

GOVERNMENT AND THE WAR

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Government and the war by Spenser Wilkinson

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SPENSER WILKINSON

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AND THE WAR**

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BY

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1918



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TO MY COUNTRYMEN

HAIRSON
DEC 1 11 1914
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SURELY by this time, in the fourth year of the conflict, the people of this country must be willing or even anxious to know the truth about the war and about its management. 'Seek and ye shall find'; if you dare not open your eyes you must not expect to see.

In August, 1914, when Germany struck for the mastery, our people responded with no uncertain voice. We accepted the challenge and we would fight it out. We gave the Government full powers and a free hand. Since then we have given the Government 7,500,000 men, of whom the Admiralty has had 400,000 and the War Office the remainder. We have encouraged the Government to spend money without limit. We have given the whole country as a workshop. We have had half the world as Allies. What is the position to-day? We were told that our navy would command the sea, but it does not. The German submarines sink our ships at such a rate that in spite of our efforts in ship-building we have to be put on rations. We were to crush Prussian 'Militarism,' which means, I suppose, to shatter the armies of Germany and her Allies. But

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in Eastern Europe those armies have been victorious and they are now collecting their strength for a fresh blow in the West. When we look at the map we follow the line of No Man's Land, which separates the opposing forces from the Channel to the Alps and from the Alps to the Adriatic. In Italy it has been pushed back from the Isonzo to the Piave. In France and Belgium, though it has here and there moved backwards or forwards, the line remains substantially where it was three years ago. This is not victory.

It is true that our troops have taken Baghdad and Jerusalem and are still advancing in those regions, but what effect can Baghdad and Jerusalem produce on the conflict in Europe?

Suppose that the enemy in 1918 should accomplish in the West what he has already achieved in the East. The eyes of those who thought that peace could always be had for the asking must have been opened by what they have seen in Russia. In presence of a victorious enemy peace could be had only by submission. The victor will have his way and the vanquished are at his mercy. Germany expects and intends to have her will, and has clearly enough explained what it is—to make an end of British sea-power, which is the British Empire.

Is it not the truth that we have to destroy the German navy, beginning with the submarines, and to inflict upon the hostile armies defeat so decisive as

to compel the German government to abandon the hope of success? In short, is not the choice between victory and defeat?

The reader who has followed me thus far can see for himself whether I have described the situation as it really is. I know that many people will not face it. It seems to them too awful. They would rather shut their eyes and build castles in the air labelled 'After the War.' That seems to me the unconscious hypocrisy of despair. I have faith in my countrymen. Nay, more, I have faith in the French and I have faith in the Italians. But it is for my own countrymen that I am writing. I am sure that they feel with me and that they want to know the worst and to do the best. All that is required is a lead.

The object of this book is to tell you where to look for a lead. A great many people are asking for your confidence. Many are saying, 'Lo, here' and 'Lo, there,' and you are rightly determined to beware of false prophets. How are you to know whom to trust or what sort of book it is worth your while now to read? The best test of truth, I believe, in the long run is consistency. If you want to find the way you don't look at a weathercock but at a compass. That is the reason why I have no faith in any of the politicians, least of all in any of those who have been or are ministers. No doubt many of them are remarkable men, conspicuous both for ability and for char-

acter. But I cannot convince myself that any one of the whole number is fit to lead the nation in this war, and I will tell you why.

You all know that Germany was preparing for this war for many years before she began it. There was no secrecy about it. Every increase of the German navy and of the armies of Prussia, Bavaria, and Austria was quite well known. Germany's objects were also well known. A host of German writers were discussing them for years. Berlin in peace is only twenty-four hours' journey from London, and the German language is very much easier to learn than Greek or Latin. But which of our politicians told the nation before the war that it would have to fight Germany in a life-and-death struggle? Which of them got us ready for it? Were they not all taken by surprise when it came? I think it was the duty of those to whom the government of the country was entrusted to know enough about Europe to be able to grasp what was going on, to see how it must affect us, and to have made up their minds how they would carry on a war in case a war should be forced upon us. They failed to perform this duty. The result is the situation which I have already described.

Many of the writers in the newspapers have kept on telling you that you were winning. Either they did not know the truth or were not allowed to tell it. In either case you are hardly likely in future to attach much

importance to what those writers and those newspapers may have to say.

Why then do I venture to offer you a book and why should you read it? I have not had to change my mind during the war. Half my book was written long before the war, so that, if I did not tell you, you could hardly find out which part was new and which part is old, except where I discuss some of the actual events of the war itself. I have given my life to trying to get to know what can be known about war and to the endeavour to arouse my countrymen to the realities of their position. For a whole generation I have been telling you that your army was not ready for war, your navy was not ready, your government was not ready. I tried to tell you what war was like, how armies and navies were made ready for it, above all that it must be conducted by a statesman, and that the statesman's first business was to understand it. What I wrote was read and endorsed by the sailors and the soldiers, but the public and the politicians took no interest in it. In 1909 I wrote a book entitled "Britain at Bay," to tell you that you were drifting into a war with Germany, and that if you were to have a chance of winning it you must change the whole spirit of your politics. While that volume was in the press I was chosen to direct the studies of those in Oxford who wished to become acquainted with modern

war and modern warfare. That meant for me a fresh study of the most recent great wars. But it meant also a renewed effort to explain to others what war is and means, how a government must carry it on, and what are the qualifications of the statesman to enable him to direct it. This volume contains the work of nine years in thinking out those problems of war which concern not so much the soldier as the nation and its government. It has been written not for soldiers but for citizens. I have tried to set forth the lines upon which a British government must work if it is to obtain victory, and I believe that, if these main ideas are rejected, defeat is certain. To seek diligently for the truth, and then to express my conclusions so that they may be understood by any reader—that has been my attempt to serve my country.

S. W.

ALL SOULS COLLEGE,
March 3, 1918.