empire is simply wrong.

Heroism and Empire

CHURCHILL ON THE OTHER HAND EMPHASIZES the moral heroism of empire, which brings nothing less than salvation to men who have never known the blessings of modernity. To bestow upon the primitive and ignorant the products of civilized intelligence is the richest gift one people can give another. That is not to say Churchill



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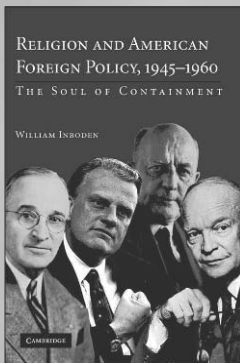
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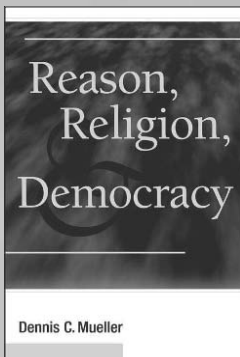


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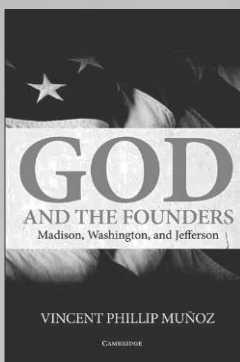


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was blind to the ugliness of imperial conquest and exploitation. Even in his young manhood, when he was something of a martial peacock, Churchill saw clearly enough the corrupt underside of empire; in *The River War* (1899), his telling of the British defeat of the vicious Dervish Empire in the Sudan, where he rode with the 21st Lancers at the Battle of Omdurman, he indicts “the greedy trader, the inopportune missionary, the ambitious soldier, and the lying speculator, who disquiet the minds of the conquered and excite the sordid appetites of the conquerors.” All the same, for Churchill the impulse to bring the empire of reason to the benighted forgives every British moral failing. As he writes in *The River War*,

What enterprise that an enlightened community may attempt is more noble and more profitable than the reclamation from barbarism of fertile regions and large populations? To give peace to warring tribes, to administer justice where all was violence, to strike the chains off the slave, to draw the richness from the soil, to plant the earliest seeds of commerce and learning, to increase in whole peoples their capacities for pleasure and diminish their chances of pain—what more beautiful ideal or more valuable reward can inspire human effort?

This encomium to the civilizing work implicitly praises precisely the sort of man whom Assistant Government Agent Woolf exemplified.

British intelligence and British character equip the imperial soldiery to conquer peoples lacking those qualities, and to do so for their own good. Once the natives are vanquished in war, they are vouchsafed the healing benefits of peace. Education in the rudiments of modernity prepares endemically indolent populations to share in the world’s work and the world’s bounty. Freedom from tyranny, freedom from superstition, freedom from want are the gifts that the British offer their new subjects. Churchill was the most eloquent spokesman for the empire of justice and prosperity.

There was of course no question that Britain had to relinquish its imperial holdings when it did, but the question that does remain is whether these former colonies are better off as free and independent nations. The perpetual plunder, squalor, and upheaval in the post-colonial world seem to give credence to the need for the civilizing mission as Churchill saw it; on the other hand, that mission appears to have been largely a failure, except insofar as it equipped still barbaric peoples with the latest means of destruction. Empire, in the time allowed it, could not triumph over human nature.

The Great War

BLOOMSBURY, HOWEVER, BELIEVED THAT humanity in the imperialist nations of Europe could change, impelled by horror at the slaughter of the Great War of 1914-1918. In the 1918 essay “Militarism and Theology,” Lytton Strachey laments that even moderate men these days accept human aggression as part of the world’s fixed order and praise the warlike virtues as eternal goods. Reading *Deductions from the World War* by the German Lieutenant-General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven makes Strachey despair, at least for the moment: “Militarism is an axiom taken for granted by every word in his book—and taken for granted so completely that it is hardly even discussed; it is simply, everywhere, and always implied. And this, surely, is a terrible phenomenon.” Yet Strachey holds out a golden hope. The “theological frenzies” that had convulsed mankind for centuries came to an end with “the age of toleration”: within a generation Bishop Bossuet’s belief in “the transcendent import of religion in history and politics, and the necessity of religious persecution and religious war,” had given way to the rational decency of Hume and Montesquieu. This radical transformation came upon the world all of a sudden, and Strachey argues that another such transformation may be in the offing:

In spite of all the Baron may say, human nature does change, and it changes sometimes with remarkable rapidity. To moderate men like him, it may well be that militarism and the implications of militarism—the struggles and ambitions of opposing States, the desire for national power, the terror of national ruin, the armed organization of humanity—that all this seems inevitable with the inevitability of a part of the world’s very structure; and yet it may well be, too, that they are wrong, that it is not so, that it is the “fabric of a vision” which will melt suddenly and be seen no more.

