[2]

Indecisive Battle

> In this final struggle for Britain's freedom the invader had been crushed and his power broken; for, thanks to our gallant citizen soldiers, the enemy that had for weeks overrun our smiling land like packs of hungry wolves, wantonly burning our homes and massacring the innocent and unprotected, had at length met with their well-merited deserts, and now lay spread over the miles of pastures, cornfields, and forests, stark, cold, and dead.
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> **WILLIAM LE QUEUX,** The Invasion of 1910[1]

The influence of the classical model was evident not only in *The Battle of Dorking* but also in numerous books that followed, up to the start of the Great War in 1914. Although the literature adapted to shifts in international politics and developments in military technology and tactics, the essential framework remained largely the same. 'Save for rare exceptions', I. F. Clarke observed, these publications were 'distinguished by a complete failure to foresee the form a modern war would take.' They held to the possibility that any future European war would be marked by brief battles and heroic deeds. The application of science would work here, as in so many other areas of human affairs, to make matters better rather than worse. The conflict might be more ferocious, but the methods would also be more efficient so that the dispute would be concluded, one way or the other, quickly. The character of this war fiction was a 'compound of complacency, ignorance, and innocence'. The possibility of war seemed

real enough, yet there were few guides as to its likely character; this allowed either wishful thinking or crude alarmism full play.[2]

With the rapid expansion of the audience for newspapers and journals, war stories were good for circulation. In 1891 a new venture, a serious-minded journal called *Black and White*, hit upon the idea of a serial outlining the course of the next European war in a documentary fashion, with fictitious but plausible dispatches from the front, official telegrams, and newspapers' editorials, laced with exciting narrative and technical detail. When this was announced at the start of the next year the editor introduced the series by explaining:

> The air is full of rumours of war. The European nations stand fully armed and prepared for instant mobilisation. Authorities are agreed that a GREAT WAR must break out in the immediate future, and that this War will be fought under novel and surprising conditions.[3]

To help explain how this war might unfold the editors had consulted the 'chief living authorities in international politics, in strategy, and in war', led by Admiral Sir Philip Colomb, a former officer who had published widely on issues of sea power. His team used established military units and existing dispositions of fleets. In terms of prediction the most impressive aspect was that the war was triggered by an assassination attempt in the Balkans on Prince Ferdinand (unlike 1914 it was unsuccessful and the Prince was Bulgarian and not Austrian), which showed some understanding of the possibility of wars developing out of a clash between small states that drew in larger powers. In this case Britain was on the side of Germany against France and Russia. Other than that the war followed known strategies, and was decided by a series of battles on land and at sea, with great generals manoeuvring into position to land a heavy blow on the weakest point in the enemy line. In terms of new technologies, the authors appreciated the importance of the telegraph (including the ability to impose a news blackout by preventing its use) but were tentative about other developments, including the machine gun.[4]

In 1894 journalist William Le Queux wrote a book for the new *Daily Mail* newspaper about *The Great War in England in 1897*, starting with a

French and Russian invasion.[5] The credibility of such a clash was underlined by the Fashoda Incident of 1898 when Britain and France almost came to blows as their imperial agendas clashed in North Africa. Six years later with the Entente Cordiale these two countries agreed to make up, and instead of being Britain's ally Germany now took centre stage as its most likely enemy. This prospect was reinforced by the developing naval arms race between the two. So when in March 1906 Le Queux revisited the topic for the *Daily Mail* with the serialisation of *The Invasion of 1910*, the Germans were now the enemy. There was the same combination of letters and reports to develop a dramatic story. It was a great success, with a million copies sold and translations into twenty-seven languages. The story was much more elaborate and sensational, with images of German troops marching through a battered London. The underlying strategy was one of a quick knockout blow, taking London and then assuming that a broken country would quickly agree terms. The scenario was always incredible, both in terms of the modest size of the invading force and the low casualties it faced, even when it got into trouble. One of the major editorial changes demanded by the *Daily Mail* was that the fighting take place near the larger cities where their readers were to be found rather than out of the way places. Maps were published showing where the German army was due to turn up the next day.

