

The First War to End War

by Bertrand Russell
(Dictated August 13, 1953)

The copy-text is the typescript (RA1 210.006862) with later revisions on the typescript carbon, tape-recorded on August 4, 1959 as "Odds and Ends about the War to End War" (220.020680).

Modern international politics begins with the Boer War, or perhaps even earlier with the Jameson raid. When the Jameson raid proved a fiasco, people were impressed by the vigour with which Chamberlain disowned it. Few people knew, and nobody publicly stated, that, because it was being planned, British troops returning from India were brought by way of the Cape so as to be on hand if needed. Still fewer knew that this measure had been sanctioned not only by Chamberlain, but also by the previous Liberal Government. The initial ill success of the British in the Boer War encouraged the Continent to express its hostility, and there was talk of intervention in favour of the Boers by a coalition of France and Germany and Russia. This fell through because their combined navies were not so strong as the British navy, but it frightened the British Government and made it feel that we needed Continental allies. Joseph Chamberlain offered an alliance to the Germans, but his advances were rebuffed because the Kaiser was determined to have a big navy. Consequently the Foreign Office set to work to make friends with France and Russia. I first heard of this policy, before it had been officially adopted, from Sir Edward Grey, then in Opposition.

I first met H. G. Wells in 1902 at a small discussion society created by Sidney Webb and by him christened "The Co-efficients" in the hope that we should be jointly efficient. There were about a dozen of us. Some have escaped my memory. Among those whom I remember, the most distinguished was Sir Edward Grey. Then there was H. J. MacKinder (afterwards Sir) who was Reader in Geography at the University of Oxford and a great authority on the then new German subject of geopolitics. What I found most interesting about him was that he had climbed Kilimanjaro with a native guide who

walked barefoot except in villages, where he wore dancing pumps. There was Amery. And there was Commander Bellairs, a breezy naval officer who was engaged in a perpetual ding-dong battle for the Parliamentary representation of Kings Lynn with an opponent universally known as Tommy Bowles, a gallant champion of the army. Commander Bellairs was a Liberal, and Tommy Bowles a Conservative; but, after a while, Commander Bellairs became a Conservative, and Tommy Bowles became a Liberal. They were thus enabled to continue their duel at Kings Lynn. In 1902 Commander Bellairs was half-way on the journey from the old party to the new one. And there was W. A. S. Hewins, the Director of the School of Economics. Hewins once told me that he had been brought up a Roman Catholic, but had since replaced faith in the Church by faith in the British Empire. He was passionately opposed to Free Trade, and was successfully engaged in converting Joseph Chamberlain to Tariff Reform. I know how large a part he had in this conversion, as he showed me the correspondence between himself and Chamberlain before Chamberlain had come out publicly for Tariff Reform. I very soon found that I was too much out of sympathy with most of the Co-efficients to be able to profit by the discussions or contribute usefully to them. All the members except Wells and myself were Imperialists and looked forward without too much apprehension to a war with Germany. I was drawn to Wells by our common antipathy to this point of view. He was a Socialist, and at that time, though not later, considered great wars a folly. Matters came to a head when Sir Edward Grey, then in Opposition, advocated what became the policy of the Entente with France and Russia, which was adopted by the Conservative Government some two years later, and solidified by Sir Edward Grey when he became Foreign Secretary. I spoke vehemently against this policy, which I felt led straight to world war, but no one except Wells agreed with me.

At one of the meetings of the Co-efficients, Amery, then still quite young, discussed various possible wars and his eyes gleamed with joy as he said, "If we fight America we shall have to arm the whole adult male population." I was in those days still somewhat naïf, and when the Russian navy fired upon British fishermen at the Dogger Bank, I was pleased with Arthur Balfour (of whom, in general, I thought ill) because he

treated the incident in a conciliatory spirit. I did not then realize that he was only preparing bigger and better wars. Still less did I realize that during the General Election of 1906, when the Liberals were supported largely because they were thought less bellicose than the Tories, Sir Edward Grey, without the knowledge of the Country or Parliament, or even the majority of the Cabinet, inaugurated the military and naval conversations with France which committed us in honour to the support of France in war, although Sir Edward Grey repeatedly affirmed in Parliament that we were not committed. Our agreement with France committed us to the support of the French conquest of Morocco which was a wholly unjustified imperialist venture and led to violent quarrels with Germany. Our support of Russia had even worse consequences. The Russian Government suppressed the revolt of 1905 with great barbarity, especially in Poland. The Russians also invaded Northern Persia and induced Sir Edward Grey to join them in defeating Morgan Schuster's efforts to introduce an orderly constitutional régime into that country. Every Czarist atrocity was minimized by Sir Edward Grey, who did everything that public opinion would tolerate to discourage support for Russian and Polish rebels.