The immemorial reasons for which young men have suffered mutilation and death are patently unreasonable, not to say insane, in Strachey’s view. Sensible people know better, and with luck shall bring a new world order into being, of internationalist institutions that would assure global peace. The hecatombs of the war deserved corrosive mockery. When conscription came into effect in 1916, Strachey applied for conscientious objector status, saying he did not oppose all wars but did oppose this one in particular. The political arrangements that hurled civilized European nations at each oth-



er's throats were evil, and he was not about to offer his own throat for the knife. Asked by a member of the review committee what he would do if a German soldier tried to rape his sister, the homosexual Strachey replied, "I should try to come between them." Strachey's petition was denied, but he flunked his physical and stayed out of the war in any case.

John Maynard Keynes on the other hand dedicated himself to the Allied cause, though he did not fight in the trenches but rather worked in a Treasury office; even so, he would denounce himself and his country before the war was through, saying, "I work for a government I despise for ends I think criminal." Keynes wrote two reviews of Churchill's history of the Great War, *The World Crisis*, as it appeared in the late 1920s, and the reviews reflect Keynes's disenchantment. Churchill cannot conceal his own excitement, Keynes writes, at taking part in strategic decision-making—he served as First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911 to 1915—yet he suffers with the soldiers and sailors who enact the decrees of the military and political magnificos. Keynes cannot escape the impression that Churchill has written

a tractate against war more effective than the work of a pacifist could be, a demonstration from one who loves the game, not only of the imbecility of its aims and its methods, but, more than this, that the imbecility is not an accidental quality of the particular players, but is inherent in its spirit and its rules.

But Keynes backs away from this assertion that would place Churchill on the side of Bloomsbury, and in his review of *The Aftermath* (1929), the volume of the history concerned with the subsequent peace, Keynes says that besides gratitude and admiration for Churchill he feels

A little envy, perhaps, for his undoubting conviction that frontiers, races, patriotisms, even wars if need be, are ultimate verities for mankind, which lends for him a kind of dignity and even nobility to events, which for others are only a nightmare interlude, something to be permanently avoided.

For Churchill, then, the life of men in nations, each country competing for its fair share and more of the world's goods—a competition that sometimes erupts into slaughterhouse madness—is and will continue to be the natural human arrangement. Keynes and his Bloomsbury friends believe more rational arrangements can be made. Keynes was the Principal Representative of the British Treasury at the Versailles

Conference in 1919, and in his exasperation at the "Carthaginian Peace" it produced, with its back-breaking burdens on Germany, he wrote *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, pointing out where "political considerations cut disastrously across economic"—that is, where inflamed nationalist passions prevented sound policy for the common welfare. Churchill replied in *The World Crisis* that Keynes's strictly economic understanding left out the need to satisfy those inflamed passions, which were only natural after a war that had left ten million dead. To ignore those violent emotions was to take an all too cerebral and therefore hopelessly incomplete view of human nature. "The story of Mankind is War," Churchill writes, and men sadly cannot leave off being warlike when they make peace. Justice has an element of revenge, and pure mercy toward a vanquished aggressor is more than one can, or should, hope for.

Other Bloomsbury writers were loath to concede the slightest virtue on Churchill's part. Lytton Strachey tossed off a little ditty mocking the disastrous 1915 Dardanelles campaign against Turkey for which most everyone blamed Churchill.

Though Time from History's pages much may blot,
Some things there are can never be forgot;
And in Gallipoli's delicious name,
Wxxxxxx, your own shall find eternal fame.

In 1922, as Britain was considering military action against Turkey once again, E.M. Forster wrote the dialogue "Our Graves in Gallipoli," in which two dead soldiers discuss the British cult of honor as embodied by "lion-hearted Churchill":

Churchill planned this expedition to Gallipoli, where I was killed. He planned the expedition to Antwerp, where my brother was killed. Then he said that Labour is not fit to govern. Rolling his eyes for fresh worlds, he saw Egypt, and fearing that peace might be established there, he intervened and prevented it. Whatever he undertakes is a success. He is Churchill the Fortunate, ever in office, and clouds of dead heroes attend him. Nothing for schools, nothing for houses, nothing for the life of the body, nothing for the spirit. England cannot spare a penny for anything except for her heroes' graves.

In his biography of the novelist, P.N. Furbank writes that Forster hated Churchill more than any other politician. That hatred gets the better of Forster here.

In *The World Crisis*, Churchill mounts an able defense of his strategic plan for the Darda-

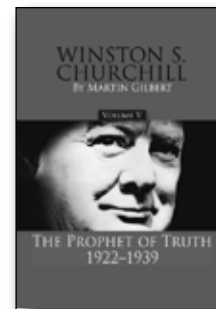
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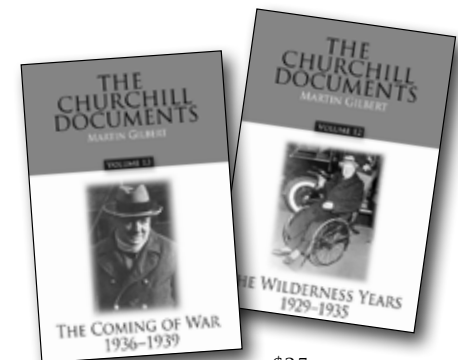