One message readers would take away was the importance of spies who had mischievously insinuated themselves throughout British society. Le Queux here and elsewhere was instrumental in encouraging the development of the Secret Service. Spies had also been present in his 1894 book, as had vivid descriptions of innocents being slaughtered as their cities were shelled. [6] In the earlier book civilians did come forward to help resist the enemy, but as volunteers, supporting regular forces. In the new book the invasion was largely defeated by resistance forces developed as the 'League of Defenders', who became more substantial and effective as the fighting moved up the country, and were somewhat more successful than their French counterparts of 1870. In this respect, Le Queux's approach was inspired by Field Marshal Lord Roberts's campaign to prepare for war with universal conscription and step up military training for the country's young men.[7]

THE 1906 BOOK CONTRIBUTED TO ANTI-GERMAN FEELING (xenophobia was a general consequence of much of the war fiction of this period across Europe), but it did not prepare its readers for what was to come. The core criticism of this body of literature has been that it failed to anticipate the stalemate and trench warfare of the Great War and the possibility that a war could go on so long in the face of such carnage.

Was this actually possible to anticipate? In the decades since the Napoleonic War the growing range and lethality of weapons combined with more efficient forms of transport and communication. Mass armies with new defensive capabilities supported by vast reserves of men and machinery steadily undermined the prospects for brilliant and irresistible offensive thrusts. Early versions of the machine gun made their appearance during the American Civil War. The deadly Maxim gun was first deployed by British forces over 1893–1894 in the First Matabele War in Rhodesia. Yet remarkably few of these or any comparable guns were purchased before 1914. It was only after their defensive value became apparent in the early months of the First World War that this situation changed.[8] Improvements in the range, accuracy, and ease of use of rifles and artillery had already extended the amount of ground an attacking force must pass and the dangers faced before they could engage with the enemy. This killing zone of concentrated fire in front of the defender's position was some 150 metres in the Napoleonic era. By the time of the Franco-Prussian War it was some 400 metres, and was as much as 1,500 metres by the mid-1890s. There were also tactics to get round this, including directed artillery fire to force the defenders to keep their heads down, and the use of terrain to reduce the open ground the attackers had to traverse. With larger armies and more in reserve, generals might have to expect greater losses in battles, but in principle offensives could still succeed.[9]

The military did not so much ignore new developments as struggle to comprehend their implications. As the battlefield became more deadly, and improving forms of transport got more men and materiel to the front, it was going to be harder to achieve an early result against an enemy of similar size and capabilities. But as the exact form a future war would take was becoming increasingly speculative, all that could be hoped was that it would be sufficiently familiar to be manageable so long as prudent

preparations were set in motion and a sufficient offensive spirit was nurtured.

The weakness of the theory lay in the claim that whatever the material balances and the quality of the weaponry, battle came down to motivation and will power. It was a test of character, a readiness to press forward, even in the face of likely death, a surge of bravery and dash that would propel sufficient men across the field of fire to engage with the enemy and rip into them. Thus, the British Cavalry training manual of 1907 said: 'It must be accepted as a principle that the rifle, effective as it is, cannot replace the effect produced by the speed of the horse, the magnetism of the charge, and the terror of cold steel.'[10] If all else failed, mass would make the difference. The defence would be spread thinly: the offence would choose where to attack.

It was possible to imagine a different sort of war. In 1898 Polish banker Ivan Stanislavovich Bloch published a dense, six-volume study, entitled *The Future of War in Its Technical, Economic and Political Relations*. The last volume was published in English under the more provocative title *Is War Now Impossible?* Bloch's basic ideas were set out at the front of the book in the form of an interview with the radical journalist William Stead. He mounted the most formidable challenge to the view that offensives could succeed under modern conditions, that troops with high morale and élan could storm through whatever obstacles were put in their way. Instead Bloch insisted that the balance of advantage was shifting from the offence to the defence in land war. When troops moved into the open they would be cut down before they could engage with the enemy. The defence would dig in. 'The spade will be as indispensable to the soldier as his rifle'. The future war would, therefore, be 'a great war of entrenchments.'

