

EUROPE'S FATEFUL HOUR

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Europe's fateful hour by Guglielmo Ferrero

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GUGLIELMO FERRERO

Author of "Greatness and Decline of Rome,"
"Ancient Rome and Modern America," etc.



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PREFACE

When the war broke out in August, 1914, it was generally supposed that it would be on much the same scale as the various struggles for the balance of power or the wars of aggression which had rent Europe asunder since the French Revolution; an opinion which prevailed so long as to exercise no small influence on the conduct of the war. It is only indeed comparatively recently that governments and peoples alike seem to have realized that the present conflict is more far-reaching and more complex than a repetition of even the Franco-Prussian War on a vaster scale.

The essays collected in this volume were all written to show the erroneousness of this idea and to prove that this struggle is not merely the continuation of the national and political wars of the nineteenth century, but rather a great crisis in what is commonly called western civilization—a crisis whose development will be far more extensive than was ever contemplated and whose consequences will far transcend the territorial ambitions of the various belligerent states. In order to prove this assertion, I have endeavoured to trace the component elements of this crisis with the help of what is generally known as the comparative method, studying modern civilization in the light of the civilizations of ancient times, trying by this means to discover their strong and weak points, and making use for this purpose of the comparative studies along these lines which I had made before the outbreak of war.¹

¹ Cfr. Ferrero, "Ancient Rome and Modern America," Putnam, New York. "Between the Old World and the New." Idem.

These essential elements of the crisis appear to me to be three in number. The first is of a military order — i. e., the rivalry between the Great Powers of Europe in the matter of armaments which began after the Franco-Prussian War, when for the first time in history the greatest nations of the world based their military policy not on the greatest possible limitation of armaments, as had hitherto been the case, but on the principle of the indefinite increase of men and weapons.

The second element is the development of industry, more especially in its metallurgical and mechanical branches. These industries, which have become so powerful during the last century, have not only supplied European militarism with the means of indefinitely increasing their armaments, but, by providing incredibly complicated, rapid and powerful weapons, have transformed the art of war into a kind of diabolical instrument of extermination. Until the nineteenth century armies were light, easily handled swords with which duels were fought between states according to certain recognized rules in order to settle their disputes with the minimum expenditure of blood and money. In the century of metallurgy and mechanics they have become gigantic machines for the destruction of nations.

The third element is of a moral and intellectual nature: i. e., that unshakable optimism, that blind faith in the progress and strength of man, that unbridled ambition and covetousness which has effaced or at all events dimmed the sense of limitation, of proportion, of the humanly possible and the reasonable in the whole western civilization, in the realms of philosophy, religion, art, science, politics, finance, industry and commerce alike. Western civilization was on the way to thinking itself omnipotent. This malady had attacked all the nations of Europe to a greater

or less extent, but its ravages were greatest in Germany which had fallen victim to that megalomania, that insensate pride, that unbounded ambition, that deterioration in the morals of the masses which made a country, which for long had been regarded as the model of the world, become in a few short months its terror and detestation.

These three elements gave birth to this war which knows no limits of time, space, destruction of life and property — an appalling phenomenon in the history of the world — a war which in its turn gave birth to a crisis in the whole of western civilization, owing to the overwhelming shock to its political and moral order.

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I was specially pleased that an English translation of this book should be published in America, because the Americans occupy a peculiar position which makes it easier for them than for Europeans to follow these ideas. Is not the United States the living proof of their truth? If the European war were the last and greatest of the political and national wars of the Old World, it would not be easy to understand why the United States could not have remained neutral as it did in all preceding conflicts; if, on the other hand, it is a crisis in western civilization, it is easy enough to see why it could not be a mere looker on, since America forms part of that civilization.

The Americans are not only in a position to understand this universal character of this crisis, but are also better able to profit by this truth in the work of reconstruction which must follow the present cataclysm. The position of America in relation to the great events of the last three years differs from that of the European Powers in so far as only two of the elements which have contributed to this

crisis are present in America: the industrial and the moral and intellectual. The first and most important — the militarism which impelled Europe to the unlimited increase of armaments — is altogether lacking.

This circumstance has had and will have various consequences. The fact that she had not taken part in the rivalries of militarism was one of the causes which both obliged America to intervene and made that intervention more difficult. It forced America to intervene because had she not done so, she would have been unable to create a great army, and had she not created this army, she would have found herself at the end of the war the only wealthy nation in the world, but at the same time wholly defenceless against Europe, which, while possessing numberless great armies, would be bankrupt owing to the expenditures of her whole capital on armaments. The vastest accumulation of wealth which the world has ever seen would have existed on one side of the Atlantic and the most formidable accumulation of armaments on the other side. It is difficult to say what would have been the outcome of this disproportion, but no one can fail to see the danger latent in it to the political and moral equilibrium of the world. It will be one of the chief glories of American democracy that it realized this supreme necessity and the other nations will give it credit for the great service it has rendered to civilization by improvising a great army at this critical moment in the history of the world in order to re-establish the equilibrium of power on the two sides of the Atlantic. This service will be still greater if, as is hoped by all enlightened minds, the new American army acts as the army of universal disarmament; if America uses her power, her wealth and the sacrifices she is making in the common cause to induce the European Powers to accept