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nelles campaign: his sound conception was fatally compromised by the generals who believed the war was to be won by the last man standing on the Western Front, and who saw to it that the initial assault on Gallipoli was hopelessly short-handed. The piercing irony is that, had the original attack employed as many troops as the course of events ultimately required for reinforcements (who were largely sacrificed), the sheer strength of numbers would have pretty well assured success. The fiasco cost Churchill his position as first lord of the admiralty, but two years later a Dardanelles Commission of Enquiry exonerated him of wrongful action. Following Bloomsbury's lead, Churchill-haters continue to cry "Gallipoli" as evidence of his hell-bent recklessness and indifference to slaughter, but the charge is unjust. The killing imprudence was not his, and he calls the debacle hard instruction in "the profound significance of human choice and the sublime responsibility of men." Whatever Keynes in a certain mood may say to the contrary, Churchill does not find war imbecilic in itself: he always distinguishes between prudence and imprudence on the part of individual actors. It is reason, even more than courage, that gives the military vocation its dignity and luster, and Churchill understands reason more fully than Bloomsbury ever did.

Saving Civilization

THAT DID NOT STOP BLOOMSBURY FROM trying to paint Churchill as the epitome of murderous subterranean unreason. Virginia Woolf's polemic *Three Guineas* (1938) addresses the question of how we are to prevent war; she is concerned not with bringing down Hitler, but with eradicating the "competition and jealousy" that infect every aspect of civilized behavior and that inevitably drive men to kill each other—the "whole iniquity of dictatorship, whether in Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain." With the leadership of naturally cosmopolitan women, free of "false loyalties" to king and country, truly civilized persons can change human nature. To despair of changing human

nature is to ensure the perpetuation of evil in the name of sanctified phantoms. Who better than Churchill to represent the dead hand of immemorial tradition? Woolf quotes from an essay of his in *Thoughts and Adventures* (1932):

"The brain of a modern man does not differ in essentials from that of the human beings who fought and loved here millions of years ago. The nature of man has remained hitherto practically unchanged. Under sufficient stress—starvation, terror, war-like passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy—the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up."

But, according to Woolf, it is not merely savage reflexes under duress that make modern men warlike; it is the preposterous honor shown the military, political, and other esteemed masculine professions. Of the ceremonial dress worn by men of high distinction in their public roles, Woolf writes with an anthropologist's wonder, as though she were describing the ritual adornments of Trobriand Islanders:

Now you dress in violet; a jewelled crucifix swings on your breast; now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine; now slung with many linked chains set with precious stones. Now you wear wigs on your heads; rows of graduated curls descend to your necks. Now your hats are boat-shaped, or cocked; now they mount in cones of black fur; now they are made of brass and scuttle-shaped; now plumes of red, now of blue hair surmount them.

In the 1922 memoir "Old Bloomsbury," collected in *Moments of Being*, she recalls a party hosted by Lady Ottoline Morrell, where she came upon a prime specimen of howling manhood in full regalia: "Winston Churchill, very rubicund, all gold lace and medals, on his way to Buckingham Palace." Virginia Woolf is out to bring down the entire structure of the vicious

outdated patriarchy, and she begins by toppling the monumental statues that decorate the façade. True civilization must have new models. The lion-hearted Churchill has got to go.

At the time Virginia Woolf was contemplating the transfiguration of humanity along more womanly lines, Churchill was engaged in the comparatively mundane task of trying to stop Nazi Germany. And as part of this effort, he was finishing his portrait of the complete man, the paragon of civilization, Marlborough (1650–1722), the general who never lost a battle, the man unsurpassed in war who cherished the blessings of peace—devout in his Protestant faith, his loyalty to his queen, his love for his wife through nearly 50 years of marriage. The carnage of the Great War had kicked the willingness to fight out of the democratic nations, and Churchill wrote *Marlborough* in large part to revive the ideal of manhood ready for war when war is unavoidable: Marlborough effectively led the European Allies against the all but invincible predatory might of Louis XIV's France, which was bent on conquest "not only military and economic, but religious, moral, and intellectual."

In Winston Churchill's time even more than in Marlborough's, the preservation of English liberty meant the defense of civilization. To be civilized as Bloomsbury understood the word was to be hopelessly incomplete, unable to withstand the demands of war to the death with an evil enemy. Churchill, the man proud of his gold lace and medals, of having braved death in several wars, of having understood human nature to its savage depths, proved the indispensable man when the very survival of civilization was on the line. Today the contrast between Churchill and Bloomsbury is once again a vital matter, as our weakened civilization—weakened in no small part by our turn toward Bloomsbury values—faces an implacable and uncivilized enemy. Whether our civilization will prevail depends largely on whose understanding of civilization we choose to guide us.

Algis Valiunas is a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of Churchill's Military Histories (Rowman & Littlefield).

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