Bloch's research was assiduous and few commentators found fault with his technical analysis. It was a prognosis built upon the armaments of the time, which made it harder for those who disliked his message to dismiss. The critiques were often to the implications of his logic. When he came to London to demonstrate how the Boer War of 1899–1901 had reinforced his views on the strength of the defence, he was accused not only of 'so-called non-jingoism, or non-militarism, the namby-pamby so-called humanitarianism' but also more seriously of a stress on 'ballistics' at the

expense of the 'qualifications and idiosyncrasies of the personnel.'[11] To the traditionalists his sin was to deny that cavalry charges and bayonets would still have their place against intense firepower.

The implications of Bloch's pessimistic assessment were profound: 'instead of war fought out to the bitter end in a series of decisive battles, we shall have as a substitute a long period of continually increasing strain upon the resources of the combatants.' The 'future of war' did not so much involve 'fighting, but famine, not the slaying of men, but the bankruptcy of nations and the breakup of the whole social organization.'[12] Thus Bloch assumed a war brought to a conclusion not by battle but by economic and social collapse. A great war might begin but there would soon be demands to bring the conflict to a conclusion.

> For the vital interests of nations are all closely interwoven as they never were before, and, like people joining hands with him who receives an electric spark into his body, they all feel the shock. As soon as they perceive that the hardship is more than they can reasonably be expected to bear they will find ways and means of putting a speedy end to the war, whatever the belligerents may think and feel on the subject.[13]

Here Bloch was assuming that societies could not cope with the privations of war and absorb costs. Yet there was already the example of the American Civil War as one in which even in the face of military setbacks governments continued the fight in preference to accepting the dire consequences of defeat. He understood why a war might settle down into one of mutual attrition but not why both sides might continue fighting despite the pain. At each stage the incremental costs of carrying on would seem less than the costs of admitting defeat. Governments could bring in reserves and step up industrial production to sustain the war effort.

THE REAL RISK, THEREFORE, WAS NOT JUST OF UNNECESSARY pain before the impossibility of a decisive victory became apparent, but also of wars dragging on for some time. The longer a war dragged on the more factors beyond the military's control would become important, most importantly the relative economic and demographic strength of the belligerents, the degree of popular support that could be sustained in the face of continuing

hardships and sacrifices, and the ability to split alliances or draw in extra allies. Then there was the question of irregular forces. It was one thing to prevail in battle and quite another to occupy enemy territory in the face of local hostility.

Although they may have had only a limited grasp of how battle might develop under modern conditions, writers of war fiction did recognise the importance of these considerations. The whole theme of Le Queux's fiction was that a successful military campaign could be challenged by a popular uprising, tying down an occupying force at every turn, adopting guerrilla warfare and even terrorist methods, despite facing harsh reprisals. Such books showed more acuity than formal military strategy in picking up on the importance of political and social changes in deciding the future of war as much as on new technologies. This did not mean that the fiction writers approved—far from it. They were often appalled by democratic trends that led governments to placate the masses with populist policies that risked eroding national will and defences.