I became so much interested in Persian affairs that I wrote about them with indignation against the British Government. In consequence, a young man at the Persian Legation came to see me to express gratitude; and when he had finished with politics he sang Persian poems to me and explained his theological opinions. I said, "You do not seem very orthodox." But he replied: "Oh yes, I am. My views are those of one of the recognized orthodox sects, namely, the Sufis." He was young, beautiful, idealistic and poetic. Thirty years later, in a hotel in Cambridge, I met a fat, middle-aged, Persian bureaucrat who informed me that he was the Minister of Education. It was the same man.

In the days when the outbreak of war was visibly approaching, I hoped against hope that England might remain neutral. I knew the Kaiser's Germany, which, though it had many faults, was more liberal than any Continental régime of the present day except those of Holland and Scandinavia. Czarist Russia had filled all liberal-minded people with horror for a long time, and I found the thought of going to war to

support it intolerable. I induced a large number of Cambridge Dons to sign a letter to the Press urging neutrality. The day after the War began nine-tenths of them expressed regret at having signed it. The *Nation*, the Liberal Weekly edited by Massingham, had an editorial lunch every Tuesday. I went to this lunch on August 4th, and found Massingham and his assistant editors all passionately in favour of neutrality. Ten hours later, England entered the War, and Massingham wrote to me next morning, beginning, "Today is not yesterday"; and retracting everything that he had said before. Almost all those who, throughout the previous years, had opposed Sir Edward Grey, became over-night his passionate supporters. Their excuse was the German invasion of Belgium.

I had known for years, from friends in the Staff College, that it was quite certain the Germans would invade Belgium in the event of a war. I was amazed to find that leading politicians and journalists had been ignorant of this easily ascertainable fact, and that all their public utterances had been due to this ignorance. There were various facts about the origins of the War which were kept dark. Long after it was over I learnt that before the assassination at Sarajevo its imminence was announced by the Serbian Prime Minister to his Cabinet. One of the crucial acts precipitating general war was the mobilization of the Russian army which was ordered by the War Minister Sokolnikov without the knowledge of the Czar. It was this that led the Germans to break off negotiations with Russia and declare war. But Sokolnikov's patriotism was of a peculiar sort: When the French and English sent supplies to Russia, Sokolnikov sold them to the Germans. Unfortunately for him, the Russian Revolution cut short his enjoyment of the proceeds.

It was my first experience of mass hysteria on a large scale, and I had considerable inward difficulty in withstanding it. I used to think in buses or trains, "If these people knew what I think they would tear me to pieces." The Press was filled with untrue atrocity stories. But anyone who questioned them was regarded as a traitor. I was told later, on good authority, that moving pictures of atrocities were manufactured by a cinema company in the Bois de Boulogne and sold to belligerents on both sides impartially, with only a change of captions. The story that the Germans used human corpses to make gelatine

was quite deliberately invented by a young man in a Government office in London, but nevertheless proved very effective and was one of the main causes of the Chinese entry into the War on our side. The supposed idealistic aims of the War gave people an excuse for letting loose a great deal of ferocity which the decencies of civilized life had until then compelled them to conceal. I remember, at a time when the War was going badly and there was some talk of peace, Sidney Webb remarked, "We must keep the soldiers' noses to the grindstone!" This was a not uncommon attitude among those not liable to military service on account of age or sex or Holy Orders.

Patriotism of course had its limits. When, at the outbreak of the War, a Coalition Government was established, it contained Sir Edward Carson, who had recently bought arms from the Kaiser for use against the British Government, and Bonar Law, whose brother sold arms to the Germans after the outbreak of war. I wrote to a friend in America pointing out how much these men strengthened the war-effort, but I think the censorship prevented my letter from arriving. I learned many years later that in the middle of the War the Directors of the Nobel Company, of whom some were German, some English, some French, had met in Holland and discussed the affairs of the company which were, naturally, flourishing.

Early in 1917 peace negotiations were well advanced and would probably have been successfully concluded but for the fact that America's entry into the war was obviously imminent. If these negotiations had been allowed to proceed to a successful termination, Kerensky's Government might have survived and Russia would almost certainly have had something better than the Communist régime, Germany would not have been ruined and there would have been no chance of a Nazi régime. It may therefore be said that we owe both the Nazis and the Communists to Wilson's determination to "make the World safe for Democracy".

The "Hang the Kaiser Election" immediately after the Armistice was disgraceful both to the Country and to the Government. The Government agreed, in reply to popular clamour, that an indemnity of twenty-six billions should be asked of the Germans. When, after the Election, someone suggested to Lloyd George that this sum was impossibly high, he replied, "My dear fellow, if the Election had lasted three weeks longer

the Germans would have had to pay fifty billions.” Lloyd George, then and throughout the negotiations at Versailles, was perfectly aware that a vindictive public opinion was demanding impossibilities, but he never publicly proclaimed this awareness, and was cynically willing to win the world for the sake of his majority.