Chapter Sixty-Four

SPLENDID ISOLATION AND WAR

WITH an Empire upon which the sun never set it was no wonder that the British at the turn of the century were complacent. The country was blessed with success, stability and abundant riches, so much so that what happened on the mainland of Europe seemed irrelevant. Its people looked across the globe rather than across the Channel. Nothing there, it was tacitly assumed, could affect what seemed to be one long saga of glory. But, like the Empire itself, that was to prove a delusion. The greatest mistake made by Lord Palmerston and his successors was to stand aside while Prussia gradually grew to be the German Empire. Suddenly in 1871 there appeared a new major power in Central Europe, with the capacity eventually to dominate the whole continent. British foreign policy since the Tudor period had been influenced by the conviction that no one nation should ever be allowed to enjoy European hegemony. In the Elizabethan age the challenge of the world-wide might of Spain had been met with the defeat of the Armada. In the two centuries that followed, the expansionist policies of France, first under Louis XIV and then under Napoleon, were curbed by Marlborough's victories and those of Nelson and Wellington. The history of the British in the twentieth century was to see re-enactments of these titanic encounters, which, like their predecessors, were to unite a nation yet again in defence of the island realm.

Lord Salisbury, who was the major influence on British foreign policy during the closing decades of the century, believed that 'it is in our interests that as little should happen as possible.' It was a policy summed up in two words: 'splendid isolation'. But it was an isolation which made a younger generation progressively more and more uneasy. Britain's relationship with Europe had left her without allies. The British cult of liberty had led successive governments to offer asylum or aid to revolutionary movements from the mainland which resulted in distrust of Britain by the European powers. On the British side the long suspicion of France remained unaltered, reinforced by clashes abroad in North Africa over the control of the Suez Canal. Two

new technological developments such as mines and the submarine and, in the case of land transportation, of motorcycles, trucks and tanks. By the last year of the war, 1918, there was a further major development, the Royal Air Force was formed.

Foreign policy was made by a small bureaucracy in the Foreign Office, which also dealt with the Empire. The decision that the country should go to war lay largely with Sir Edward Grey. The Germans gambled on the belief that Britain would wish to stay out, and it could have if the government had been prepared to accept German domination of Europe. It was, however, to be the assassination of the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, which would trigger the war. Then the German army entered Belgium, from which there was the shortest crossing to Britain. On 4 August Grey sent an ultimatum, to which the Germans did not respond. Suddenly Britain found itself at war.

War sooner or later had been expected but when it finally came it was a surprise. The public believed it would all be over by Christmas but the Minister for War, Lord Kitchener, realised from the outset that this was going to be a long struggle. Nothing had prepared anyone for the terrible and unprecedented carnage which followed for this was a new kind of war, devoid of any swift or heroic offensive. Instead it was characterised by the grinding monotony of two armies dug into trenches facing each other across a narrow strip of land which, due to the endless bombs, came to resemble more and more the surface of the moon. The troops endured cold and isolation, feeling themselves to be locked into something from which there seemed neither escape nor an end in view.

First World War poster to encourage every class and both sexes to enter war service.

On 6 August the British Army left for France and linked up with the French Fifth Army. The German plan had been to knock them out in one massive offensive but in this they failed, the allies holding on at the river Marne. Gradually a front line snaked its way from the Belgian coastline down as far as Switzerland, and there it stayed for virtually the whole duration of the war. The town of Ypres was held, but at a price, the decimation of the British Expeditionary Force. It rapidly became clear that men would be needed in millions and Kitchener's famous poster with its slogan 'Your Country Needs You' contributed to raising a million volunteers by Christmas 1914. Similar

numbers were raised in each year of the war. But the men recruited initially were inevitably untrained, devoid of proper barracks and equipment, and above all, lacked the necessary munitions with which to fight.