For example, although Chesney was well aware of the Paris Commune, underway as he was writing, he drew no conclusions from it about the potential importance of irregular forms of warfare or civil strife. This 'foolish communism', which 'ruined the rich without benefiting the poor', had brought down the French. Such tendencies led leaders to pander to popular, short-term, selfish demands at the expense of the nation's defences. He lamented the passing from power of 'the class which had been used to rule, and to face political dangers', and which had brought the nation with honour unsullied through former struggles. It was now moving 'into the hands of the lower classes, uneducated, untrained to the use of political rights, and swayed by demagogues'.[14] Tory despair over liberal weakness grew over the following decades, reflected in the laments in Le Queux's 1906 book about the decline in fighting spirit. He also deplored the loss of a strong aristocratic government to one 'swayed by every breath of popular impulse.' It was the mark of the harm done to the country by the German invasion that the country succumbed to

> socialism, with its creed of "Thou shalt have no other god but Thyself," and its doctrine, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," had replaced the religious beliefs of a

generation of Englishmen taught to suffer and to die sooner than surrender to wrong.[15]

Another follower of Lord Roberts and his campaign to get the country's youth ready for the struggle to come was General Baden-Powell. When he began the Boy Scouts movement in 1908 it was to address the problem as he saw it of a deteriorating race that was ill-equipped to cope with the demands of war and the defence of the empire. His famous motto for the scouting movement was 'BE PREPARED'. The preparation required was 'to die for your country… so that when the time comes you may charge home with confidence, not caring whether you are to be killed or not.'[16]

From the other end of the political spectrum this militarism, xenophobia, and alarmism looked like the real danger, encouraging a war fever among people who had no reason to feel hostile to each other. This was the line taken in successive conferences of the Second Socialist International until class unity gave way to patriotism in August 1914. For those who saw in war only misery and futility the rational course was to demonstrate this prospect and hope that good sense would prevail. This meant confronting popular belligerence and deploring tendencies towards aggressive, nationalistic 'Jingoism'.[17] The risk was that in the face of such attitudes it was unrealistic to expect measured and calm responses at times of crisis. Popular enthusiasm might fan the flames rather than dampen them down. War could be even more destructive as rational restraints were overcome.

THE NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST H. G. WELLS WAS THE MOST influential writer on future war of his time. Although a socialist, his vision owed as much to a gloomy view of humanity under stress as it did to his fascination with the potential of new types of weapons. As an advocate of world government, Wells sought consistently through his futuristic novels to demonstrate just how bad war could be, and how its abolition could only take place once this came to be appreciated. He saw fiction as 'the only medium through which we can discuss the majority of the problems which are being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development.'[18] In 1902 he also issued a manifesto, *Anticipation of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought.* This was

the basis for his claim to be recognised as the first exponent of futurology. It included a chapter on ‘War in the Twentieth Century’.

For Wells, the ability to embrace science represented the dividing line between the ancient and the modern, between those wedded to old practices and those embracing the most advanced methods—people he called ‘the efficients’. In his 1902 essay he saw how this might be reflected in the practice of war. Instead of a ‘dramatic little general spouting his troops into the proper hysterics for charging’, the efficient would be represented ‘far in the rear’ by a ‘central organizer’ who would ‘sit at the telephonic centre of his vast front.’[19] The war would be won with the seizure of the ‘vital apparatus of the urban regions’, such as water supply, electricity generating stations, and food distribution, despite the efforts of guerrilla bands to prevent the advance.

If we concentrate only on Wells’s prescience we will miss the point of his military imagination. He can be credited with the invention of the tank, although the ‘ironclads’ he envisaged in 1903 were enormous at over 100 feet long and in their size and armament more like battleships (from which he took the name) than the sort of vehicles that could make a mark in a land battle. And while he saw the potential of aircraft at first he assumed that they would take far longer to develop than was in fact the case. Meanwhile he could not take the submarine at all seriously, as it was unlikely to do little more than ‘suffocate its crew and founder at sea’. He was very excited by balloons which he thought would be everywhere on the first day of a new war. The new weapons of his imagination rarely suffered mechanical breakdowns or fell victim to obvious countermeasures.

More impressive was Wells’s ability to appreciate the problems the new weapons might be trying to solve and those they would create. While the generals were arguing with Bloch’s claim that trench warfare might be the natural response to the strength of the defence, he was thinking about the next steps if Bloch was right. While others produced more realistic models of how armoured tracked vehicles might be made to work, Wells’s visions became much better known; his concept had sufficient credibility to encourage those searching in the early months of the Great War for ways to deal with the stalemate on the Western Front.[20]

For futurists the most exciting prospect was that of flying machines. Some of the possibilities had been indicated by the military use of balloons. The beleaguered citizens during the siege of Paris used balloons then to move people and post in and out of the city, bombard the Germans with propaganda messages although not much else, and attempt to get in supplies. In his 1887 novel, *The Clipper of the Clouds*, Jules Verne had backward-looking balloon enthusiasts confounded by Robur, a mysterious hero who had actually built a 'heavier than air' machine, that was as much helicopter as winged aircraft. At the novel's end Robur left the scene, taking with him the secret of his machine, observing that he was 'before his time' and that the divided nations were not ready for union. He would return when people were educated enough to profit from the invention and not abuse it.[21] In a dark sequel, published in 1904, Robur returned with a new machine, ominously called the *Terror,* which operated as a speedboat, submarine, automobile, or aircraft. The book's title, *Master of the World*, now indicated the inventor's intention. It would allow him, he proclaimed, to 'hold control of the entire world, and there lies no force within the reach of humanity which is able to resist me, under any circumstances whatsoever'. Yet before exercising control, he died with his machine, and its secrets, in a massive thunderstorm.[22]

1904 was the year of the Wright Brothers' first manned flight. Wells, who had already anticipated that aircraft would play a role in future war,[23] published in 1908 *The War in the Air*. In this story German airships terrorised American cities until surrender terms were accepted. Instead of New Yorkers being cowed into submission, however, they became angry and warlike, defying the Germans and so inviting their own destruction. This reflected Wells's view that war triggered intense, violent, and contagious emotions, so that once begun it was uncontrollable. 'Nation rose against nation and air-fleet grappled air-fleet, cities blazed and men died in multitudes.'[24] Thus air power was not a means to a decisive victory but instead a means by which war would be spread across previously impassable borders and into all areas of life. It posed a challenge precisely because it took war away from the classic battle, 'inextricably involving civilians and homes and all the apparatus of social life.' This he saw, apocalyptically, as leading to complete chaos and the

breakdown of civilisation.

Wells was not the only writer to consider how a terrible new experience of war might encourage humankind to accept that war was now obsolete. The year before the publication of *The War in the Air*, the American writer Roy Norton published *The Vanishing Fleets*.[25] As Wells did a few years later (although more accurately), Norton picked up on the recent discovery of radiation. Norton saw this being used as an anti-gravity weapon. He had the president of the United States exclaim that access to the 'most deadly engine ever conceived' created a responsibility to use it 'as a means for controlling and thereby ending war for all time'. The same year, another book, with the title *The Man Who Ended War*[26], also drew on radioactivity, with a pacifist scientist, John King, working out how to turn it into a death ray that could paralyse seamen and melt battleships. King travelled the world in a submarine taking out individual warships from each of the great powers until they agreed to end war, at which point he destroyed himself and his invention.

Wells therefore was not alone in his fascination with deadly scientific breakthroughs that would enable the folly of war to be driven home in a great confrontation. But he had the greater literary capacity and broader social imagination.[27] He appreciated the two key features of air power. The first was the unequal fight between the airmen and their victims: 'men who were neither excited… not in any danger, poured death and destruction upon homes and crowds below'.[28] Second, he recognised that while air power allowed for new levels of destruction it was limited in what it could achieve militarily. As he observed in a new preface to *The War in the Air* in 1921:

> [W]ith the flying machine war alters its character; it ceases to be an affair of "fronts" and becomes an affair of "areas"; neither side, victor or loser, remains immune from the gravest injuries, and while there is a vast increase in the destructiveness of war, there is also an increased indecisiveness.[29]

Because they could not hold territory, aircraft could not on their own 'win' wars, a point that we shall see was generally missed by the air power enthusiasts of the interwar years.