The war was fought on two fronts for Germany had also invaded Russia which stood in desperate need of supplies. Turkey joined the Germans and in April 1915 Italy entered the conflict on the side of Britain and France. In the same month over 40,000 Imperial troops were landed at Gallipoli in the hope of opening up a supply route to Russia. In the end they were forced to evacuate with huge losses. Meanwhile in France there was another battle in the area of Ypres and for the first time the Germans used poisoned gas to horrendous effect. The casualties kept on relentlessly mounting.

In January 1916 conscription for all adult males between eighteen and forty-one was introduced. As a consequence, women began to take on the jobs vacated by their menfolk. The number of women in domestic service suddenly fell by a quarter. In May the war's major naval engagement took place, the Battle of Jutland, which resulted in heavy losses on both sides. The German fleet escaped but never challenged the Royal Navy again. Then came the 'big push' on the Somme, an offensive which lasted from July to November with little to show for it apart from the loss of a half-a-million men mown down by German machine-gun fire. This was to be the first war in which more men actually died encountering the enemy than from disease or neglect. At home the loss of Lord Kitchener, drowned on his way to Russia, led to reorganisation with Lloyd George taking over as Minister for Munitions and later as Prime Minister.

John Singer Sargent records the horrors of gas. Sargent went to the French front to record the American and British troops. Here he catches the heart-rending spectacle of blindfolded soldiers who had lost their sight, victims of mustard gas.

Workers at the National Shell-fitting Factory at Chilwell, Nottinghamshire in 1917. Women gained a new status during the war making up a large percentage of the munitions workforce.

Another attempt at a knockout blow against the enemy was tried in April 1917 but that too failed and in July the advance to the village of Passchendaele, close to Ypres, claimed 300,000 more lives. The battle was fought amidst a sea of mud and all that was gained was a strip four miles in width. By then the Germans had embarked on submarine warfare threatening the British merchant navy, vital for the country's

food supply and for the import of raw materials. Lloyd George instituted a system of convoys. In 1917 the United States entered the war, and in Russia revolution broke out wiping out the Russian Imperial family and the rule of the tsars.

That revolution released the German army on the eastern front to move west and there was a renewed offensive in 1918 but the Germans were unable to sustain it. Marshal Foch was put in overall charge of the allied forces, and in August the Battle of Amiens was won. By then the mighty German war machine was crumbling and the German front line began to break up. At home Germany was in crisis, a blockade having strangled its supply lines so that its people began to suffer death through malnutrition. The Germans had reached the end of their capacity to endure any more. On 11 November 1918 an armistice was agreed to. The war was over.

In Britain the mood to the very end remained one of determination although the people were exhausted, the war having affected everyone in a way hitherto unknown. Peace brought a feeling of triumph mixed with a cry for vengeance. But then came the realisation of just how terrible it had been and just what those men had gone through amidst the mud of Flanders. The First World War traumatized a generation. Nothing, as Edward Grey predicted, was ever the same after it. No one, however, doubted but that the right decision had been taken, to fight. Germany's bid for domination had been squashed and that is where Britain's commitment was seen to end.

The country seemed to have learnt little from this holocaust, and wished to return in policy terms to a period of 'splendid isolation'. Once more the Empire assumed a paramount position, added to which there was now a new relationship with the United States. At the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 Britain offered a military guarantee to France but only on the condition of American participation. Britain stood back while the huge consequences which affected the whole of the mainland took place, signalling the end of the short-lived German Empire, and also of the empire of Austria-Hungary, this time after centuries. The sorting-out of so much change went on well into the 1920s. President Wilson proposed a League of Nations which was subsequently set up with the idea that it could avert a recurrence of what was viewed as 'the war to end all wars'. In 1925, at the Locarno Conference, France, Germany and Belgium mutually guaranteed each others' frontiers, a guarantee underwritten by Italy and Britain. By 1930 Britain had successfully succeeded in getting back to where she had been at the opening of the century, her face firmly averted from the European mainland and turned instead towards her Empire. In that year France proposed that the European nations should form some kind of federal link primarily of an economic character. The idea was firmly rejected.