The world's problems, for Wells, were the result of nations refusing to accept the 'wider coalescence', the 'reasonable synthesis', of world government. They were so consumed with their national interests and so suspicious of each other that they could not embrace such wisdom. Instead they were behaving 'like ill-bred people in a crowded public car, to squeeze against one another, elbow, thrust, dispute and quarrel.' These habits of mind, according to Wells, produced an almost instinctive urge to violence and vengeance once the fragile constraints of civilisation and peace were broken. His argument, therefore, was that without socialism and world government, there would be compulsive destruction. Men and even whole nations were unable to help themselves. He first set out his credo in his 1901 *Anticipations*, looking forward to 'a Republic that must ultimately become a World State of capable rational men, developing amidst the fading contours and colours of our existing nations and institutions', and until the end of his life was making this case.[30]

His approach reflected assumptions, not uncommon of his time, about the possible development of a rational, scientific society that would displace capitalism and the system of nation states. The message was that future wars would be run through an educated and disciplined population. 'The law that dominates the future is glaringly plain. A people must develop and consolidate its educated efficient classes or be beaten in war and give way upon all points where its interests conflict with the interests of more capable people.' This thought was combined with some alarming social engineering. Advantage would go to the 'nation that most resolutely picks over, educates, sterilizes, exports, or poisons its People of the Abyss', and the one that dealt with gambling and the 'moral decay' of women, extinguished 'incompetent rich families', and turned 'the greatest proportion of its irresponsible adiposity into social muscle'. He had little confidence in the ability of the masses to make sensible decisions about peace and war. He assumed that social order would soon break down when they were subject to attack. In his novels the dominant impression is often less future inventions or the guidance of a highly competent elite and more the supposed immaturity of public opinion, prey to dangerous passions.

THE LIKELY RESPONSES OF THE WORKING CLASSES TO WAR, whether in or out

of uniform, was a subject of both fascination and anxiety at this time. Wells was very familiar with Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind,*[31] published in 1895, which encouraged the view that ordinary, rational people could lose their reason once they got caught up in the mass psychology of the crowd. This influenced views about what soldiers might be persuaded to do in battle as well as what might happen to civilians under fire. The uncertainty about the future of war was less about the hazards of modern battle but how well men could be motivated to meet them. In this respect the greatest vulnerability as far as the military class was concerned was degeneracy and moral decay. Ivan Bloch shared the assumption that modern man lacked the stomach for war, except that he welcomed this as antidote to militarism. He assumed that the stalemate of war would be broken not by a military breakthrough but by popular disgust at its misery and cost. Behind many of the developing theories of war at this time therefore were assumptions about how people in the mass would react to the experience.

This was not the concern of the generals as they advised governments across Europe. They did not assume that war would be easy but only that somebody's offensive would succeed, and if not their own it would be the enemy's. Hence the focus on the speed of mobilisation to get into position while the enemy was disorganised and imbuing troops with a spirit of patriotism and self-sacrifice that would propel them forward. Massive loss of life was envisaged but stalemate was not. A German military magazine in 1908 insisted that the 1904 Russo-Japanese war had 'proved that even well-defended fortifications and entrenchments can be taken, even across open ground, by courage and cunning exploitation of terrain… The concept of states waging war to the point of absolute exhaustion is beyond the European cultural experience'.[32] A Russian military commentator dismissed Bloch's claim that 'the resolution of such questions by arms in the presence of modern, colossal, peoples' armies, technologically sophisticated materiel and social relationships is impossible'.[33] At the time of the Boer War the humourist Hector Munro (known as Saki) wrote a parody of *Alice in Wonderland*. At one point he has the Secretary for War, caricatured as the White Knight, telling Alice:

“You see, I had read a book… written by someone to prove that warfare under modern conditions was impossible. You may imagine how disturbing that was to a man of my profession…”

Alice pondered. “You went to war, of course—”

“Yes; but not under modern conditions.”[34]

Munro died in action in 1916.